

*First Baptist Church in Beverly
Advent Home Devotionals, 2020*



The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined. ~Isaiah 9:2 (NRSV)

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INTRODUCTION

Happy (Church) New Year! During the Season of Advent, we eagerly anticipate an inbreaking of light. We prepare to welcome the Christ Child, the One who has come to save us. The Christ Child is long-awaited, long prayed for, and long hoped for. He represents God's promise to do a new thing. He helps us be sure that we are entering a future filled with hope, peace, joy, and love! The Season of Advent is all about great expectations. With God, we have already seen great things, and in the future, we will see even greater things than these!

This year, journey with us each week of Advent, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day. We will walk through these days of darkness with enthusiasm because we have seen a great light! The devotions we have prepared for you will guide you each week as you light the candles in your Advent wreath. Advent wreaths are typically evergreen wreaths with four candles. The circular wreath represents God's infinite love for us. Typically, three of the candles are purple or blue to represent hope, peace, and love. A pink or rose candle, usually lit on the third Sunday of Advent, represents joy. Often, we place a white candle in the middle of the wreath to represent the light of Christ. Traditionally, we light the white candle on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The tradition of Advent wreaths originated in private homes. It later expanded to be a staple of public worship during Advent.

Please use these devotionals as a weekly resource for you and your loved ones this year. This devotional is for our church members and friends of all ages! That said, some of the themes we will discuss are a reflection of the messy realities of human life. If you will share this devotional with some of our youngest friends, please preview the material to ensure that everything is age-appropriate.

No matter the color of your candles or whether you light candles at all, we pray that these devotions will help you to embrace the spirit of this sacred season. You may read them aloud, or you may channel the spirit of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and ponder them in your heart. Know that wherever you are and however you choose to celebrate, God is there with you. Blessings to you as you walk toward the light.



**This year, we will add a virtual component to our Advent celebration! Join us on Facebook Live on Monday evenings during the four weeks of Advent (starting on Monday, November 30, at 7:30 pm ET) to reflect on the themes of the season.*

*First Sunday in Advent
November 29, 2020*

New Ways of Thinking About Power
The Wolf and the Lamb

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-9

Meditation

Today, light the first candle in your Advent wreath. We will begin our Advent journey with the prophet Isaiah. As you might know, Isaiah is a composite book that was written by several different prophets at different times in Israel's history. There are three main sections of the book, and the passage we read today from Isaiah 11 was written by "the first Isaiah." He was the eighth century BCE prophet for whom the book is named. This Isaiah was rooted in the Zion tradition, which means he understood that God was the King of Heaven and Earth. Isaiah trusted God to save Jerusalem. He also honored the Davidic royal tradition through his belief that the great kings of Israel would come from King David's lineage.¹

The passage we read today from Isaiah 11 defies our logic! What is the nature of the Kingdom of God? Where can we find a ruler who does not judge us by the way we look or the way we speak? Where can we find the ruler who judges us with righteousness? Where is this leader who governs us through faithfulness? Where is this place where wolves and lambs lie together? Where do cows and bears graze alongside each other? We learn that on God's holy mountain, young children can safely play where venous snakes crawl! Everyone large and small is safe on God's holy mountain! It sounds like the Kingdom of God is an incredible place!

So many things happen every day that make us feel weak and powerless. We sometimes feel out of control as we face down forces that seem bigger and stronger than we are. In this passage from Isaiah, God calls us to think about power in new ways. In the Kingdom of God, we will work together to transform our lives and our world. In the Kingdom of God, there are lots of reasons to have hope as we collaborate to create different worlds. God is already doing a new thing among us, and all we must do is join God in the divine project of peacemaking. Friends, our salvation is already here! God has already saved us! Have you heard the news? The Kingdom of God is with us.

Questions to consider:

As you light the first candle in your Advent wreath, think about your answer to these questions. What are some of the things that make you feel weak and powerless? How have your relationships helped you to persevere despite your fears? Have you felt God's presence through your relationships? How is the Spirit of God showing up in your life these days?

¹ J.J.M. Roberts, "Isaiah," in *The Harper Collins Study Bible New Revised Standard Version*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Revised (New York, N.Y: HarperCollins, 1989), 912-14.

Sing a Carol – “Come, O Long-expected Jesus”

*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 in us 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.*

Prayer: God of peace, help us to work together to build Your Kingdom here on Earth. Thank you for being with us every step of the way. Amen.

Shifting Realities
Mary and The Angel Gabriel

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

Meditation

Today you will light the first and second candles in your Advent wreath as we explore what it means to allow God to change our lives. The author of the Gospel of Luke was not an eyewitness to the life and ministry of the historical Jesus. Therefore, he presents a beautiful, almost cinematic perspective on the birth, words and deeds, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is often described as the first Christian historian, but his commitment to being a good historian takes a backseat to his theological vision.² What is that vision? Well, it seems like Luke is committed to showing that the promises Jesus made to the children of Israel give birth to a new reality. In this new reality, Jews and Gentiles would lay down their social, cultural, and political differences and commit to a shared vision. Luke imagined a world where Jews and Gentiles would collaborate to create a new institution that would be called the church. God-fearing people would create a new religious space for those who followed the teachings of Jesus and were committed to serving God and each other.

In the passage we are reflecting on today, the angel Gabriel visits Mary. Mary was a young woman who lived all the way in Nazareth, far away from the center of the action in Jerusalem. No doubt, this small-town girl never imagined that she was destined for something spectacular. So, imagine her surprise when a heavenly visitor showed up. He called her “favored.” She had never heard anyone call her anything like that before! She wondered what he had to tell her. Gabriel had life-changing, reality-shifting news to share with the young, unmarried Nazarene. God had chosen her to bring the Christ-child into the world. Her unborn child would shift the destiny of nations.

God chose Mary to do something that would change the world! God is choosing us to do things that will change the world. God is choosing us to do something new. None of us is too small or insignificant to change the course of human history. But we must be willing to open ourselves up to the impossible and the unimaginable because God is doing a new thing. The new thing God is doing is beyond our comprehension. We, like Mary, might find ourselves asking, “How can this be?” But God’s still and steady voice reminds us that “nothing will be impossible with God.”

Questions to Consider:

As you light the first and second candles in your Advent wreath, reflect on the following questions. Can you relate to Mary’s experience of being shocked by an unexpected

² David L. Tiede and Christopher R. Matthews, “Luke,” in *The Harper Collins Study Bible New Revised Standard Version*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Revised (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins, 1989), 1759–61.

development in your life? Have you ever felt the tug of the Holy Spirit, urging you to do something that felt new, scary, or risky to you? How did you respond to that spiritual tug?

Sing a Carol – “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

*O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear*

Chorus: *Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel*

*O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's deep shadows put to flight*

Chorus: *Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel*

*O come, thou Wisdom from on high, and order by all things far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And cause us in her ways to go*

Chorus: *Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel*

*O Come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease,
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace*

Chorus: *Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel*

Prayer: God of surprises, thank you for expanding my limited perspective of who and what I can be. Help me to be willing to trust you as I take on new challenges. Amen.

*Third Sunday in Advent
December 13, 2020*

Social Outsiders, Spiritual Insiders
Joseph and Unexpected News

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-23

Meditation

Today you will light the first, second, and third candles in your Advent wreath as we spend some time with a carpenter named Joseph who happened to be a descendant of King David. The author of the Gospel of Matthew understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of the promises of the Hebrew Bible. The author of the gospel is clear, Jesus descended from a line of Israelite kings, and He is the promised Messiah. He came to establish a new kingdom that would be different from every kingdom that ever existed before or since. Jesus is the Savior we have been waiting for! It comes as no surprise that Matthew wants us to become well-acquainted not only with Mary but also with Joseph. Joseph was a descendant of King David; his sacrificial love created the conditions for Jesus to live.

Mary and Joseph shared a complicated story. Before they were married, he learned that she was going to have a baby. Joseph had a challenging decision to make. In their culture, a woman could be brutally punished for having a baby with a man who was not her husband. Joseph's righteousness saved Mary's life. He did not want to embarrass her publicly, so he agreed to break off their engagement quietly. Joseph's decision to save Mary was no small thing. In the ancient world, an engagement was a contract between two families. The new couple rarely were united by love. Marriages were about money and status. Joseph did not know his betrothed on a personal level. He did not know about her upstanding character. He did not know that God was at work in their lives. How could he have known?

God chose Joseph to be Jesus' earthly father because he was a descendant of King David. However, God did not choose Joseph because of his bloodline alone. Joseph was open to the will of God even when he did not understand it. Joseph must have been astounded when an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him to take Mary as his wife because her child was from the Holy Spirit. When Joseph woke up, he had no doubt about what to do next. His only option was to honor his commitment to Mary because God was doing something spectacular with them. Joseph did not understand the work that God was doing, but he knew that he was blessed to be part of it. He was entrenched enough in his relationship with God to believe that the birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of Scripture. Joseph made the societally unpopular choice. He probably endured public shaming. At times, he probably felt unsure or insecure. What made Joseph special was that his commitment to God and his wife-to-be outweighed social pressures. Joseph understood that God was with them; there was no need to fear!

Questions to Consider:

As you light the first, second, and third candles in your Advent wreath, consider the following questions: How often do societal pressures or expectations impact the decisions you make? Have

you ever made an unusual or unpopular decision because you felt led to do so by the Holy Spirit but felt socially ostracized by people who disagreed with your decision? How did you stay encouraged despite the outside critiques?

Sing a Carol – “It Came upon the Midnight Clear”

*It came upon the midnight clear,
that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the Earth
to touch their harps of gold:
“Peace on the Earth, good will to men,
from heaven’s all-gracious King.”
The world in solemn stillness lay,
to hear the angels sing.*

*Still through the cloven skies they come
with peaceful wings unfurled,
and still their heavenly music floats
o'er all the weary world;
above its sad and lowly plains,
they bend on hovering wing,
and ever o'er its Babel sounds
the blessed angels sing.*

*And ye, beneath life’s crushing load,
whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way
with painful steps and slow,
look now! for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
and hear the angels sing!*

*For lo! the days are hastening on,
by prophet seen of old,
when with the ever-circling years
shall come the time foretold
when peace shall over all the Earth
its ancient splendors fling,
and the whole world send back the song
which now the angels sing.*

Prayer: God of Abraham, Isaac, and David, You have called us to be in this world, but not of it. Help me to put Your will above my desire to conform to the expectations of this world. Thank you for being my guide. Amen.

*Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 20, 2020*

Unlikely Messengers
The Shepherds, the Angels, and a Child

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

Meditation

Today you will light the first, second, third, and fourth candles in your Advent wreath as we take our place among the witnesses who first gazed upon the Christ Child. We will begin by spending a bit of time with the shepherds. At first glance, it might seem strange the first people who learned about the birth of the Son of God were shepherds. But, if we dig into the Scriptures a bit, it becomes readily apparent that God would not have started with anyone else. Before he became the second King of Israel, David was a shepherd. As David writes in Psalm 23, the Lord is our Shepherd. What is so great about shepherds? Shepherds take care of the weakest creatures in our world. They know how to keep watch. They have the patience to wait for the first light. Can we also do the work of keeping watch over each other? Will we work to hold each other close until we reach the light?

The shepherds are not the only characters in this story. While they were in the fields keeping watch, an angel of the Lord appeared to them. The angelic visitor was eager to share the good news! A child was born in the city of David. The shepherds must have been shocked that the news of a royal birth reached them first, but as they kept listening, it became clear that this was no ordinary child. This royal babe was not being treated as babies born in the royal family were. Verse 12 says that the shepherds would know they were in the presence of the young king when they encountered a baby, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

Parents often recall their first time seeing and interacting with their child. They remember the moments of care, tenderness, and love that passed between them and their newborn child. Can you imagine how Mary and Joseph must have felt as shepherds joined them, still smelling of the fields but so eager to meet their child? In the moment of stillness, silence, and darkness, in came a ray of light. At that moment, the parents must have realized that despite the messiness of their circumstances and the absence of their families, God had not left them alone. The shepherds did not keep the news of the newborn child to themselves. They went and told everyone! Even strangers were willing to celebrate with the new parents and to bow at the feet of their beautiful newborn child.

God gave the shepherds a job that only they could do well. God called people who were already so well acquainted with living in isolation and darkness. The shepherds already were intimately acquainted with waiting. God called the ones who knew how to tend to the small things. God called the ones who knew how to care. May God grant each of us the spirit of those shepherds.

Questions to consider:

As you light the first four candles in your Advent wreath, consider your answer to these questions. Has there ever been a time that you felt that your life or your work were unimportant? Have you ever struggled to determine your purpose or felt that you did not have enough to offer?

What are some of the unique gifts you have to offer the world, and what is the best way to share those gifts?

Sing a Carol – “Away in a Manger”

*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down His sweet head.
The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay,
The little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.*

*The cattle are lowing; the baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.
I love you, Lord Jesus! Look down from the sky
And stay by my side until morning is nigh.*

*Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask you to stay
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in your tender care,
And fit us for heaven, to live with you there.*

Prayer: God of grace, sometimes I feel like I do not have much to offer. Thank you for the unique gifts you have given me. Help me to discover my gifts and grant me the courage to share them with the world.

*Christmas Eve
December 24, 2020*

**Let Earth Receive Her King!
*God and The Word***

Scripture: John 1:1-5

Meditation

Merry Christmas Eve! Today you will light the four candles in your Advent wreath and your Christ Candle as we receive Jesus, the light of the world. Our Scripture comes from the Gospel of John. John is unlike the other three Gospels. Using metaphors, John asserts that Jesus was the Son of God, fully human and fully divine. It seems to have been written for people who already followed Jesus to encourage them in times of great trouble.³ Perhaps these opening verses of the Gospel of John will provide some comfort to you as well as we travel ever closer to the end of our Advent journey.

This prologue of the Gospel of John declares that the Word was in the beginning with God. You might remember this “in the beginning” opening statement from Genesis 1. The Gospel writer returns to those familiar words to assure us that God has had a plan for us since the beginning of time. This Word who was with God was the kind of divine wisdom described in the book of Proverbs. Without the breath of God and a touch of this divine wisdom, none of us would be here. We are shaped and loved by a God who has a plan and a purpose for us. We are here for a reason. Through the infinite divine wisdom that we have life, and that light is the light of the world.

Friends, as you light the Christ candle, may your soul also be lit on fire. We who long for divine wisdom, who seek out hope, joy, and peace, who pursue Jesus, have the light inside us. What we have been seeking and chasing after has been with us all along. God placed the divine light in each of us from the beginning of time, and all we must do was receive it. Arise, shine, your light has come!

Questions to Consider:

As you light your Advent candles on this Christmas Eve, consider your answer to the following questions. How have I felt God’s spirit moving during this Advent season? At the end of this season, how am I feeling renewed? What am I feeling God calling me to do in the season ahead?

Sing a Carol – “ Silent Night, Holy Night”

*Silent night, holy night!
All is calm, all is bright
‘Round yon virgin mother and child.*

³ John Rensberger and Harold W Attridge, “John,” in *The Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version*, ed. Harold W Attridge, Revised (New York, N.Y: HarperCollins, 1989), 1814–16.

*Holy Infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

*Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight;
Glories stream from heaven afar;
Heav'nly hosts sing "alleluia!
Christ, the Savior, is born!
Christ, the Savior, is born!"*

*Silent night, holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.*

Prayer: God of light, sometimes I feel so lost as I wander in the darkness. Thank you for sending the light and being the light. Help me remember that you are always right there when I feel afraid, lighting my path. Amen.

*Christmas Day
December 25, 2020*

We Have Seen a Great Light!
The People and Their Light

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7

Meditation

Christmas Day is here! Light your Advent candles and enjoy being surrounded by the warmth and the light as we return to the words of the prophet Isaiah. His words were probably an oracle used at the coronation of a new Judean king. His oracle promised a new day of hope and possibility in a world that seemed to be overrun with violence and oppression. They promised the hope of a new and brighter future.

On this day of great joy, we also live in the shadow of all sorts of unrest locally, nationally, and globally. Children worldwide are hungry, prisons are overrun, wars brew, and people are suffering from a lack of love. The human condition is not easy. Our condition is not unlike what the children of Israel encountered when they were annexed by the Assyrians. Our world is not that dissimilar from the world Jesus was born into as a poor Jewish child in first-century Palestine. Yet, Jesus' birth and life give us a reason to be filled with hope. We have lived under oppressive conditions, and yet, there is light.

The Kingdom that God is creating for us is ruled by our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, our Prince of Peace. His rule is marked by a reign of peace because, with God, peace is possible. Remember that we were saved by the birth of a child, born in the most unusual and chaotic circumstances. When you look into the eyes of your children, grandchildren, younger siblings, nieces, nephews, and other young friends, love and honor them because they are the source of our light. They give us a reason to rejoice. Next time you look at your reflection in the mirror, love and honor yourself. God has made you, and you are filled with light.

Today as you light your Advent candles, reflect on all the ways that you have grown in this season. Below are the lyrics of one carol you might want to sing today but feel free to sing as many carols as you want. As you bask in the light of Christ, may you overflow with joy!

Sing a Carol – "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"

*Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King:
peace on Earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with th'angelic hosts proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"*

Chorus: Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King"

*Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of the Virgin's womb:
veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail th'incarnate Deity,
pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel.*

Chorus: Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King"

*Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the Earth,
born to give us second birth.*

Chorus: Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King"

Prayer: God of overwhelming joy, we thank you for the gift of this life, we thank you for overcoming all our challenges, and we thank you for giving us a Savior. On this Christmas Day, we ask that you will make us people of peace. On this Christmas Day, we ask that you will make us open to the unexpected. On this Christmas Day, we ask you for the courage to follow your will for our lives. On this Christmas Day, we ask you to help us embrace the gifts you have given us. Thank you for guiding us to the light. Amen.