ADVENT
MAKING A PLACE
FOR GOD

Reflection and Prayer
to Prepare for the Lord’s Company

JERRY WELTE
Introduction

MAKING A PLACE FOR GOD

THINGS ALWAYS CHANGED dramatically around our house whenever my parents uttered the telling words: “Company’s coming!” We were quickly appointed to make room for our guests by picking up our toys, clearing the table, and “putting away” bad manners. Advent is like that. It is a time to clear our homes and hearts for extraordinary company, a wondrous and transforming visit from Emmanuel, “God with us.”

The worst thing a weary traveler can encounter is a flashing sign that says, “No Vacancy!” Mary and Joseph were turned away because there was no room in the inn. Sometimes our homes and our lives are also very full. We fill up our attics and closets, our heads and our hearts, until there is no space for anything else. We put up clear signs that we are too busy or preoccupied for God or others.

The coming of Christ is not just an historical event. God continues to be born in our world, but often comes to us in the disguise of human ordinariness. The Lord visits us in the poor, the lonely, the sick, and in our own loved ones, but we fail to recognize him: “He was in the world…yet the world did not know him.” This Christmas and throughout the New Year, we welcome the Lord who taught us: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

—Jerry Welte
First Sunday of Advent

GOD’S HOLY MOUNTAIN

Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths. —Isaiah 2:3

IT IS HARD TO BELIEVE in our 24/7 culture, but most stores used to be closed on Sundays. Advent was less frantic before we started counting shopping days until Christmas. Once a week, Christians lived life differently, not just going to church, but slowing down, spending time together, and being aware of God’s presence. My Colorado family often went to the mountains after church. There we would sit by a stream, eat breakfast, and go climbing. I recall the peace and quiet, the simplicity and closeness of those times. On those mornings I learned what it meant to “climb the Lord’s mountain” and I sensed why people would flock to such a place. Advent is a season to seek out times like this, to “keep the Lord’s day holy” by drawing close to God, family, and friends.

Activity: Don’t do any shopping or household projects today. Turn off the television and the video games. Go for a drive, play a game together, and enjoy a close family dinner.

Prayer: Loving God, help us to count differently during this season. Let us not count shopping days, but let us count and treasure “quiet days,” “family days,” and “the Lord’s days.”
Monday of the First Week of Advent

THE WORD MADE FLESH

“Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed.”
And Jesus said to him, “I will come and cure him.”
“Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof;
but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed.”
—Matthew 8:6-8

PERHAPS IT DOESN’T MEAN quite as much anymore when we hear someone say, “I give you my word.” False words and broken promises have diminished our faith in the spoken word. Yet, in Genesis, God creates our vast universe with words alone: “Let there be light.” Through Isaiah, God assures us that “My word will not return to me void, but will achieve the end for which I send it.” The centurion had great faith in the power of Jesus, the living Word. He believed that the Lord’s word was enough to save his son. This advent, we too celebrate the power of God’s word to restore our lives and we realize the power of our words to hurt and to heal others.

Activity: Write down a word that describes a positive quality of each family member: loving, funny, helpful, etc. Family members can carry that word with them during the week.

Prayer: We wait for you, Lord, the Word made flesh, to renew our faith in the power of the Word to change our lives. Help us to be true to your word and true to our word as well.
Tuesday of the First Week of Advent

SEEING BEYOND APPEARANCES

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.
—Isaiah 11:3-4

I REMEMBER shaking packages under the tree as a child, peering in vain through the wrapping, and delightfully wondering about the contents. Perhaps there are not as many surprises over Christmas gifts as there used to be. Several factors have combined to render modern gift giving more planned and less mysterious. Yet, while store-bought packages may be more predictable, the true gifts of Christmas—God’s people—continue to surprise us. What is inside them can seldom be guessed by the wrapping. We await the birth of the Christ child who constantly moved people by exceeding his ordinary appearance, leading some observers to comment in amazement: “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?”

Activity: Wrap a surprise gift for the family. Let each child examine it and guess the contents. Discuss judging people by appearances. Put it under the tree to be opened on Christmas.

Prayer: God of mystery, help us to treasure each person as one of your gifts, full of wonder and surprise. May we open each one carefully and value what is inside more than their “wrapping.”
THE GOOD SHEPHERD

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.

—Psalm 23:1-3

IT MAKES PERFECT SENSE that shepherds were the first to hear the good news of Christ’s birth. Jesus chose the image of the Good Shepherd to symbolize his love for God’s people and his willingness to die for them: “A good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” Church leaders carry shepherd staffs to symbolize their mission of leading and guiding the faithful. The shepherd is such an intimate part of the Christmas story that it is even celebrated in popular culture. The candy cane, a traditional Christmas treat, is shaped in the form of a shepherd’s staff, a fitting reminder that we are all called by God to watch over one another and to care for each other.

Activity: Gather near the Christmas tree and have each member hang a candy cane on the tree as a pledge to care for each other. Break one extra candy cane into pieces and have each family member eat a piece to seal this shared commitment.

Prayer: Loving God, be with us always as our shepherd and guide. Help us to watch over your people, especially those who are most lost, most alone, or most afraid.
GUIDE US TO THY PERFECT LIGHT

It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to put confidence in mortals.
It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to put confidence in princes.
—Psalm 118:8-9

WE LIVE IN A CELEBRITY CULTURE that is increasingly fascinated by the stars. Despite our growing fascination with “star gazing,” a closer look sometimes reveals that the light radiating from our idols is artificial and misleading. Advent calls us to a higher form of astrology. We do not put our trust in princes or movie stars, but in the “star of wonder” that guides us to the Perfect Light. Artist Vincent Van Gogh, who searched for the true light of the world, provided a glimpse of it in his famous painting, “The Starry Night.” His words inspire all wise seekers to study the stars: “Sometimes I have a terrible need of religion, then I go out at night to paint the stars.”

Activity: If the night is clear, go outside and study the stars. Afterwards, make a star for each family member from yellow construction paper. Place the stars on a wall above your manger scene with a family member’s name on each one.

Prayer: God of wonder, let the heavens be our guide, leading us to the birthplace of your presence. May we also be bright stars of faith to lead others to the place where you live.
WAIT FOR GOD AND OTHERS

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord; be strong,
and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!
—Psalm 27:13-14

WHEN I WAS LITTLE, I sometimes had trouble keeping up with my older brothers. On the way to school or the park, as I found myself falling behind, I would call out to them in a moment of panic: “Wait for me!” Nothing was more comforting than having one of my brothers turn around—despite an occasional look of annoyance—and wait for me to catch up. Advent invites us to “wait up,” to give God and others time to arrive. We patiently wait for God to come, but we also pray that God will wait for us with compassion when we are slow to change or grow or believe.

Activity: Sprinkle sand over the fingers of each family member as a sign of God’s precious gift of time, a gift that we cannot control or hold onto, but is ours forever in love and memory.

Prayer: Eternal God, when we frantically try to save time, we only seem to lose it. Help us to let your gift of time pass gracefully through our hands, grateful for each moment and sharing our time with others who call: “Wait for me!”
GIVE SIMPLY AND FREELY

As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.”
Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.
You received without payment; give without payment.
—Matthew 10:7-8

CHRISTMAS GIFT-GIVING can be joyful and satisfying, but it can also be stressful and agonizing. Perhaps consumerism—finding the “it gift” or the “steal” of a bargain—has taken some of the joy and humanity out of Christmas. The gospel calls us to bring a spirit of simplicity to our gift giving. We shop a little less in order to be more personally present. We simplify in order to appreciate and share what we have. Advent calls us to celebrate the spirit of “the little drummer boy,” a poor child who knew very well that he could never afford a proper gift: “I have no gift to bring that’s fit to give our king.” Instead, he gave simply and freely from his heart: “Shall I play for you...me and my drum?”

Activity: Listen to “The Little Drummer Boy.” Discuss the real spirit behind giving gifts. Agree on one or two ways the whole family can make Christmas a little simpler and more personal.

Prayer: Lord, you were born in poverty, but you gave us all you had, your whole self. Help us to worry less about material things and more about how to give of ourselves.
BEFRIEND YOUR ENEMIES

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
—Isaiah 11:6

WHEN I WATCH my grandsons play, I realize that their world is often predisposed to conflict. Their action figures come complete with weapons, as if battle is a foregone conclusion in life. The “good guys” and “bad guys” are sometimes predetermined at the factory. The heroes arrive with pleasant smiles on their faces, while the villains are painted with furrowed brows or wicked grins. Yet, in “Return of the Jedi” Luke Skywalker refuses to fight his sworn enemy, Darth Vader, and instead redeems him. Advent suggests the shocking possibility that even natural enemies may be allies, that predators can dwell together in peace. Christmas teaches us that humans are not born enemies, but have the power of free will to live peaceably in God’s kingdom.

Activity: Have your children bring some hero and villain action figures to the table. Girls may bring dolls, which probably get along much better. Use the figures to role play peaceful ways to settle differences.

Prayer: Prince of Peace, the grace of this advent season helps us to see the goodness in others and the faults in ourselves. May we build God’s kingdom where all creatures dwell in harmony
Monday of the Second Week of Advent

SPIRITUAL FITNESS EXERCISES

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God. He will come and save you.”
—Isaiah 35:3-4

ONE WAY TO MEASURE our values is to study vocabulary. We realize the growing importance of physical fitness because once foreign terms like “abs,” “glutes,” and “pecs” are now common. We have specific exercises to strengthen each of these muscle groups. The exercises of faith, however, condition different muscles, muscles of letting go rather than holding on, muscles of gentleness rather than brute strength. St. Ignatius developed an entire regimen called “the spiritual exercises” to help believers shape hearts and minds toward conversion. Yet, just as physical workouts often require a partner, so do our spirits get stronger in community through mutual support. Advent is a season to work together on our spiritual fitness as a family of God.

Activity: Pass a tennis ball or rubber ball around the family and have each one squeeze it as hard as they can. Now pass a fragile ornament around the circle and have each one cradle it gently.

Prayer: Almighty and gentle God, strengthen our hearts and shape our spirits. Make us fit in the ways of love, strong enough to lift up the fallen and gentle enough to embrace the weak.
Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. —Isaiah 40:1-2

JUST AS GOD shepherds and comforts us, so does the Lord want us to comfort and shepherd each other: “If you love me, tend my sheep.” Jesus entered our world in a stable, sharing the human condition in the discomfort of a cold, hard manger: “Away in a manger, no crib for a bed.” Mary and Joseph used straw to give some minimal relief to the child who would later bring so much comfort to the sick and suffering while embracing our poverty: “The Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head.” During advent, we commit ourselves to using whatever is at our disposal to bring comfort to the poor, the oppressed, and the suffering.

Activity: Gather the family and have each member pray for a person or group in need of comfort. With each prayer, a few pieces of straw are placed in a manger or on a wooden table or floor. Finally, a Christ child figurine is placed on the straw.

Prayer: Loving God, fill us with love and compassion so that we may bring comfort to the sick, rest to the weary, and love to the lonely. May our love soften the hardness of the world for all.
Wednesday of the Second Week of Advent

ON THE WINGS OF EAGLES

Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

—Isaiah 40:31

THE FREEDOM OF FLIGHT has reflected the yearnings of the human heart ever since the first person watched a bird arc gracefully across the sky. The eagle is a symbol of the ultimate goals to which believers aspire: freedom, resurrection, and ascension. To defy the law of gravity is somehow to transcend the limitations of life, to overcome problems, and to share the lofty heights of the angels. Advent prophecies promise a sharing in such glorious, rarified air. With God’s love and grace, we can be freed of the bonds of earth and take wing in the heavens. Today we strive for the grace of the dove and the freedom of the eagle, glorious signs of God’s transcendent power among us.

Activity: Obtain a bird feather from around the house or a craft store. Touch the feather to each person’s head or shoulder and say the blessing below.

Prayer: When you are weary, may you find rest. When you are afraid, may you have courage. When you are burdened, may you be freed. May you soar on eagles’ wings. May you run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint.
Thursday of the Second Week of Advent

WATER AND THE SPIRIT

I will open rivers on the bare heights,
and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
and the dry land springs of water.
—Isaiah 41:18

WHEN SCIENTISTS send probes to distant planets, the first thing they look for is the presence of water. When doctors confirm that a patient is alive, they first check for breathing. Water and breath are the first, most basic signs of life. Water conservation and air pollution control have become priorities for the life and health of future generations. Of course, we know that water and breath are also the first signs of the spiritual life. Jesus begins his ministry by submitting to baptism. John baptizes with water, but bows to the one after him who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. God’s precious gifts of pure water and Holy Spirit give us life and love to follow in the footsteps of Christ.

Activity: Gather around a bowl of water. Have someone read the scripture above while parents blow gently on the water. Family members then bless themselves with the water. Discuss water conservation in the home and ways to live baptismal vows.

Prayer: Lord of creation, your gifts of water and the Spirit give us new life and hope. May these holy signs of life refresh and renew us to live our faith in both word and action.
THE GIFT OF INTEGRITY

John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon;” the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. —Matthew 11:18-19

TODAY’S GOSPEL might have helped inspire Abraham Lincoln’s famous words about the perils of trying to please everyone. Lincoln rightly concludes: “You can’t please all of the people all of the time.” Politicians may say the right things just to get elected and we may do things out of character in order to be accepted. Each time we compromise like this, we give up a piece of ourselves. We await the birth of a Messiah who paid a great price for his integrity, for telling the truth that sets us free. When we stay true to ourselves like Jesus did, we may lose popularity, but we keep what counts the most—we remain whole or holy.

Activity: Print a Christmas or winter scene on card stock and cut it into puzzle pieces. As you assemble the puzzle, discuss what it means to be whole or holy, to be one body or assembly in Christ.

Prayer: One and holy God, we pray for the gift of integrity, the power to be true to ourselves and true to your word. May we live to please you above all others.
SEEING THE FACE OF GOD

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.
Stir up your might, and come to save us!
Let your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.
—Psalm 80:1-3

THERE IS NOTHING so beautiful to parents as seeing the face of their child. Nothing is as comforting to a child as seeing the face of a parent. James Taylor echoes this sentiment: “Whenever I see your smiling face, I have to smile myself.” For generations, God’s people longed to see the face of God, but also feared the consequences: “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” The birth of Jesus makes the distant, intimidating countenance of God human and approachable. From that day forward, every human face is a revelation of our Creator. As we view the diverse beauty of human faces, we are privileged to view a slideshow that could be titled, “Pictures of God.”

Activity: Take pictures of the faces of your family. Make a slideshow to view on the computer or print the pictures to display on a wall or refrigerator.

Prayer: Incarnate God, we see your loving face in the face of Jesus, our Savior. We recognize your image in the faces of those we love and even in the strangers we meet.
Third Sunday of Advent

ROSES IN DECEMBER

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.

—Isaiah 35:1-2

THE ISAIAH READING echoes the miraculous spirit of the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. According to tradition, the Blessed Mother sent a simple farmer, Juan Diego, to ask the bishop to build a church on the site of her appearance. When the kind, but skeptical bishop asked for a sign to validate the vision, Mary provided fresh roses from the cold, frozen ground as well as a beautiful image of herself on Juan Diego’s cloak. Such is the faith of Advent, a belief that God can work miracles, producing water in the desert, light in the darkness, and roses in December.

Activity: Buy one or more red roses. Fill a large bowl with snow from outside or with quilt batting. Have each member of the family drop rose petals on the snow while offering a personal prayer and one for the world.

Prayer: Almighty God, we believe in your power to bring order out of chaos, life out of death, and roses out of December snow. Work your miracles of life among us in this season of hope.
When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this power?”

—Matthew 21:23

WE CAN IMAGINE a frantic homeowner calling customer support to report a new prelit tree that refuses to work. The dilemma is resolved with a simple, embarrassing question: “Have you plugged it in?” Nothing is more satisfying than flipping a switch and beholding a tree as it erupts in a blaze of colorful glory, but if one light is missing, a whole string may be out. Families can be like this. If they are not “plugged in,” they may not work. If one member is struggling, everyone is affected. During advent we plug in to God and string our lights together so that we may brighten the darkness for all.

Activity: Gather in a dark room and plug in a string of lights. Unplug it and/or remove one light to experience the darkness. Then replace the light or plug it back in. Discuss concrete ways to be light for the world.

Prayer: Christ, our light, show us the way to remain connected to you, the light of the world. May our light never go out or be hidden, so that we may give light to all in the house.
Tuesday of the Third Week of Advent

THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” —Matthew 21:31

BOARD GAMES can be a lot of fun, but many of them are designed to encourage winning at the expense of others. We try to be the first to get “home,” like the Pharisees jockeyed to be first in the kingdom. We send players back several spaces or back to the start, advancing ourselves through their losses. This can be fun when we are playing with pawns, but it can cause injustice and heartbreak when those same rules are applied to real life. This is why victims of “get ahead” schemes are often called “pawns.” Jesus teaches us a challenging lesson on the game of life by insisting that “the last shall be first,” that turnabout is fair play.

Activity: Play a board game that involves a race to the finish or “home.” Change the rules so that whenever there is a chance to penalize a player, the player is advanced instead. Afterwards, talk about how that feels and how to apply such rules to life.

Prayer: Lord of Justice and Peace, you want us to walk together on our way to the kingdom. Help us to advance the hopes and dreams of every person until we arrive together at our true and eternal home.
ONE OF THE MOST beautiful metaphors of the Advent Scriptures is the striking image of God’s justice falling from the heavens like rain or snow. We witness how spring rains soak the fields and awaken the world. We marvel when winter snow transforms a barren landscape into a “winter wonderland.” Despite the difficulties such weather can bring, somehow it also brings out the child in us. We feel impelled to go out and play, to go “singing in the rain” or to lie on the ground making snow angels. To the eyes of faith, rain and snow represent God’s way of pouring grace onto the world, soaking us with justice, blanketing us with love, and renewing all of creation.

Activity: Make snowflakes by folding shapes of white paper and cutting out pieces along each fold. On the snowflakes, write down the gifts of God for which you are most grateful. Hang some snowflakes on your tree.

Prayer: Lord of earth and sky, we look to the heavens for your coming. We welcome the warm rays of your sun, the cool splash of your rain, and the pure beauty of your snow. Rain down your love on your people this day.
Thursday of the Third Week of Advent

**LOVE SOLID AS A ROCK**

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the Lord, who has compassion on you.
—Isaiah 54:10

IN A FAMILIAR SONG, Paul Simon rejoices in a mother’s love: “She loves me like a rock.” Isaiah’s prophecy echoes that same sentiment from Psalm 18: “I love you, Lord, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer!” Our confidence in love can become uncertain, even cynical, because human love often seems flawed, conditional, and temporary. The tabloids are full of stories of famous people who have been unfaithful in love. Even those who seem to have everything struggle to find true love. The third week of Advent is a time of rejoicing in God’s love, renewing our faith in the Lord’s unconditional, unshakable, unchanging love for each one of us.

**Activity:** Pass a palm size stone around the family circle. Let each person hold it and feel its properties. While holding the rock, reaffirm your love for God and each other.

**Prayer:** God of Love, sometimes it feels like love is very fragile and temporary. May the example of the solid rock of your love keep us in love with each other and with you.
Friday of the Third Week of Advent

THE FAMILY TREE OF CHRIST

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham… and Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. —Matthew 1:1,17

THE GENEALOGY OF CHRIST can sound like a long, boring list of strange names. At the heart of this reading, however, lies a profound truth: God’s heroes come from families and their amazing works have roots. The Messiah didn’t just drop out of the sky, but was nurtured by generations of holy men and women who were faithful to God’s word. As the proverb reminds us: “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” We also belong to the family tree of Christ and have inherited his amazing grace. The Lord calls each of us to play a vital role in carrying on his work: “The one who believes in me will do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.”

Activity: Make a Jesse Tree or print and study its symbols. Examples and instructions can be found online. Afterwards, add the names and tell the stories of your own family tree.

Prayer: God of all generations, we thank you for the great women and men who have gone before us. Help us to grow from the roots of their faith and to branch out in love.
In his days Judah will be saved
and Israel will live in safety.
And this is the name by which he will be called:
“The Lord our justice.”
—Jeremiah 23:6

THE WORD “security” conjures up images of Linus in the Peanuts comic strip, clutching his security blanket and sucking his thumb. It is both a humorous and a wise reflection on the vulnerability of the human condition. Most of us can recall holding on to something as a child—whether it was a doll, a teddy bear, or a blanket—to help us feel more safe and secure. Perhaps the greatest gift that parents give their children is that feeling of safety. The world often relies on military might for security, but Scripture reminds us that justice is the source of security in God’s kingdom. We dream of peace as we await the birth of Christ, God’s living security blanket for the world.

Activity: Pass any soft, warm blanket around the family circle. Invite members to share a personal fear and a personal comfort. Donate extra blankets around the house to charity.

Prayer: Give us the courage to seek justice in our lives and in our world. Grant us the peace, not that the world gives, but the peace and security that comes from doing what is right.
WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceal and bear a son, and they shall name him ‘Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’”

—Matthew 1:22-23

WHEN A WOMAN IS PREGNANT, we say that she is “expecting.” This is exactly the state of being that Advent invites for all believers. As Christmas approaches, each of us should think of ourselves as “expecting,” or “in labor.” Advent is a season for us to anticipate the birth of whatever new life is forming within us. We might be pregnant with a new idea, a developing virtue, a book or project, a new relationship, a fresh perspective, or an actual child. Faith proclaims that all these forms of life are “conceived by the Spirit” and manifestations of “Emmanuel, God with us.” During Advent, we carry ourselves joyfully as expectant parents and we anticipate how wonderfully life will change when “a child is born to us.”

Activity: Mothers and Fathers can share with their children the experience of pregnancy and stories of their children’s births.

Prayer: God of new life, all of creation is pregnant with your grace, in labor with your Spirit. Help us to welcome you with joy in all the wonderful ways that you are born into our world.
The angel said to her,
“And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”
—Luke 1:36-37

TELEVISION ANCHORS are often the bearers of terrible, tragic news, but angels are God’s heralds of tidings of comfort and joy. It is an angel who first announces to Mary that she will be the mother of our Savior. It is angels who sing a celebratory chorus of praise on Christmas morning: “Glory to God in the highest!” Advent is a season to rekindle our hope in good news, our belief that God still speaks to us in varied and wonderful ways. It is a time to remember that the guiding voices we hear, the holy impulses we feel, and the hopeful messages we receive are God’s good news delivered by “angels we have heard on high.”

**Activity:** Draw or trace a pattern of angel wings, then cut out and color them. On each pair, write a blessing received or a good thing that has happened. Display the wings over the fireplace.

**Prayer:** God of hope, there is too much news these days to sadden and discourage us. Send us your holy angels to cheer us with glad tidings that we may walk in joy as we await your birth.
HOW CAN I KEEP FROM SINGING?

Praise the Lord with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.
Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.
—Psalm 33:2-3

A FAITHFUL CHURCH LEADER, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, died of cancer in 1996. Before he died, he revealed that his favorite song was the beautiful hymn: “How Can I Keep from Singing?” This song is a stirring expression of the advent spirit, a belief in the silent hymn of creation that can be heard even in difficult times by those with the ears of faith who ask each other: “Do you hear what I hear?” God’s music pervades the world and is stronger and truer than the sadness of life or the occasional melancholy of the holidays. Perhaps this is why we sing at Christmastime like no other time of year. As the song lyrics explain: “Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?”

Activity: Read the lyrics or listen to the song, “How Can I Keep From Singing?” Then sing or play, “Do You Hear What I Hear?”

Prayer: Lord of all, your music fills the world and inspires us to sing during this holy season. Fill our hearts with your song of hope so that we may sing of your love all our days.
**MAGNIFY THE LORD**

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.”  
—Luke 1:46-48

As we get older, newsprint and directions seem to be written in increasingly tiny print. Soon we realize that the world is often designed for young eyes. God’s words and actions can be like that. It takes young eyes to see them, the eyes of faith that Jesus says are found in the children of the Kingdom. Mary understood this. She realized that the good news comes in small print and grace often arrives in small experiences. Mary was so good and so pure that she became a magnifying glass for God’s presence. Her spirit became an enhancer to help us see God’s grace and read God’s word. During advent, we too strive to make ourselves holy so that our souls may magnify the Lord with Mary.

**Activity:** Print a short list of words (God, love, joy, hope) in a four or six point font. Pass the list around with a magnifying glass. Let each person read the list with and without the glass.

**Prayer:** Holy God, we look to Mary to magnify the good news of your coming so that we may recognize you in the poor and see your grace in the small, simple experiences of life.
LIFE AT THE CROSSROADS

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
—Psalm 25:4-5

TEACHERS LIKE TO ASK a question of students they find wandering in school corridors: “Where are you supposed to be?” It is a very good question, but hardly an easy one to answer. Life is full of choice points. Our paths are full of crossroads and we find ourselves with hard choices to make. “Do I stay in and do my homework or go outside to play?” “Do I help my neighbor or go to the mall?” The characters of the Christmas story made choices too. Somehow, Mary and Joseph, the Magi, and the Shepherds ended up in the right place at the right time. Faith tells us that they were guided. By choosing to follow the Lord’s paths, they found the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Activity: Gather around a picture of a crossroads or an intersection from a car or train set. Share examples of important life choices. Discuss how to make good choices with God’s help.

Prayer: Jesus, you are the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Show us your ways; guide us to the right path. Help us to make good decisions that lead us home to you.
TWAS THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.
—Luke 1:78-79

CHRISTMAS EVE may be the hardest of all nights for children to sleep, yet it is also the night when sleep is most essential. As every parent has told an eager, restless child: “If you don’t go to sleep, Santa can’t come.” So, children all over the world force themselves to sleep this night and dream of the bright promise of tomorrow. Childlike visions of sugarplums are previews of more adult yearnings, rehearsal for the days when our spirits generate prophetic visions of peace and justice. If God’s children don’t dream, then perhaps the Lord cannot fully come. Let us welcome such dreams on Christmas Eve, for they help usher in the wondrous daybreak of God’s tender mercy.

Activity: Gather around a pillow from one of the children’s beds. Have each person write down a dream for the world. At bedtime, each person puts their “grownup Christmas wish” under their pillow.

Prayer: God of hope, tonight we dream of the bright promise that awaits us tomorrow. Fill us also with dreams and visions of peace in the world, love for the lonely, and justice for the poor.
THE WHOLE FAMILY

Bear with one another and forgive each other;
just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.
Above all, clothe yourselves with love,
which binds everything together in perfect harmony.
—Colossians 3:13-14

THE HOLY FAMILY can be a hard act to follow. It seems impossible for any human family to reach such perfection. It is important to remember, then, that Mary and Joseph were human and had real feelings. They were obviously hurt when Jesus wandered off to teach in the temple without telling them: “Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” Mary and Joseph struggled to understand why Jesus hurt them and they probably had to forgive him. It is no different with our families. We are human and our feelings get hurt. We must try to understand and forgive each other. Above all, we must practice love, the virtue that makes all families holy.

Activity: Line a metal bowl with foil and gather around it. Have each family member write down a hurt they feel, crumple it, and place it in the bowl. Using the Christmas candle, carefully burn the papers as a sign of forgiveness, then share a sign of peace.

Prayer: Loving Father, we struggle each day with hurts and misunderstandings that pull us apart. Help us to forgive one another so that we may be united in your perfect harmony.
ADVENT WREATH
ACTIVITIES AND PRAYERS

First Week: Pass the first purple candle around the table. Each family member holds the candle and names a personal hope, dream, or prayer. Then light the first candle. Prayer: Lord of light, like your children of long ago, we long for the light of your coming in faith and in hope.

Second Week: Pass a sprig of fresh evergreen around the table. Each person holds it and names something good that they believe lasts forever. Then light the second candle. Prayer: God of life, the fresh scent of the evergreen fills us with hope that your life never ends, your love never dies, and your grace is always alive in our hearts and our world.

Third Week: Pass the pink candle around the table. Each member holds the candle and names something that brings them joy. Then light the pink candle. Prayer: We await your coming in joy, knowing that your birth, like the birth of all children, brings laughter and happiness to our lives, even in difficult times.

Fourth Week: Pass a silver or gold ring around the family table. Each member holds the ring and shares a favorite memory of family life. Then light the fourth candle. Prayer: As your coming draws near, we pray in the circle of your love, where your presence is with us always and we always belong to your family of faith.
Christmas Day

IT CAME UPON A MIDNIGHT CLEAR

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.
—John 1:3-5

CHRISTMAS IS A FEAST OF MIDNIGHT. The light of the world is born to us in pitch darkness. What we celebrate this day is not the end of night, but the light that shines through it. Christ is a light that the darkness cannot overcome. There is no other time of the year when we so look forward to the coming of night, because darkness brings out the lovely Christmas lights on all the houses and streets of our cities. These lights are so magical that we make special trips to view them. For this reason, taking down the lights after the Christmas season can be a reluctant undertaking. Still, if we have done our work, we know that the light of Christ continues to shine brightly in our hearts all year long.

Activity: Take a white Christmas candle and pass it around the family circle. Have each person hold the candle and name a favorite blessing or joy of Christmastime. Then, light the candle.

Prayer: Light of the world, continue to brighten the darkness that surrounds us and fill the dim, sad places in our hearts. Help us to shine brightly in the darkness so that others may follow you.