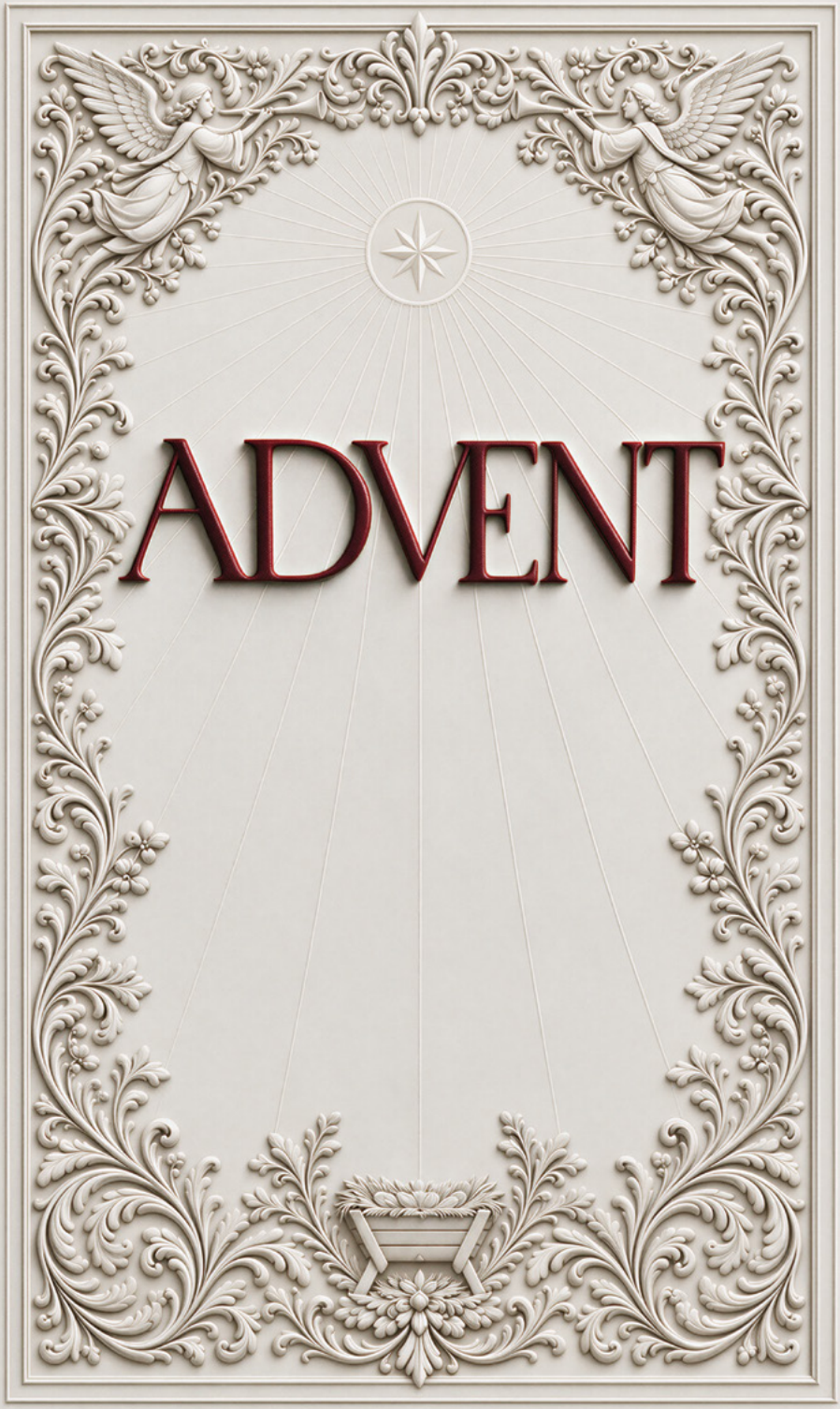

ADVENT

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THE SUMMIT CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

WAITING

Simeon was a man accustomed to waiting. His face bore the lines of old age, but his eyes still gleamed like a child's. He made his way up to the temple, knees creaking as if to ask just how many more times he could climb this path. But the Holy Spirit pushed him onward, coursing through his weary body, pulsing with the promise that he would not taste death without first meeting Christ.

Anna was a steady presence in the temple, as constant as the building's very pillars. She tasted grief early in life, losing her husband sooner than any wife should. But she found solace within those hallowed walls, praying, fasting, and worshipping through the tears of a brokenhearted young bride, into the peace-soaked stillness of a wise older woman. Anna was a prophetess in a time when the prophets had gone silent, but her God had been proclaiming light over dark voids since the very beginning.

Simeon and Anna kept vigil in the temple, like two candles melted nearly down to their base but still flickering through the night. While people bustled around them, they watched for an arrival that others had forgotten to hope for. They knew the old stories and had heard of the covenants. They clung to the faith of Abraham and Ruth, trusting in a God who made promises to old men and brought widows their redeemers. But the temple seemed no different than it did any other day. Perhaps there was a little more waiting left in them. Just then, they heard a sound coming from the temple gates: the cooing of turtledoves mingled with a baby's cry.

ARRIVALS

While the season of Advent comes at the end of our calendar year, it sits at the beginning of the liturgical church calendar, calling believers to "begin our Christian year in waiting." [1] The word Advent means "coming," or "arrival," and asks us to join Simeon and Anna's ranks as we watch in expectation for the Messiah. We place ourselves further back in the story, remembering the deep, unmet longings of a time before a Savior. The poet Malcolm Guite insists that "Advent itself is always BC! The whole purpose of Advent is to be for a moment fully and consciously before Christ."[2]

Because we live in the space between the already and the not yet, Advent also trains our eyes for an arrival that is still to come. Traditionally,

the season focuses not just on the baby in the manger, but on the future coming of Christ. We see the brokenness around us and feel creation's groaning as we yearn for the return of our King. Like the traditional Advent candles on a wreath, we flicker with anticipation through the darkest night and watch for the dawn of a new morning. The church calendar may keep moving forward, but until a new kingdom comes, "What other time or season can or will the Church ever have but that of Advent?"[3]

COUNTERCULTURAL CHRISTMASTIME

Our culture is allergic to waiting, and few things prove this infirmity like the waning months of the year. We clear August store shelves of their school supplies to make room for Halloween candy and take out Christmas decorations before the Thanksgiving turkey has even grown cold. We cram our calendars with holiday parties and performances, wondering just how many events we can fit into a span of four weeks before we burst. We purchase gifts with the click of a button, settling for nothing longer than two-day shipping. Our childhood wish lists are replaced by endless to-do lists, and before we know it, December 25th starts to feel more like a looming deadline than a sacred holiday.

The practice of Advent quietly rails against our culture's frenetic pace. It requires us to pause and still our hearts while an anxious world screams that we cannot possibly afford to do so. But if we rush through this season, we miss its entire point. Waiting is not wasteful. Like planting a bulb in cold winter soil with the hope of a bright spring blossom, it sets our minds' attentions and hearts' affections on something greater than the present moment.

Often in the waiting, we discover that our attentions and affections have been misplaced. Historically, this has also been a season of repentance. In liturgical traditions, many churches mark each Sunday in Advent with the prayer, "Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light."[4] As we look inward, we see that our own hearts bear the brokenness of the fall. But "the call to repent is not a call to get busier, trying to jam more good works in an overcrowded schedule, redoubling our efforts to 'do better.' It is a call to step back and pay attention. Not to remake oneself but to be remade."[5] We clear away the weeds and rocks so our spring bulb can take root in healthy soil. And when we confess our sins

and admit that we too are in desperate need of saving, it makes the arrival of a Savior even sweeter and the coming redemption of the world all the more glorious.

THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

This Christmas season, we invite you to cast aside the hurriedness and impatience of adulthood and return to the joyful anticipation of a child. Grown-ups tap their feet in frustration, constantly glancing at their watches, thinking of all the other things they could be doing. Children wait with excitement, dreaming of what is to come, asking endlessly, ***"Is he here yet?"*** After all, as Dickens reminds us, "it is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child himself."[6]

He who came for us and is coming again will always be worth the wait. So, take a breath. Shut out the noise. Put down your list and pull up a chair close to our fire. Listen to the old stories and hear the echoes of the promises. Put yourself in the shoes of those who waited for the Messiah, through loss and victory, heartache and hope. Meet the unlikely cast of characters who ushered in the birth of Jesus Christ and like Simeon and Anna, set your gaze on a coming day. Clear away the clutter and come close to the warmth of the flickering flame. Join us as we keep watch—and let every heart prepare Him room.

> ***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.***[7]

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Advent begins every year on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. In liturgical church traditions, each weekend of Advent is marked by the lighting of a candle on a wreath, signifying hope, peace, joy, and love. This guide is divided into weekend and weekday readings. Over the course of four weeks, we will walk through scripture, from Eden onward, to see God's covenant promises and redemptive plan. We will celebrate the arrival of Christ on the fourth week, ending on Christmas Day.

For each of the Sundays during Advent, you will find a guide for personal or family worship. These include a scripture reading, prayer and song of Christmas. Let these moments be a way to stop as you begin a new week and orient your heart towards Christ and the ways His coming brought hope, peace, joy and love into the world.

May this guide awaken your heart to the wonder of the Incarnation in ways that lead you to deeper surrender and worship of our Savior King.


HOPE

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

HOPE

READ

Isaiah 7:14 — Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

PRAY

Lord Jesus, we enter this season of Advent with a sense of anticipation and expectation. We know that your people, Israel, waited in the dark for a light they could not yet see. You came, just as you promised, and we believe that you are coming again. Hold us steady in the waiting. Fill us with hope that doesn't flinch, because it rests on you, who keep your word. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.

SING

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus (Charles Wesley)

> *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.*

WEEK ONE: MONDAY

FAR AS THE CURSE IS FOUND

Read: Genesis 3

Things fell apart so quickly. The snake's seemingly harmless question held deadly venom, and his guarantee of wisdom was nothing but a cheap counterfeit. The man and woman had all the knowledge they needed—full access to the Creator of the universe, daily walks with Him in the cool of the garden. They were His people and He was their God. Their life was one of abundance, but after the snake's whispers, all they could see was scarcity. They wondered if their Maker was holding out on them, so they took and they ate.

And with one bite, God's good creation shattered, like a single crack in a pane of glass that spreads its spidery veins to every corner. The man and woman's eyes were opened, as the snake had said, but instead of insight, all they felt was shame. They sewed together fig leaves, a poor excuse for clothing, something that quickly shrivels and falls apart. It's an all too familiar tendency—covering our sin with a cloak of our own creation, hiding from the only One who can truly fix the mess we've made.

God laid out the devastating cost of their actions. The woman would suffer excruciating pain as she brought new life into a broken world. The man would no longer work in the shade of a verdant garden, but under a merciless sun, constantly battling thorns and thistles. But God's curse for the serpent contained a promise for Adam and Eve—a glimpse of hope on the fledgling world's darkest day. After the groans and cries of a long labor, a child would be born, a Son given. And he would grow into a man who would feel the serpent's fangs but ultimately crush his head under nail-scarred feet. This second, sinless Adam would bear man's curse of thorns and thistles, twisted into the shape of a mocking crown.

As the mother of all living held her firstborn son, she must have hoped the brokenness would be mended in a single generation. She could not see the murder and strife ahead of her, or the centuries of descendants who would stray even farther from Eden. But God saw it all. He could see another garden, sitting in the shadow of a cross, holding a vacant tomb. He knew that only the blood-tinged sweat and toil of His Son could bring His children home for good.

There is another garden coming—one with a river flowing straight from God's throne to water the tree of life. Unlike the fig tree, its leaves will not be used for hiding, but for the healing of nations. Our Maker will walk with us in the cool

of the day and dwell with us again. He will come and place His hands over every fracture and fissure left from the fall and restore it to its Edenlike perfection. All that fell apart so quickly will one day be made new.

> *No more let sins and sorrows grow,*
> *nor thorns infest the ground;*
> *He comes to make his blessings flow*
> *far as the curse is found.*[8]

WEEK ONE: TUESDAY

A BOW IN THE SKY

Read: Genesis 8–9:17

Ravens are carrion birds—they feast on decaying flesh. Noah's raven found no shortage of this when he left the ark. The last of the living had just witnessed the great unmaking of the earth, a devastating reversal of creation. After seeing the horrors sin had wrought on His world, the Lord decided to wipe the slate nearly clean, sparing just one righteous man and his family. The raven never returned to the ark; he had all the death he needed to stay alive. So, Noah chose a dove, a messenger better suited for finding signs of life.

As man and beast returned to dry land, the Lord made a covenant of preservation. He promised Noah and all creation that He would never again drown the earth in the waves of His wrath. He knew floodwaters could not fully blot out the stain of sin on every human heart. So, the Lord hung His radiant war bow in the sky, a token of remembrance to stay His hand. For you see, when it comes to covenants, the Lord always remembers, no matter how often His people forget.

Centuries later, a man would arrive at the Jordan river to be baptized. He needed no washing but came as the spotless Lamb of God to cleanse us of our sins. And as the Lord's beloved Son passed through the waters, the Spirit came to rest on him in the form of a dove. After all those carrion years of death and decay, a dove heralded new life. The Spirit rested on the true Branch of Peace, and the Lord remembered His covenant and recalled the direction in which He had set His bow in the sky.

When he hung His weapon in the clouds, He made sure that the arrow of His wrath was not pointed toward the earth. Instead, He aimed it straight for the heart of heaven.[9]

STARRY NIGHTS AND FLAMING TORCHES

Read: Genesis 15; Hebrews 6:13-20

The sun seemed to be setting for Abraham. It was hard to hold onto God's promises amidst the relentless march of time. At his and Sarah's age, barrenness seemed like an irrevocable reality. The blessings of land and legacy came with a sting when he remembered he had no child to pass them on to. And so, as twilight fell, the Lord gently ushered Abraham out of his tent and directed his gaze toward the night sky. The stars shone like beams of light pushing through pinpricks in a heavy curtain. The Lord reminded Abraham of His promise, assuring him that his offspring would be as abundant as those stars. Pushing away the doubts, Abraham believed Him.

Because the Lord knew Abraham's hope was riddled with so many hows, He chose an even more visceral image to drive the message home. In those days, if two people wanted to swear an oath to one another, they conducted a ritual in which they cut animals in half, spread them apart, and walked between them.[10] The gruesome scene was a way of saying, "May this be done to me if I do not keep my word." Customarily, partners walked the path together, equally assuming the curse of a broken covenant. That night, however, there was a break with tradition.

A darkness fell over Abraham, deeper than the black sky and weightier than mere exhaustion. The Lord told him what would become of his descendants, from sojourn to slavery to the promised land. And then, something astonishing happened. Taking on the form of a smoking pot and flaming torch—much like the clouds and fire that would one day protect the Hebrew people—the Lord passed between the pieces of the animals. He secured the covenant by Himself, as Abraham lay motionless on the ground.

When God establishes a covenant, He does not distribute the workload evenly. Instead, His oaths come with the implicit message, *"You cannot hold up your end of the bargain, so I will."* Abraham clung to a hope displayed through shimmering stars and flaming torches. But the Lord knew there would be another starry night, in which hope took on the form of His only Son, destined to walk a bloody path all alone. And despite our failure to fulfill our end of the bargain, Abraham's true descendant would look at the cross and say, *"May it be done to me."* He would bear the curse of the covenant we broke and become our eternal blessing.

WEEK ONE: THURSDAY

THIS TIME I WILL PRAISE

Read: Genesis 29

Leah just wanted to be loved, but her father had other plans. She seemed destined to be a pawn in his deceptive games. Her younger sister, Rachel, was the beautiful shepherdess everyone noticed, and Leah was the perennial wallflower, known only for her weak eyes. It must have pierced like a dagger, that night her father revealed his schemes and brought her to Jacob's bed chamber. She was the butt of Laban's sick joke, a bargaining chip for seven more years of labor. In the morning, when Leah saw Jacob's horrified expression, all her fears were realized. Who would possibly want a girl like her?

Knowing Leah was despised and rejected by the men in her life, the Lord opened her womb. Rachel had Jacob's heart, but Leah could have his children. With each pregnancy, she hoped her labor would buy the love she desperately longed for. As she held each baby boy, she gave them names to carry both her pain and her deepest desires. Reuben meant *seen*, Simeon *heard*, Levi *attached*. She knew the Lord was acquainted with her grief, but she couldn't stop wishing that Jacob would fill the hole in her heart left from years of neglect.

And then the fourth boy came, and something shifted.

As Leah held her baby, a new song sprang up in her heart. It was different than the mournful lullabies she sang for her first three boys. She called the baby Judah, declaring, "*This time I will praise the Lord.*"[11] Leah deliberately turned her gaze upward, away from Jacob's indifference and toward the Lord's endless affection. Only He could supply everything she yearned for.

And so it was that the girl with weak eyes discovered she was seen by the Giver of all good things. The Lord never took His eyes off Leah, not even for a moment. He was the fulfillment of every longing whispered in her sons' names. He saw and heard every silent tear she cried. She was attached to *Him*. No longer used by her greedy earthly father as a means to an end, she was chosen by her Heavenly Father to be a precious vessel that would bring life into the world and fulfill His promises. The Lord set His love on Leah, and in doing so, the overlooked wife became the matriarch, the ancestral mother to the Lion of Judah. Forever held in His steadfast arms.

And that was certainly something worth singing about.

WEEK ONE: FRIDAY

OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON

Read: Exodus 19 and 24

Leah's sons and their brothers grew and multiplied, and the story God told Abraham under that starry sky came to fruition. The Hebrew people found themselves on the other side of the Red Sea, with Egypt and its generations of oppression behind them. Their journey was marked with miracle after miracle—plagues and plundering, Passover lambs and pillars of fire. They tasted water from a rock and bread from heaven. But God knew that even after rescuing His people from Egypt, it would take another miracle to cleanse Egypt from their hearts. Even as their shackles lay beyond the sea, their minds were prone to wander back to the customs of their pagan taskmasters.

And so once again, the Lord called for a covenant.

With Moses as His mediator, the Lord laid out an agreement with the Hebrew people. They were not just a small chosen family anymore, but a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession—and they needed to act like it. The Lord commanded them to live in light of their rescue, showing a watching world not only who they were, but whose they were. But because of His great power and their great frailty, there were limits to how close they could come without perishing. So, Moses went before them, speaking with God on a smoke-filled mountain and coming down to deliver the law on His behalf. The covenant this time was not marked by a rainbow or a bloody path, but by a book. After Moses read the Book of the Covenant aloud, the people declared with one voice, "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do."[12]

But the Lord knew their promises wouldn't last long.

In a great act of mercy, He called Moses, the leaders, and the elders to approach His mountain. Knowing they could not fully behold Him and survive, God allowed them to see where His feet rested, on a sheet of sapphire, "the very heaven for clearness."[13] Then came an astounding invitation—the Lord of heaven and earth told the men to come and dine with Him. He knew that many of these men would descend from this experience and within a few short days, lead His people into idolatry. They would take the very gold they had plundered from their captors and melt it down into a calf to worship. But He welcomed them to His table just the same.

A mediator greater than Moses came for us. He too was born amidst an evil ruler's slaughter of the innocents and the wails of grieving mothers. Under the cover of darkness, his parents carried him to Egypt as a refugee. He grew to

become a teacher who delivered his sermons from a mountainside. And at the Passover feast, he welcomed the saint and sinner to his table, offering them the cup of the new covenant. He bore the yoke of oppression and secured our exodus from the slavery of sin.

In these wilderness days, we await the advent of a new heaven and earth, our ultimate promised land. We long for the day when we will stand before the throne, dazzling with jewels in every color of the covenantal rainbow, and behold the King in all His glory. He will dwell with us again, and we will eat and drink at His table, dressed in the robes of sons and daughters. With our shackles on a distant shore and Egypt fully cleansed from our hearts, we will live in eternal communion with our King as His treasured possession and blood-bought heirs.

> ***Truly He taught us to love one another;***
> ***His law is love and His gospel is peace.***
> ***Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,***
> ***and in His name all oppression shall cease.***[14]


PEACE

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

PEACE

READ

Isaiah 9:6-7 — For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

PRAY

Jesus, you are the child that was given, the Prince of Peace, and of your peace there will be no end. Lord, come into the turbulent places in our lives, the worry and the hurry, and make them calm. Quiet us. Teach us to rest in the peace you have provided for us, the kind that guards us when everything else is loud. Amen.

SING

Silent Night (Joseph Mohr, tr. John Freeman Young)

> *Silent night, holy night,*
> *All is calm, all is bright*
> *Round yon virgin mother and child!*
> *Holy Infant so tender and mild,*
> *Sleep in heavenly peace,*
> *Sleep in heavenly peace.*
>
> *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.*

WEEK TWO: MONDAY

GRAFTED IN

Read: Joshua 2

From the moment she met them, she knew the men at her door were different than all the others. The word "Israel" conjured up stories she had heard about a ragtag group of slaves turned ocean-parting army. Any city their God led them to, they conquered, and now her hometown sat right in their crosshairs. Her neighbors shuddered with fear, but Rahab found herself trembling with another feeling—hope. Where Jericho saw a threat, Rahab saw salvation. A way out.

With the king's men hot on the spies' heels, time was of the essence. In one single moment, she had to decide if all the stories she had heard were folklore or fact. And if they were fact, it would change everything. Once they were in the clear, Rahab approached the spies with an audacious request. She asked for a rescue, believing that God's promises could extend to her when everything around her said they couldn't. She was the wrong woman with the wrong job from the wrong place. Would the God of Israel even offer a lifeline to someone like her?

The answer was a resounding *yes*.

The Lord didn't just throw Rahab a life preserver—He grafted her in as a daughter. Instead of plucking her from the city walls and setting her outside the rubble to find her own way, He gently placed His hand on her back and ushered her into the Israelite family, assuring safety and belonging for the rest of her days. But it went beyond even that. The woman from enemy territory with a scandalous past became a member of the royal line. And at the beginning of that line was her son Boaz, who also offered protection to a woman from distant lands.

What began as a bold demand to spare her life ended with Rahab being woven into the story of the ultimate rescue. And long after her chapter ended, a descendant would come who kept an eye out for women just like her. Women caught in the most impossible circumstances, holding out their own red cord of hope, daring to ask for a way out. And his answer would always be a hearty "*yes*," grafting every one of them into his own family tree.

WEEK TWO: TUESDAY

THE BOY FROM BETHLEHEM

Read: 1 Samuel 16:1-13 and 2 Samuel 7

Samuel filled his horn with oil and made his way to Bethlehem as thoughts swirled in his head. He had already anointed Israel's first king. Was it really going so badly this quickly? Saul physically fit the bill: head and shoulders above his peers, the son of a wealthy man, a poster boy for the Israelite army. But God knew the heart of His people when they begged for a king. The request revealed their wandering eyes and their desire to mimic the nations around them, just as they had been warned against on Mount Sinai. Like a father teaching a spoiled child a lesson, God gave them what they asked for. Saul was a mirror held up to the nation—a glory thief, just as they had become—and the Lord removed His favor from him. So off Samuel went to find Jesse, a father of many sons.

Samuel watched the brothers pass by in birth order. He assumed God would send a man who matched the stature of Saul, but as each one stood before him, the Lord stayed His hand. Almost as an afterthought, Jesse mentioned one more son, still out in the fields tending the sheep, not even worthy to make an appearance. As the small, ruddy, bear-wrestling poet was called in, the old prophet tightened his grip on the horn of anointing oil. This was the one.

Often the king we're looking for is not the king we need.

After slaying a giant and escaping from a deranged king, David took his rightful place on the throne. One day, while looking around at the fine cedar walls in his palace, he thought of the tabernacle curtains, worn down from decades of use. He resolved to build the Lord a house of His own, but the Lord declined. He did not need anything from a king, even a man like David, who was after His own heart. Instead, the Lord made a covenant with David to build him a house, not of wood or gold, but sons—a dynastic line.

Even though Israel's plea for a king came from an idolatrous place in their hearts, even though future glory thieves would splinter the nation, even though every king of Israel, including David, would prove his own fallibility, the High King of Heaven's decree would stand. His steadfast love would not depart from them. The Lord would build the house of David, not the other way around, and the reign of His kingdom would know no end.

Centuries later, a cry would ring out in Bethlehem from another ruddy-faced boy. This anointed one was little more than an afterthought in

David's hometown. He didn't have the stature for a palace, but he had the heart of a shepherd. And he would do whatever it took to protect his Father's flock.

He wasn't the king we were looking for, but he was just the King we needed.

WEEK TWO: WEDNESDAY

LOST AND FOUND

Read: 2 Kings 22:1-23:27

The temple needed a deep cleansing. Once glorious and sacred in the days of David's son Solomon, it now sat in disrepair from years of neglect—a living picture of the Hebrew heart, cluttered with a hodgepodge of foreign idols. Asherah poles and incense for Baal made a mockery of the holy place. Reminders of Eden and Exodus sat in the shadow of gods of wood and stone. As the men sorted through the rubble, the priest came upon a book that, by the looks of things, had long been forgotten. He sent it to Josiah, a young king wise beyond his years. As his servants read it aloud, the words struck him like a double-edged sword.

Josiah gathered the people of Judah together and read the Book of the Law aloud, just as Moses had all those years ago. At Mount Sinai, the Israelites promised they would do all that the Lord told them. But they hadn't. Their kings strayed, their nation splintered in two, and their idolatry was on full display throughout Jerusalem. The Lord commanded them to bind His words between their eyes and teach them to their children. But His law lay abandoned in a dusty corner of the temple while descendants of Abraham and Isaac sacrificed their own precious children on hellish pagan altars. It was as though God's people had been wandering through a treacherous forest for years and found an ancient map that showed them just how lost they were.

Along with the commands of the law came the consequences of forsaking it. Josiah and his people knew that if the Lord was faithful in His blessing, He would also be faithful in the curse. There was a way out of this mess, but it went by way of Babylon. The young king could not go back and change the hearts of his forefathers or go forward and keep exile from coming, but as long as he sat on the throne, he would guide God's people back to the old paths. He demolished the shrines and held a Passover like no other, reminding them of their rescue out of slavery. There were dark days behind them and dark days ahead, but for his leg of the journey, Josiah carried the fire. He led the people in a vow renewal, restating the promise of the covenant

to walk in the ways of the Lord and keep His commands "with all his heart and all his soul."[15]

Long past Judah's shining moment, the Lord would keep His word. Though His wrath was just, He shielded Josiah and his generation from the worst of it. He would love His children with all His heart, mind, and strength even when they failed to love Him in return. The sons and daughters of Adam and Eve were born to be runaways. So, one day the Lord himself would come in the flesh, bring them home, and cleanse the temple of their hearts once and for all.

WEEK TWO: THURSDAY

WRITTEN ON THEIR HEARTS

Read: Jeremiah 31

Their bondage began long before exile. It did not start with the siege of Jerusalem, the plundering of the temple, or the long journey to Babylon. No, the people of Judah had been living in captivity for quite some time, forging their own shackles as they worshipped the gods of their enemies. The Lord warned them that if they handed their hearts to idols, their bodies would soon follow, and the promised land would slip from their grasp. He rescued them from slavery, but they kept wandering back, convinced the ways of their oppressors would satisfy their souls, so the Lord gave them over to their desires.

Exile was exodus in reverse.

God's nature, once revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai, was unchanging. He was merciful and gracious, sending prophet after prophet to warn His children of their errant ways. He was slow to anger, withholding His wrath for centuries. Like any good Father, His discipline did not diminish His steadfast love, it proved it. He had sent His children away before. But whether they were cast out of a perfect garden or a land of milk and honey, Adam and Eve and their descendants found grace, even in exile.

Amidst lament and pronouncements of judgment, Jeremiah, "the weeping prophet," delivered a message of hope to his brothers and sisters.[16] They would not be scattered forever. The Lord longed to gather His prodigal children back to Him. In fact, every covenant, every rescue plan, every moment

since His first breath of air into Adam's lungs was marked with the same intent: *"I will be their God, and they will be my people."*

He loved them. He had always loved them. And that love would last forever.

Sin's chasm between God and His people was too wide and could not be breached by the blood of bulls and goats, but only by a perfect sacrifice. A law written on stone or scroll was not enough—it had to go as deep as the snake's poison had gone, etched onto their very hearts. Heavy temple curtains and mediating priests could not bring God's people as close as He desired. They had to know Him intimately and experience His presence firsthand. The old covenants lit the way for a new covenant, one that would never need amendment or revision, but whose fulfillment would come at the greatest cost.

Advent is a reminder that we still live east of Eden. But while it anticipates the arrival of the Messiah, it isn't just about the longing of our own hearts—the Lord is longing for something as well. Like a father at a doorstep watching for a wayward child, He yearns for us to come home, straight into His loving arms. Despite our stubbornness and rebellion, His heartbeat throughout the story of scripture is that we would dwell with Him. And in the end, the One who orders the sun and the moon, who measures the heavens above and the oceans below, will always get the desires of His heart.

> *O come, O come, Emmanuel,*
> *and ransom captive Israel*
> *that mourns in lonely exile here*
> *until the Son of God appear.*
>
> *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel*
> *shall come to you, O Israel.*[17]

WEEK TWO: FRIDAY

HOMECOMING

Read: Ezra 3 and Zechariah 8

The Israelites made their way back with a mixture of memories and emotions. The older generation kept a slower pace, with eyes dimmed from decades of waiting, but they could have walked the Jerusalem streets in their sleep. They knew the corners where they met to play with childhood friends, the walls that kept them safe at night, the way the great temple loomed over them when they were small. They ached for the home of their youth, before their enemies had reduced it to rubble. The younger generation climbed the path

to the city nimbly, but uncertain of what they would see. They had built Jerusalem up in their imaginations, constructed from the stories of their elders. After living their entire lives in Babylon, they found themselves homesick for a place they had never been.

The Lord went before His children in exile, and gave them favor in the highest places, from Daniel's counsel to Esther's royalty to Nehemiah's role as cupbearer to the king. When the time came for Him to bring them home, the work of restoration was crucial. With the city gates in ashes, they were at risk of another invasion, and if they did not lay the right foundation, their hearts would be left vulnerable as well. The project came in fits and starts, with waves of new exiles returning amid threats from surrounding nations. But under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, with the prophetic encouragement of Zechariah and Haggai, the city and its temple began to take shape again. No one was too important or too insignificant for the task at hand. Side by side, men and women, rich and poor, young and old, priest and laity set to work, brandishing hammers in one hand and spears in another. They resolved to leave neither the city nor their souls open to attack again.

There were times when the sounds of lament and praise were indistinguishable from one another. The old mourned the lost years and the sight of the ruined temple. Much like the days of Josiah, the Hebrew people cried at the reading of the law, seeing how their nation had failed to keep God's commands. But they celebrated as well, bringing back the old feasts, praising the One who proved His faithfulness from Egypt to the promised land, to Babylon and back again. The Lord fulfilled His words spoken through Zechariah as the old men and women returned to their childhood stomping grounds to watch a new generation of boys and girls playing in the Jerusalem streets. His love endured through the curse and the blessing, the scattering and the gathering, and it would continue even after they were gone.

But even in the freshly rebuilt Jerusalem, symptoms of spiritual amnesia remained. There were rumblings of forgotten Sabbaths, a neglected temple, and intermarriage with pagan nations. The story was not over; in many ways, it had hardly begun. God's people were back, but they were not home yet.

There is a new Jerusalem coming, one built in the heavenly places, with walls made not of stone but impenetrable jewels. We will no longer look over our shoulders in fear of an attack, because the enemy will be struck down once and for all. Our worship won't be tinged by sadness, because every tear will be wiped away for good. And we will see "no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."[18] We will not visit Him on special occasions behind a heavy curtain, because He will dwell with us in perfect, eternal communion.

So, we wait with the longing of those in exile. We let ourselves feel homesick for a place we've never seen. We continue the task of restoration, laboring side by side until our work is done. But with every strike of our hammer and sharpening of our sword, we remember this one thing: We are not home yet.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

> *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."*[19]


JOY

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

JOY

READ

Luke 2:10-14 – [10] 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. [11] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." [13] And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, [14] "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

PRAY

Lord Jesus, the angels brought good news of great joy for all the people, and that includes us. Our joy is not a mood that comes and goes. It is you, our Savior, born in a manger, Christ the Lord. Let this joy fill our home and spill over into the people around us. We sing with the angels today: glory to God in the highest. Amen.

SING

Angels We Have Heard On High (Anonymous)

Angels we have heard on high,
Sweetly singing o'er the plains,
And the mountains in reply
Echoing their joyous strains.

Refrain:
Gloria in excelsis Deo.
Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?
What the gladsome tidings be
Which inspire your heavn'ly song?

[Refrain]

Come to Bethlehem and see
Him whose birth the angels sing.
Come, adore on bended knee
Christ the Lord, the newborn King.

[Refrain]

See him in a manger laid,
Whom the choirs of angels praise.
Mary, Joseph, lend your aid
While our hearts in love we raise.

[Refrain]

WEEK THREE: MONDAY

UNTO US

Read: Isaiah 9:1-7

There is a darkness so thick, we can barely see our hands in front of our faces. Black and heavy like pitch, it immobilizes us, as we fear what each blind step holds. It invades our minds with shadowy figures and sinister lies, convincing us that morning will never come. The darkness of sin and death was let in through a crack we can trace back to a spot near a tree in a garden. The Hebrew people felt its invasion, but they were not the only ones. We too have stumbled in the night, longing for the break of day.

The Old Testament stories and promises were prologue to something more brilliant than anyone could have imagined. Like navigational stars, they pierced through the curtain of the night sky, guiding the way to dawn. But this morning light was not man-made, built by our own ingenuity. Nor was it some ethereal spirit of optimism and goodwill, assuring us things were not as dark as they appeared. No, things were every bit as bad as they seemed. That is why such a great light was needed, and why it could not come from the very people who had cast the shadows in the first place.

This was a task for the same Creator who once spoke over a formless and void earth. Once again, He would command, *"Let there be light."* But instead of the sun to guide the day, or the moon to illuminate the evening, this light took the form of an infant boy. A child born, a Son given not to one single generation or tribe, but *unto us*. All of us.

He is the Wonderful Counselor, whose wisdom exceeds that of any priest or prophet. He is the Mighty God, stronger than any warrior-king. He is the Everlasting Father, unhindered by even the heaviest of gravestones. He is the Prince of Peace, reconciling God and man, and one day eradicating the need for garments of war. His reign is eternal, forever extending in glorious perfection.

Although Isaiah wrote these words centuries before the angels' announcement to the shepherds, parts of his prophecy were written in the present tense. For you see, when our zealous, covenant-keeping God makes a promise, it's as good as done. Wrapped in the cloth of humanity, a Light broke through, pushing back the darkness once and for all with his nail-scarred hands. Dawn shattered the night when a Savior was given, and he was given *unto us*.

> *O holy night, the stars are brightly shining;*
> *it is the night of the dear Savior's birth.*
> *Long lay the world in sin and error pining,*
> *till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.*
>
> *A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,*
> *for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn![20]*

WEEK THREE: TUESDAY

THE WORD MADE FLESH

Read: John 1:1-18

The Word was there at the beginning of all things. From the formation of galaxies to man's first breath, The Word spoke every corner of creation into existence. The Word called for a flood in Noah's time and held back the waters of the Red Sea for Moses. The Word delivered promises to Abraham, dreams to Joseph, and hope to Hannah. The Word drafted the law for the Israelites and the blueprint for the tabernacle. Through the mouthpiece of the prophets, the Word beckoned His children home, gave them a glimpse of the future, and patiently repeated His promises.

And then, something astounding happened: The Word became flesh.

The Nativity stories of Matthew and Luke are familiar to most of us, easily depicted in carved figurines and children's plays. But the Gospel of John offers a third Christmas story, written in poetry instead of prose. It lingers in the mystery of the incarnation, when the divine was confined to mortality. The "Light of Light, very God of very God," came down and walked among us, subjecting himself to the full range of the human experience.[21] He felt the skinned knees of boyhood, the sore feet of a long day's journey, the joy of a good belly laugh with friends, and the stinging tears of loss. The one who ruled and reigned with the Father and Spirit became hungry, tired, rejected, betrayed, tempted in every way and acquainted with our grief.

No one had seen God's face and lived to tell the tale. Moses saw traces, Elijah heard whispers, but to behold His full glory was more than any man or woman could bear. He kept His formidable presence behind the heavy curtains of the tabernacle and temple. And when the time came for God to give us the truest expression of Himself, the "exact imprint of His very nature," He baffled the world with His simplicity.[22] The God of all time and space, with the wealth of the universe at His disposal, set His arrival in the Middle East of the first century. He did not come as an ancient emperor or modern-day millionaire, but as a carpenter's son turned itinerant preacher. The God of endless possibilities became Jesus of Nazareth.

God spoke to His children since the very beginning. They had stories of miracles passed down from parents and grandparents, covenant promises echoing through the ages, laws written on stone and visions cast through the prophets. These were all glorious ways of communicating, but something stunning happened when he came down and spoke in our own dialect. The Word left the throne room of heaven and "tabernacled among us."[23]

Grace and truth arrived in our same skin and bones. The Lord desired to dwell with us, so he came and dwelt as one of us, breaching sin's chasm, tearing the veil between heaven and earth.

Man could not see God and live, so God became man and died on his behalf. And when he rose again in glory, death's victory speech was silenced by the very Word himself.

> *…veiled in flesh the Godhead see*
> *Hail th'incarnate Deity!*
> *Pleased as Man with man to dwell,*
> *Jesus, our Immanuel.*[24]

WEEK THREE: WEDNESDAY

THE FAMILY TREE

Read: Matthew 1:1-17

There are some family stories we don't tell at the Christmas dinner table. We only dare to mention them in a low whisper, after the dishes are cleared and the children have gone out to play. When we open our scrapbooks, curated to show our proudest moments, they are nowhere to be found. We push unpleasant memories to the back of a drawer or a dusty corner in the attic, hoping one day they'll disappear for good.

Every family has stories they would rather forget.

In Matthew's day, when a man's pedigree was his destiny, it was common to prune the family tree. Complicated figures and unseemly stories were conveniently expunged from the record.[25] But rather than erase the troublesome moments in Jesus' genealogy, this gospel account highlights them. We meet characters who are both heroes and scoundrels and find ourselves wondering whether they deserve our veneration or a good scolding. And just in case we are tempted to put our trust in kings, the Davidic line—the pinnacle of Hebrew bragging rights—is marked by one of its darkest moments. Solomon's mother is listed as Uriah's wife, not because she was unworthy of being named, but as a reminder that she was never David's for the taking.

Ancient genealogies were primarily lists of fathers and sons, but Jesus' ancestral line recognizes several women, though not the ones we might expect. Instead of matriarchs like Sarah or Rebekah, we meet women from foreign lands with troubled pasts. They were outsiders in every way imaginable, but in the opening pages of the New Testament, they stand shoulder to shoulder

with the patriarchs of the faith. This has always been Christ's way—seeing and remembering women whom the world had forgotten, holding their stories close to his heart. Throughout his ministry, he looked for women who resembled Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, and invited them to become cherished followers and friends.

Jesus Christ's family tree is much like all of ours—messy. Since our mother and father took and ate from the tree, the blight of sin has infected every one of us. His genealogy is not a boring list of names or a scandalous tell-all, but a treasure map, using landmarks of imperfect men and women to point us to the true character of God. And while their frailty is on full display, the first line of Matthew's gospel reminds us that our God is always true to His word. The descendant of Abraham and David fulfilled the covenants to bless the nations and establish an eternal king. He sovereignly chose every name in the line to bring about the redemption of the world—thorns, thistles, and all.

Every family tree has branches that cause us to blush, but read the old begats and take heart. Remember that the Keeper of every promise and Author of every story is not ashamed to be called our God.[26]

WEEK THREE: THURSDAY

PREPARE THE WAY

Read: Luke 1:5-24 and 1:57-80

Zechariah knew Abraham's heartache. The faithful priest prayed for a child, but as the years dragged on, resignation replaced hope. Even when an angel told him it wasn't too late, he was dubious. He forgot that the God of Abraham was not bound by biological timetables, so he questioned heaven's messenger and found himself tongue-tied in the process.

He could not describe what happened to the temple crowd, nor could he explain things to an astonished and expecting Elizabeth. Over the course of about forty weeks, Zechariah was able to feel what Israel had experienced for four centuries—deep silence. Amidst invasion and imperial rule, God's people found themselves without a single prophet. And while we may only have to flip a few pages from Malachi's promises to Luke's gospel, those who lived within the pregnant pause must have felt every second of its uncertainty.

Over nine quiet months, the Lord worked in Zechariah's heart and mind, clearing away the doubt to make room again for hope. By the time of John's birth, Zechariah was His chosen vessel to break the prophetic silent streak and herald in the era of the Messiah. As the old man gazed upon his newborn

son, he saw the work that lay ahead of him. John would pave the way for his people to meet their long-awaited King.

While we are more familiar with cheerful Christmas countdowns, "the Advent season has historically been a penitential season, 'a little Lent,' a time to seek repentance, humility, and renewal."[27] It may seem like somber work during a happy season, but it is the only way to make room for Christ's arrival. We cannot long for someone we do not believe we need, and if we don't recognize our sin, we will never look for a Savior. John's ministry of preparation and the work of Advent are the same—they till up the soil of the human heart, pull out weeds, clear away debris, and create fertile ground in which Jesus can plant new life.

Zechariah's son was called the new Elijah and just like the old prophet, he wore a hairy cloak and spoke uncomfortable truths to powerful people. Both men were marked by a moment near the Jordan River. Elijah walked a dry path through it and was swept up into heaven, but for John, the reverse was true. As he baptized his brothers and sisters in the waters of repentance, one greater than he arrived on the banks of the Jordan. And instead of being taken up to heaven, John the Baptist watched in awe as heaven came down to earth.

> *The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said,*
>
> *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*[28]

WEEK THREE: FRIDAY

HIGHLY FAVORED

Read: Luke 1:26-38; 46-56

She was just a girl. Fifteen years old, by many estimations.[29] She had no formal education and held little societal value. Her fiancé was a common tradesman. But when Gabriel arrived on the scene, he greeted Mary of Nazareth with words that had never been spoken in her direction before: *"Favored one."*[30]

Her assignment was as old as sin, fulfilling Eve's hope when she held her first child and wondered if he might be the one to crush the snake's head. Since then, every generation ached for redemption and now it had come, hidden inside the womb of this young virgin. Mary was a contemplator, so she tried to work Gabriel's words out in the recesses of her heart and mind, but the logistics alone were unfathomable. Why here? Why now? Why *her*?

Future generations would call her blessed, but for an unmarried Jewish girl in the first century, pregnancy seemed more like a curse. She risked accusations of heresy or lunacy if she tried to explain things, and an adulteress's stoning if she let her growing figure speak for itself. Yet Mary saw past the scorn to the joy set before her. Instead of the hero of the story, she assumed the role of a servant, and with costly and courageous obedience told the angel, *"May it be done to me."*[31]

The only one who could come close to relating to Mary's circumstances was Elizabeth. And when her older cousin miraculously confirmed the angel's message, the girl who kept things close to the vest found poetic worship spilling out of her mouth. The Magnificat is an extraordinary hymn, drawing from weighty themes in scripture, and closely echoing Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel. The ancient world may have deemed Mary unworthy to sit in a classroom, but her knowledge of the nature of God went deeper than that of any scribe or Pharisee. She knew the old stories by heart and believed the covenant promises, bearing the fulfillment of every one of them in her own body. She saw His mercy sweeping through every generation, past and present. Mary was well acquainted with the "God of great reversals," whose upside-down kingdom brought down the mighty and lifted up the humble.[32]

Before the heavenly host ever lit up the Bethlehem sky, Christ came to an unassuming girl in an unremarkable town. He came without fanfare, under the shadow of the Holy Spirit—deity confined to embryonic form.

And for his first nine months on this earth, only Mary could sense him moving. It was as though for just a little while, she had him to herself, feeling his flutters, hiccups, and kicks, marveling at how this little person inside her body could be the Son of God. She treasured these things in her heart, wondering how it could be that "the greatest king in history was wrapped up in her poverty."[33]

The odds were stacked against this peasant teenager. But when the Lord looked through all of time and space to find the mother of His Son, He set His gaze on little Mary of Nazareth, smiled, and said "*Her*." Mary held onto the promise of the Messiah so tightly that she was willing to offer herself as a vessel to bring him into the world. Through labor pains and public scrutiny, she delivered the Deliverer and trusted that her son would also be her Savior. She was just a girl, but when the Lord of Heaven sets His love on someone and they open their hands to receive it, they don't stay just anything for long. Something magnificent is bound to happen next.

> ***How silently, how silently,***
> ***the wondrous gift is giv'n!***
> ***So God imparts to human hearts***
> ***the blessings of His heav'n.***
> ***No ear may hear His coming,***
> ***but in this world of sin,***
> ***where meek souls will receive Him still,***
> ***the dear Christ enters in.***[34]


LOVE

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

LOVE

READ

1 John 4:9-11 – In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. [10] In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. [11] Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

PRAY

Father, in the birth of your Son, Jesus, you wrapped your love in human flesh and laid it in a manger. We did not earn it and we could not deserve it. It was simply given. Help us rest in it today, held by you, who call us by name. And teach us to give it away, the way you gave your Son. Amen.

SING

O Come, All Ye Faithful (John Francis Wade)

> *O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,*
> *O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem!*
> *Come, and behold Him, born the King of angels!*
>
> *Refrain:*
> *O come, let us adore Him;*
> *O come, let us adore Him;*
> *O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!*
>
> *Sing, choirs of angels; sing in exultation;*
> *sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above!*
> *Glory to God, all glory in the highest!*
>
> *[Refrain]*
>
> *Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning;*
> *Jesus, to Thee be all glory giv'n!*
> *Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!*
>
> *[Refrain]*

WEEK FOUR: MONDAY

SING, O BARREN ONE

Read: Isaiah 40:1-5 and Luke 1:39-45

They were waiting for arrivals the world could not comprehend. Elizabeth spent years living under the harsh stigma of infertility in a culture where a woman's worth was measured by her ability to bear children. Mary faced the opposite dilemma: a child when she was least expecting one, without the protection of a husband. Zechariah was mute and could not relay Gabriel's words spoken in the temple. Mary wondered if Joseph would say anything when she told him, or if he would just run.

As Mary came to the doorstep and called out for her cousin, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. And Zechariah's silent household erupted in the praise of two women in waiting.

Elizabeth, freshly filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke the first human words announcing Christ's arrival. For a woman who had been barren for decades, it may have seemed like an unlikely choice, but not to the God of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. Time and time again, the Old Testament shows the Lord's fondness for women in such circumstances, choosing their stories as preludes to some of His greatest work. Elizabeth's prophetic words gave Mary the confirmation she desperately needed and set the stage for her Magnificat. And Mary offered Elizabeth companionship, as she sat for months secluded in an all-too-quiet home.

John the Baptist and Jesus did not have to be cousins for the mission to work effectively. But the triune God, living in perfect community since eternity past, saw fit to make the mother of the Messiah and the mother of his messenger relatives. He knew they needed each other. In seasons of waiting, God brings relationships to make the long days shorter and the rough places smoother. Friends help quiet our doubts and offer hope when all seems lost. Elizabeth faced the mountain of a late-in-life pregnancy, while Mary walked through the valley of teen motherhood and social rejection. But their presence in each other's lives leveled their paths, set their sights on the coming redemption, and filled a long silence with joy and laughter.

Advent was not meant to be observed at a table set for one, but within the fellowship of believers. In this season of arrival, may we continue the work of Mary and Elizabeth. May our songs fill desolate places in the world around us, and in the barren places of each other's hearts. May our candles light the way to a coming kingdom, where all who are hungry will sit with the Founder of the feast and be filled.

> *"Sing, O barren one, who did not bear;*
> *break forth into singing and cry aloud,*
> *you who have not been in labor!*
> *For the children of the desolate one will be more*
> *than the children of her who is married," says the Lord.*[35]

WEEK FOUR: TUESDAY

A FATHER'S HEART

Read: Matthew 1:18-25

He was a man of few words. We never hear him speak directly, and know little beyond his profession as a craftsman, yet his character is plainly seen. Joseph held tightly to the law of the Lord, but his conviction and compassion were held in equal measure. He knew the wrath Mary's situation could incur, so he opted to end their legally binding engagement as quietly as possible, protecting whatever dignity they both had left. Adultery could have carried a death sentence, and all outward evidence suggested Mary had been unfaithful to him, but he did not wish the girl harm and refused to cast the first stone.

Joseph was a good man with a bent toward mercy. And though he did not share biological ties with the child in Mary's womb, he certainly acted like his son's Father.

Much like his namesake, Joseph heard from the Lord in dreams. While he slept, an angel visited him and told him that things with Mary were not as they seemed. She had not sinned against him, nor was she out of her mind. The child truly was the Son of God, and the Father in heaven had selected Joseph to raise him. Quiet, unassuming Joseph. The kind of man who would rather put in an honest day's work than chase the spotlight.

Joseph placed himself between Mary and her accusers and took her into his home as his wife, offering cover and protection in an unforgiving time. If the town wanted to get to her, they'd have to go through him first. And when the dreams returned to warn him of impending danger, Joseph shielded the child and his mother from Herod's sword and brought them safely to Egypt. The Lord, who had often brought His children under the shadow of His wings, sovereignly chose a likeminded defender for Mary and Jesus. He trusted Joseph's calloused yet gentle hands to hold His only Son.

Joseph taught Jesus the family trade, how to wield a hammer and a nail, acquainting the second Adam with the toil and sweat of the first. He watched

Jesus take his first steps and brought him to the temple for the annual Passover feast, recalling when the God of Israel spared their firstborn sons. And although he could not see ahead to Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, where he would become the sacrificial lamb, Joseph was determined to keep his child safe for as long as he possibly could.

Jesus met women caught in impossible circumstances and never once heaped shame on them. He stood between them and scornful crowds, speaking gently to them with the perfect blend of grace and truth. He bore the sword on our behalf and brought us into His family as adopted sons and daughters. Joseph may have been a surrogate, but he was not an afterthought. Christ's true Father wanted His Son to grow up with a man who shared the family traits and had a heart like His, and Mary's husband fit the bill. He acted justly and loved mercy. And with the Savior's tiny hand held tightly in his own, Joseph walked humbly with his God.

WEEK FOUR: WEDNESDAY

IMMANUEL

Read: Luke 2:1-7

In poverty and squalor, he came. Not in a sterile hospital room or a plush royal chamber, but on the cold, dirty floor of a stable. Travelers to Bethlehem might have gossiped about the couple whose due date was scandalously close to their wedding day. Even with the poor girl in anguish from labor pains, no one in the crowded city of David would offer them their room. The Son of Man had no place to lay his head, so Mary and Joseph used a feeding trough as a makeshift crib. Everything about the scene seemed hastily arranged and completely undignified, but the Messiah's arrival was going exactly according to plan.

Jesus Christ had reigned with the Father and Spirit in complete dominion, with creation obeying his every word. He could part seas, call down fire, breathe life back into dry bones, and even coordinate the bureaucracy of a global empire, with all its taxes and tallies, to suit his purposes. And yet, the same One who had held the hearts of kings in his hand could not hold up his own head. The Almighty embraced a newborn's fragile state— "fullness of God in helpless babe"—wholly dependent on others to feed and clothe him.[36]

He did not descend like a heavenly celebrity, posing for a few staged pictures while keeping his hands clean from the dust of the earth. No, Jesus felt

mortality from start to finish, in all its "mean estate," exposed to the harshest elements of a broken world.[37] His life was bookended with vulnerability; in birth and in death he was carried in another's arms, wrapped in strips of cloth, and laid in a borrowed bed. And yet, it was only through Christ's emptying of himself that we found we could be filled.

From Noah's rainbow to Abraham's starry sky, from the tablets given to Moses to the royal line of David, all the covenants were fulfilled through the birth of one little boy. And every sting of the serpent's lies, every tear shed by a forgotten woman, every slave's plea for freedom, every homesick night in exile, every ache since Eden found its perfect balm in a Bethlehem barn. The new covenant had come, not with trumpets or fanfare, but with a newborn baby's cry. The promises of God found their "yes," nestled in hay, lying in a manger. It had all come to pass, just as He said it would, but not how any of us could have ever imagined.

God's mission has always been relational at its core. His heart song throughout all of scripture is the same: *"I will be their God, and they will be my people."* But the chasm between His glory and our sinful state was simply too wide, so the Lord became holdable, small enough to fit in our frail hands. He made us His by becoming human-sized. And though the world would know him as Jesus of Nazareth, Joseph and Mary whispered another name over him that night in Bethlehem. It was a name handed down from heaven, perfectly describing the aim of the most anticipated but least predictable arrival of all time.

They called him *Immanuel. God with us.*

> ***O little town of Bethlehem,***
> ***how still we see thee lie!***
> ***Above thy deep and dreamless sleep***
> ***the silent stars go by.***
> ***Yet in thy dark streets shineth***
> ***the everlasting light;***
> ***the hopes and fears of all the years***
> ***are met in thee tonight.***[38]

WEEK FOUR: THURSDAY

CHRISTMAS EVE
SHEPHERDS WELCOME

Read: Luke 2:8–21

Invitations tell us what to expect. Beyond basic information like location, date, and time, their format leaves clues for what we should wear, and who we should expect to see on the guest list. Black-tie-only affairs aren't scribbled on the back of a receipt, and casual gatherings with friends don't require a wax seal. The grandest events call for embossed stationery, complete with dress codes, offering directions to an ornate ballroom or stately hall. But the birth announcement of Christ broke all the rules.

In the fields outside Bethlehem, a curtain between heaven and earth was drawn back for a moment, and the glory of the Lord overwhelmed the darkness. The night sky, resplendent with angels, shone like noonday as their majestic songs rang through the air. But the audience, still stunned from the scene, must have done a double take when their heavenly messengers gave directions to visit the long-awaited Messiah. *A feeding trough in a barn? Had there been some mistake?* The announcement did not match the location at all.

A stable is no place for a Savior's arrival, unless shepherds are invited.

People didn't think much of shepherds, if they thought about them at all. They weren't known for their cleanliness or intellect, just a raggedy group of men who spent most of their time surrounded by livestock on the outskirts of town. They could not burst into a palace or step into the holiest place in the temple. Shepherds were not politicians, who could talk their way through any room, or religious scholars who could argue the finer points of Isaiah's prophecies. If they wanted to pay anyone a visit, they needed to wash up first. But a barn was a place where a shepherd felt at home, where he could step inside wearing his work clothes without turning any heads. Christ's choice to be born in a stable was not an accident due to an overbooking error in Bethlehem inns. The Lord knew who he wanted to visit first, so he chose a place where even the filthy and unkempt could enter in.

The story of the shepherds is the story of the Gospel—Jesus Christ positioning himself in the humblest of places so that we could meet him without pretense. He doesn't require that we clean ourselves up first. We can come just as we are, but we always leave radically changed. The angels repeatedly told the shepherds that the good news was *for them*. That the child was born *unto them*, that God's peace and favor had come to rest on their own work-weary

souls. But those words held a deeper meaning when they discovered their Messiah lying in a manger. God's perfect gift, addressed to them, wrapped in packaging only a shepherd could love.

The Advent of Christ, just like the rest of his ministry, took a bottom-up approach. He did not come first to the halls of power, or to the religious elite, but to a humble group of men who shared his heart. The Lord was well acquainted with the work of a shepherd. He had spent many nights keeping watch over his own flock, protecting them from predators. He knew how to gently lead them to lush pastures and beside calm waters. And he was quite familiar with chasing down the one that always seemed to wander off.

That night in Bethlehem, the God of Heaven sent out an announcement that was at once dazzling and down-to-earth. He delivered it to a group of men on the fringes of society, but with a seat of honor in His own heart. With a Savior like this, there is only one response to such an invitation: Run as fast as you can to meet him.

> *Shepherds, in the field abiding,*
> *watching o'er your flocks by night,*
> *God with man is now residing;*
> *yonder shines the infant light:*
> *Come and worship,*
> *Come and worship,*
> *Worship Christ the newborn king.*[39]

WEEK FOUR: FRIDAY

CHRISTMAS DAY
DESIRE OF NATIONS

Read: Matthew 2:1-12 and Isaiah 60:1-6

Jerusalem was buzzing. Important men from a far country had come to town with strange questions. They were seers, interpreters of dreams, students of the cosmos. As experts in a well-respected field of their time, the wise men believed that the stars in the sky held the secrets to life on earth.[40] And from what they could tell, the heavens were proclaiming the arrival of a new king. But Herod, the reigning "King of the Jews," was disturbed by such news. Men with great power do not easily relinquish it. He asked the Hebrew scribes and priests to shed light on the wise men's predictions. They could quote Micah's prophecy from memory, and yet, whether from fear of Herod or plain indifference, not a single one followed the foreign visitors to Bethlehem in search of the Messiah.

The magi made their intent plain. Perhaps that was what shook the town. They were not on a diplomatic mission, looking to shake a few hands and sign a new treaty. The purpose of their long journey went well beyond foreign relations or scholarly curiosity. Like all mankind, the wise men were created to do one thing, and until they did it, no amount of celestial navigation or sorcery could satisfy them. And so, these pagan outsiders came to Jerusalem, the city of God's chosen people, the home of His temple, to meet the desire of every human heart, Jew and Gentile alike.

They came to *worship*.

God was always after the nations. In His covenant with Abraham, He promised that through his offspring, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed."[41] The poets and prophets spoke of His desire to bring them into the fold, pointing to a day when "all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship" Yahweh.[42] For years, He had worked through the Israelite people, using them to bring about His redemptive plan. But His arrow of salvation was aimed beyond their borders, reaching to the very ends of the earth. And in order to bring every tribe and tongue into His presence, He used a language they could understand. If the stars were what the wise men knew, then the Lord would speak through the stars. He had made them, after all. He could use them as He saw fit to beckon the sojourners home.

Most of us cannot trace our ancestry back to Abraham. As Gentiles, we are tempted to read the Old Testament as "someone else's story," a collection of

interesting events that has little to do with us.[43] But the wise men tell us that this simply isn't so. They were far from Israel, but something in their heart ached for a Messiah just the same. "They did not know his name, but still they sought him"; they searched for Christ because he longed to be found by them.[44] And when they came into the house in Bethlehem, and saw a child in his mother's arms, they knew that all their wandering and conjuring was over. Without instruction from any priest, they did what the Maker of the stars had created them to do. With exceedingly great joy, they laid down the riches of the world at their Savior's tiny feet and worshiped him.

At his birth, Jesus Christ drew the nations to himself. And at his ascension, the same one who had been crucified under a sign reading "King of the Jews" sent his followers out to make disciples of all nations. He has never shortened his aim, nor can we, until all have heard the good news. Until we tell sons and daughters of every shade of skin, speaking every dialect, with feet planted on every distant shore, that the desire of the nations is fully met in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The wise men and their gifts were a foretaste of a coming day, when those from "every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" will come "before the throne and before the Lamb."[45] And when they do, there will be no distinction between citizen and foreigner, local resident or out-of-town guest, because we will all be home. And in one accord, we will do what we were all created to do.

We will worship The King.

> *Sages, leave your contemplations*
> *Brighter visions beam afar;*
> *Seek the great Desire of nations,*
> *Ye have seen the Infant's star.*
> *Come and worship,*
> *Come and worship,*
> *Worship Christ the newborn king.*[46]

CONCLUSION

DEPARTURES AND ARRIVALS

> *"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."*[47]

The strange harmony of baby noises and cooing turtledoves drew closer to the entrance of the temple. A young couple walked in, balancing their child and an offering, a common occurrence in those days. The birds revealed their poverty—they did not come with a lamb or a goat, but a sacrifice reserved for peasants.[48] While everyone else went on about their day, the old man and the aging prophetess froze in their tracks. They knew in an instant that their waiting was over, that the moment they prayed and fasted for had finally arrived. Consolation had come. Here he was. The Savior of the World.

The Lord promised Simeon that he would set eyes on the Messiah, but when the time came, he got something much better than a fleeting glimpse. The old man cradled Christ in his very own arms. Babies want to be wrapped snugly, softly swayed and rocked, anything to soothe their bodies that are still adjusting to a wider world. Perhaps Simeon let Jesus' tiny hand wrap around his finger, or gently held his fragile head against his chest, as close to his own heart as he could. The Lord's presence had dwelled in the tabernacle and temple before, but never like this, in such a tangible and vulnerable form.

Simeon and Anna could not keep the good news to themselves. Anna went and told everyone she knew about her redeemer. Simeon found he still had one song left in him. Some men face their final days with an iron-tight grip, terrified to relinquish control, but Simeon gladly opened his hands. Christ had come, so he could go in peace. After holding the very Son of God, he could "die as if there were not death," greeting the arrival of the Savior while preparing his heart for a "gentle departure."[49]

He finished his hymn of praise, and gazed at Mary's face, so bright and full of hope. She had the look of any new mother, so proud of the little one Simeon

now held, so desperate to stay close to him, attend to his every cry, and shield him from any discomfort. Mothers hate to see their children in pain, but Simeon saw what the future held for Mary. This child, so gladly welcomed in the temple, would one day draw a dividing line in Jerusalem so deep, crowds would find themselves deciding whether they should "kill him" or "crown him."[50] And when the verdict was handed down, and a sword went through his bruised and bloody side, it would also pierce the depths of Mary's heart, and the woman who had once been an expectant young girl would let out a wail only a mother could cry.

But that wouldn't be the end of the story. What felt like a final, excruciating departure would give way to a glorious arrival three days later, before Mary's tears even had time to dry.

Our world is full of comings and goings. We watch with anticipation for brighter days, all the while bracing ourselves for tearful goodbyes. It is as though we sit in an airport terminal, watching an endless list of arrivals and departures. But this will not always be the case— "Someday all of our Advents will end."[51] As we move forward in the church calendar, past the birth of Christ, we continue to look for a day when heaven and earth will be reborn. Jesus came in poverty, but he will come again in glory. The same one who wore swaddling clothes will one day be cloaked in radiant garments, and instead of a tiny baby's cry, we will hear a voice "like the roar of many waters."[52] He who was born in complete humility will one day return in absolute victory, and when he does, the weeping of departures will cease, and the waiting for arrivals will be over. The Lord will have His way, restoring all that was lost. He will dwell with us again, and we will be His people, and He will be our God.

Until then, we keep watch. We wait for the sure and final Advent, lighting the candles until morning comes. We hold onto hope when the world around us falls into despair. We do the work of making peace wherever strife is found. We choose joy in all circumstances. And we bind ourselves together in a love that will never end. We take Simeon and Anna's post at the temple, with our eyes fixed on the door in anticipation. And until He calls us home, we sing with one voice: "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

> ***He who testifies to these things says,***
> ***"Surely I am coming soon."***
> ***Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!***[53]

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