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# The One True Story

We are people drawn to stories and shaped by stories. Whether a book, podcast, movie, TV show or song, it's hard to find a human being who isn't moved or captivated by a good story. This is because we are created to live in a story—the Christian story.

But given our bent toward sin, away from the one true story, we often find ourselves caught up in the false stories of our culture. Amid the chaos and busyness of everyday life, we buy into narratives like consumerism, secularism, nationalism, progressivism and cynicism. Though we may not confess these stories to be true with our mouths, we act as if they are true with our lives. They sink deep into our bones, shaping and forming our longings and desires, disorienting and distracting us from the gospel.

The observance of Advent seeks to redeem our time and space through readings, prayers, songs, and other practices. Observing Advent reorients our hearts and minds away from the false stories of the world and back toward the one true story of the Bible—the story of Jesus.



Of all the seasons, Advent probably feels the most familiar. Many people, regardless of faith, have used an Advent calendar—the ones with little windows to help you count down the days until Christmas. Yet, even though Advent is certainly about anticipating the coming of the Messiah, we don't seem to be very good at it, and what we generally call "Advent" looks pretty different than what the Church historically has called "Advent."

Formed from a Latin word meaning "coming" or "arrival," Advent is the traditional celebration of the first advent of Jesus in humility and the anxious awaiting of His second advent in glory. The season is a time for remembering and rejoicing, watching and waiting.

In American Christianity, we've got that first part down. As soon as Thanksgiving is over (and sometimes even before), we start putting up the tree and listening to our favorite Christmas songs. There's nothing wrong with doing these things, of course, but the whole point of Advent is to spend several weeks—four weeks, to be exact—preparing for Christmas instead of celebrating Christmas.

It's about stepping into the shoes of the Israelites, longing and crying out for the Messiah to come. It's about reflecting on our sin and shortcomings and our need for a Savior. It's about looking around at our broken world and hoping for the second coming of Jesus. And, once we get to Christmas Day, the celebration of Jesus' birth becomes that much more spectacular and meaningful.

## HISTORY AND TRADITIONS

The Advent season begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and continues up to Christmas Day, or Christmas Eve in some contexts. There are a variety of ways to celebrate the season, depending on tradition and background. Many people use an Advent calendar, typically made up of 24 “windows” containing Scriptures, stories, poems or gifts, to count down the days until Christmas. As each window is opened and the final day draws closer, our expectation increases. This reminds us of the hopeful yet anxious waiting God’s people experienced as they longed for the promised Savior to come.

Another popular tradition is marking the progression of the season through an Advent wreath made up of five candles. This symbol is borrowed from the emphasis throughout Scripture of Jesus Christ being the Light of the World (Matt. 4:16; John 1:4-9; 8:12). Each week, a new candle is lit in anticipation of Christmas Eve. The last candle, called the Christ Candle, is lit on Christmas Eve to represent Jesus’ first advent. Through this theme of ever-increasing light penetrating the darkness, we see a picture of the gospel.

Regardless of the tradition, Advent is a significant time in the life of the Church. It’s an opportunity for believers to remember God’s promise to send One who would overcome sin and death forever. God promised a Savior, and He kept that promise perfectly.

**Posture:** yearning, expectant, hopeful, celebratory

**Colors:** blue, gold, white

**Symbols:** wreath, candles, trees

**Flowers and Greenery:** red and white poinsettias, evergreens, holly



Though we think it's helpful to get a grasp of the history and details of the Advent season, this book is less about information and more about formation—providing a framework for entering the story of Christ through establishing annual traditions and rhythms. From a Bible reading plan to devotionals, reflections, and songs, we want to give individuals and families ideas for how to center our heads and hearts around the one true story of the Bible each year.

## **BIBLE READING PLAN**

There is no substitute for spending regular time reading and reflecting on God's Word, so a reading plan is provided that follows the high points of the Advent season. If you don't do anything else with this book, we encourage you to at least follow the Bible reading plan.

That's the most important thing you could do to participate in the observance of Advent. After all, Advent is first and foremost about remembering the story of Scripture. This specific Bible reading plan includes a reading from the New Testament, the Old Testament and the Psalms each day. There are also make-up days each week in case you get behind or want to dig deeper into a particular passage of Scripture. Each week's readings are found at the beginning of the weekly sessions (see below).

## **AN INVITATION TO PRAY**

As a part of the Bible reading plan, we're inviting everyone to spend time praying together each day. We encourage you to pray for your time in the Scriptures, that God would use His Word to center your heart and mind around Him and His story. We also encourage you to pray through the Scriptures, using one of the texts you're reading that day as a framework for prayer.

## WEEKLY SESSIONS

Within this book, there are weekly sessions that include a devotional, a set of questions for reflection, a song and a prayer.

The devotionals focus on either a passage from the Bible reading plan or on the season itself, hitting the major plot points and themes of the story. The reflection questions will help you consider your heart and mind, as well as your actions, in a given season. They can be used on your own or with your family or even with your Bible Study Group.

The song and prayer are meant to be read and sung throughout the week. We've also created an Advent seasonal playlist on Spotify for you to use throughout the season (@weemscreekchurch). As you read, sing, and pray week to week, day to day, throughout the day, we believe the Lord will use these rhythms to shape and form you more into the image of the Son.

## FAITH@HOME

Advent is an opportunity to pause and reflect on the birth of Jesus. But especially for families, this time of year can be filled to the brim with activities and obligations. Before the calendar begins to overflow, set aside a few minutes to consider what you want this season to be for your family. Then make a plan so that a time intended to remember and celebrate the story of Jesus doesn't get swallowed up by the false stories of our culture.

To help toward that end, we have provided a Faith@Home section each week that will help you create intentional time to talk about Advent. If you choose to use the Advent wreath as the guide suggests, put it in a special, visible place in the house to serve as a reminder of Jesus' coming.

The family portions of the guide are written with preschool and elementary-aged children in mind. If you have older children, consider having each person work through the "Personal Quiet Time" section in place of reading the family commentary, and then come together to talk about what you learned.

The Faith@Home section is built around the Weems Creek Kids framework for family discipleship: Faith Talks, Faith Walks, and the Faith Path:

- **Faith Talks** will help you build intentional time into the rhythm of family life for the purpose of thinking about, talking about, and living out the gospel. Be sure to pick up your Advent candle ring and candles to use with the Faith Talk sections of this guide.
- **Faith Walks** are activities or discussions in the course of daily life that turn a child's attention toward the presence and power of God in every part of life.
- **The Faith Path** suggests a focus of specific spiritual disciplines and milestones of God's work in the life of the family and child at certain ages. For more info about where your child is on the Faith Path, go to [www.weemscreek.com/faithpath](http://www.weemscreek.com/faithpath).

During this Advent season, consider choosing a specific time during the week to have a family worship time. As you will see from each of these suggestions and ideas, this really is a simple time and not intimidating. God has not called you as a parent to necessarily have a church service with your children, but rather to consistently and intentionally communicate the truth and love of Jesus to them.

For more ideas and resources on leading your family spiritually, check out the Faith@Home Center in the Worship Center Atrium or go to [weemscreek.com/faithathome](http://weemscreek.com/faithathome).

## ARTICLES FOR DIGGING DEEPER

Though we want this guide to be more about formation than information, we still think it's helpful to learn and grow in your understanding of the history and theology behind Advent and the story it tells. At the end of this guide are articles inspired from the songs of the season from one of the pastors at Weems Creek. Use these to dig deeper into the season.



# Week One

December 2-8

Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
And death's dark shadows put to flight...



## READING PLAN

**Sunday:** John 1:1-5

**Monday:** Genesis 3

**Tuesday:** Psalm 13

**Wednesday:** Psalm 24

**Thursday:** Leviticus 16

**Friday:** Jeremiah 31:31-34

**Saturday:** Hebrews 8

## PASSAGE: ISAIAH 2:2-5

*It shall come to pass in the latter days  
that the mountain of the house of the LORD  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be lifted up above the hills;  
and all the nations shall flow to it,  
and many peoples shall come, and say:*

*“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.”*

*For out of Zion shall go forth the law,  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*

*He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;  
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,*

*neither shall they learn war anymore.  
O house of Jacob,  
come, let us walk  
in the light of the LORD.*

## **DEVOTIONAL**

The brokenness of our world is inescapable. Watching a newscast or quickly scrolling through your social media timeline reveals atrocity upon atrocity. Whether it's acts of terror or nations warring or genocide or injustice or senseless acts of murder, we remain a people bombarded with this reality: Things are not as they should be.

The season of Advent breaks into our broken world and reorients our hearts around a better reality—the present darkness which shrouds creation has been defeated in Jesus Christ and will one day be fully realized. Advent is a turning away from despair and toward hope.

The prophet Isaiah heralded this hope to Israel, and like him we can look ahead in hope when the instruments of war, destruction and death of our day are hammered into plowshares and pruning hooks. The Light of the World shines into the darkness. Let us join with the prophet Isaiah in his exhortation, “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.”

## **REFLECTION**

Think of an event in your life where you waited with a longing expectation. What were you waiting for? How did you feel in the waiting? What was it like when the event finally happened?

What are some evidences of the brokenness of this world that you've seen this week?

How does the return of Christ help reframe the way you see them? Think about someone you know who might be feeling overcome by darkness.

What are some ways you can point them to the hope of Christ's advent this week?

## **SONG: “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  
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, oh Israel*

*O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer  
Our spirits by Thine advent here  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death's dark shadows put to flight  
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, oh Israel  
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, oh Israel*

*O come, desire of nations bind  
In one the hearts of all mankind  
Bid thou our sad divisions cease  
And be Thyself our King of Peace  
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, oh Israel  
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, oh Israel*

## **PRAYER**

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son, Jesus Christ, came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*—The Book of Common Prayer*



God calls the family to play a vital role in discipling the next generation. At Weems Creek, we encourage you to use the language of Faith Talks, Faith Walks, and the Faith Path as a framework for family discipleship.

## **FAITH TALK**

Faith Talks are designated times during the week for your family to gather for prayer and to study a biblical truth together. Set aside ten minutes one night this week to talk about God's promise to rescue His children from sin. The only materials needed are five candles, matches and a Bible.

### **Lighting of the Advent Candle**

Have one member of the family light the first candle.

### **Scripture Reading**

Have one person read the following passages out loud.

*Before they left the garden, God whispered a promise to Adam and Eve: "It will not always be so! I will come to rescue you! And when I do, I'm going to do battle against the snake. I'll get rid of the sin and the dark and the sadness you let in here. I'm coming back for you!" And he would. One day, God himself would come.*

**The Jesus Storybook Bible**

*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.*

**Isaiah 9:6**

## **Reflection**

Briefly talk about what it means to be rescued from something. When might you need to be saved from danger? Whom would you call upon to rescue you? For example, if there were a fire, whom would you call to save you? What are rescuers typically like?

## **Have an adult read the commentary below.**

In the very beginning, God created a perfect world. There was no sin, pain, sickness, death or sadness. God created Adam and Eve to live in His perfect world with joy and peace. But Adam and Eve sinned. They disobeyed God. When they sinned, God's perfect world broke. There was a punishment for Adam and Eve's sin. Because God is perfect, He cannot be near sin. So Adam and Eve were separated from God. The punishment for their sin would also be placed on all humans who were born after Adam and Eve.

## **Ask: Because Adam and Eve disobeyed God, each of us needs to be rescued from something. What do we need rescue from?**

But before Adam and Eve left God's perfect Garden, God made a promise. God promised to send a Rescuer, someone to save Adam, Eve and mankind from the punishment of sin. He promised to send Jesus!m God did not send Jesus to rescue His people right away. God waited thousands of years to send the Rescuer. During that time, God's people faced many hard things. While they waited, God gave them hints and clues about how Jesus would come, what He would do and what He would be like. These hints, written in Scriptures by prophets, would help God's people wait. The verse from Isaiah that we read together after lighting the Advent candle was written while God's people waited those thousands of years for the Savior.

During that time, God made other promises to His children and kept those promises. Each time God made and kept a promise, it helped His children trust that He would be faithful to His promise to send Jesus to rescue them from their sins.

## **Ask: What do you think it felt like for God's people to wait for the promised Rescuer to come?**

Some days, God's children waited patiently. Some days, they waited with tears and frustration. Some days, they wondered if God had forgotten His promise. But

God continued to whisper it over and over again as His children waited. And one day, when no one was expecting it, Jesus would come.

God shows us many things about what's He's like through the birth of Jesus. How do you see that God is the Deliverer, that He rescues His children, in this part of the Advent story? What other attributes of God do you see?

### **Prayer**

Have one family member say a prayer to thank God for His goodness and mercy in sending Jesus to rescue us from our sins.

### **Song**

As a family, sing or listen to “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” As you do, read carefully through the lyrics and explain any words that might be unfamiliar to your kids. Ask them what they learn about Jesus from this song.

## **FAITH WALK**

*Faith Walks are activities or discussions in the course of daily life that turn a child's attention toward the presence and power of God in every part of life.*

### **Watching and Waiting**

Parents, make plans for a fun Christmas activity next week that you know your children will love. Perhaps it's seeing a Christmas play or movie, decorating cookies together or seeing Christmas lights.

At the end of your family Advent time, promise your kids that you are going to do something special together to celebrate Advent—something they will love—but don't tell them what or when. As the days go by, remind them of your promise and give them hints as to what it might be. Let their expectation and excitement grow throughout the week.

Use this opportunity to remind them of God's promise to send a Rescuer and the anticipation God's people felt as they waited.



# Week Two

December 9-15

From our fears and sin release us,  
Let us find our rest in thee...



## READING PLAN

**Sunday:** Isaiah 11:1-10

**Monday:** Micah 5:2-5

**Tuesday:** Zechariah 9:9-13

**Wednesday:** Jeremiah 23:1-6

**Thursday:** Ezekiel 34:11-16

**Friday:** Isaiah 9:2-7

**Saturday:** Isaiah 53

## PASSAGE: MARK 13:32-37

*“But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”*

## DEVOTIONAL

It happens every year—what we expect to be a slower-paced summer whirs by, and before we know it, it's Labor Day weekend. Autumn comes and goes faster than a withered leaf falling to the ground from a lofty branch. Fireworks give way to football, then pumpkins to pilgrims. Now, it's all we can do to finish our Christmas shopping and get our yuletide greetings in the mail before the

“guaranteed delivery by Christmas” date. And the reality is, if left unchecked, we’ll be right here again this time next year wondering, “Where did the time go?”

The Advent season calls us out of our slumber. It bursts into our passive experience of time and calls us to “stay awake.” Jesus’ words from Mark 13:32-37 are a stunning reminder that Jesus is coming again. Our Master has departed on a journey, but He’s left us with work to do while He’s away. And the work we’re called into cannot be put off until later because Jesus’ second advent will come at a day and hour that only the Father knows. It’s so easy to get lulled into slumber by the turning of time, buzzing by at what seems to be an ever-increasing pace. But this sleepy apathy toward time’s passing is not the life we’ve been called to live. Advent reminds us that we are a commissioned people, granted a stewardship of the gospel message. We have the privilege of heralding this message day by day, season by season, year by year, eagerly anticipating the return of Christ. Our Master is away, but He’s coming again. May we be a people about His work, hastening His return.

## **REFLECTION**

Think about the past year. What seasons did you experience? Were they slow or fast-paced?

What did you learn about God through them? About yourself?

How does the immanence of Christ’s return impact how you view what you’re doing in the here and now?

How does the way you structure your life reflect a belief that Jesus really is coming back?

Jesus calls His disciples to “be on guard” and “stay awake.” Is there a conversation with a friend or loved one about the gospel that you’ve been putting off? What steps could you take to make that conversation happen this week?

## **SONG: “COME, THOU 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**

O Son of God and Son of Man  
Thou wast incarnate, didst suffer, rise, ascend for my sake;  
Thy departure was not a token of separation but a pledge of return;  
Thy Word, promises, sacraments, show thy death until thou come again.  
That day is no horror to me,  
for thy death has redeemed me,  
thy Spirit fills me,  
thy love animates me,  
thy Word governs me.  
I have trusted thee and thou hast not betrayed my trust;  
waited for thee, and not waited in vain.  
Thou wilt come to raise my body from the dust,  
and re-unite it to my soul,  
by a wonderful work of infinite power and love,  
greater than that which bounds the oceans' waters,  
ebbs and flows the tides,  
keeps the stars in their courses,  
and gives life to all creatures.  
This corruptible shall put on incorruption,  
this mortal, immortality,  
this natural body, a spiritual body,  
this dishonored body, a glorious body,

this weak body, a body of power.  
I triumph now in thy promises as I shall do in their performance,  
for the head cannot live if the members are dead;  
Beyond the grave is resurrection, judgment, acquittal, dominion.  
Every event and circumstance of my life will be  
dealt with –  
the sins of my youth, my secret sins,  
the sins of abusing thee, of disobeying thy Word,  
the sins of neglecting ministers' admonitions,  
the sins of violating my conscience –  
all will be judged;  
And after judgment, peace and rest, life and service,  
employment and enjoyment, for thine elect.  
O God, keep me in this faith,  
and ever looking for Christ's return.

–*"The Second Coming," from The Valley of Vision*



God calls the family to play a vital role in discipling the next generation. At Weems Creek, we encourage you to use the language of Faith Talks, Faith Walks, and the Faith Path as a framework for family discipleship.

## **FAITH TALK**

Faith Talks are designated times during the week for your family to gather for prayer and to study a biblical truth together. Set aside ten minutes one night this week to talk about God's promise to rescue His children from sin. The only materials needed are five candles, matches and a Bible.

### **Lighting of the Advent Candle**

Have one member of the family light the first and second candle.

### **Scripture Reading**

Have one person read the following passages out loud.

*And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

Luke 2:3-7

*And there, in the stable, amongst the chickens and the donkeys and the cows, in the quiet of the night, God gave the world his wonderful gift. The baby that would change the world was born. His baby Son.*

The Jesus Storybook Bible

## **Reflection**

**Have an adult read the commentary below.**

Do you remember the promise we talked about last week? God's promise to send a Rescuer? His promise to send Jesus? Well, Jesus came, just like God said He would!

After thousands of years of waiting, on an ordinary night, Jesus came. God gave His people hints and clues about how Jesus would come. He told them that Jesus would come from Bethlehem, be a Ruler and bring peace. Many expected a soldier; some expected a politician. No one expected a baby. But that's how Jesus came.

**Ask: If you had been an Israelite, how would you have expected the promised Savior to come?**

Mary and Joseph lived in a town called Nazareth. One day, the king gave an order that everyone was to go back to their hometown to be counted for something called a census. Mary and Joseph traveled a long way to the town of Bethlehem, where Joseph's family was from. When they got to Bethlehem, the town was full of other travelers, and there was nowhere for Mary and Joseph to stay. So they found a stable to sleep in. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby, and Jesus, the Savior, was born.

**Ask: How do you think Joseph and Mary felt when they finally got to Bethlehem and realized they had nowhere to stay? Do you think God knew that they felt this way?**

Jesus, the King of heaven, left His perfect home to be born a baby to a young man and woman. He became fragile and helpless. His room that night was a stable—dirty, smelly and full of noisy animals. His bed was not kingly and luxurious; it was a feed box that animals ate out of. Mary had to wipe old, rotten food out of the manger and cover it with poky straw before she laid her tiny baby in it.

**Ask: Is a stable the place you would expect the Savior to be born? Why do you think God decided for His one and only Son to be born there?**

But everything that happened that night was exactly what God had planned and promised. Jesus came, just like God said He would. God saw that we needed to be rescued from sin. He cared about us in our need, and He acted. He sent Jesus.

The events of that night, in that stable in the little town of Bethlehem, would change the world forever.

God shows us many things about what's He's like in the birth of Jesus. How do you see that God is compassionate—that He sees, cares and acts when His children are in need—in this part of the Advent narrative? What other attributes of God do you see?

**Prayer**

Have one family member say a prayer to thank God for sending Jesus to be born as a baby who would save us from our sins.

**Song**

As a family, sing or listen to “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus.” As you do, read carefully through the lyrics and explain any words that might be unfamiliar to your kids. Ask them what they learn about Jesus from this song.

**FAITH WALK**

*Faith Walks are activities or discussions in the course of daily life that turn a child's attention toward the presence and power of God in every part of life.*

**Just Like We Said**

This week, keep the promise you made to your family during last week's family Advent time. Talk about how you fulfilled the hints and clues you gave them. Discuss the experience of waiting: What was it like to wait? What was it like to finally experience what you had been waiting and hoping for? Remember together God's faithfulness in sending a Savior. It happened just as He said it would.

# **Week Three**

**December 16-22**

**Light and life to all He brings,  
Risen with healing in His wings....**



## READING PLAN

**Sunday:** Romans 5: 12-17

**Monday:** Hebrews 1:1-4

**Tuesday:** Isaiah 61:1-4

**Wednesday:** Colossians 1:15-22

**Thursday:** Philippians 2:1-11

**Friday:** Luke 1:26-38

**Saturday:** Luke 1:39-80

## PASSAGE: LUKE 1:26-38

*“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”*

*And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”*

*And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy— the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also*

*conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.*

## **DEVOTIONAL**

As incomprehensible as an angelic visitation and pronouncement that she would carry the Son of God in her womb were for Mary, that event was just the beginning. The angel left, and the reality of the news began to settle in. The incredible promise spoken by Gabriel faded into the reality of being a young, not yet-married woman who had to answer to her future husband, her family and all those she encountered about the nature of her pregnancy.

Luke tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months, but we aren't told much else about what her pregnancy was like. As with any pregnancy, there were likely difficult days, happy days and all kinds of days in between. Regardless, her pregnancy must have been marked by a sense of expectancy. Not just because she was anticipating the arrival of the Son of God, but because she was... expecting.

We are between the two advents of Christ, and we can relate to the expectancy Mary must have felt. Mary received the good news that she would be carrying in her womb the King who would sit on David's throne. Those who put their faith in Christ, too, have received the good news that a King has come. Now, we wait longingly, through sometimes difficult and trying circumstances, for the return of the Son of God to fully establish His kingdom on earth.

## **REFLECTION**

Think of a time when you or someone close to you was pregnant. How did a sense of expectancy mark the pregnancy? Did attitudes and expectations change throughout? How does this inform the way you think about expecting Christ's return?

When Mary was approached by Gabriel with the news of her child, she exhibited an incredible openness to God. In what areas might God be calling you to a deeper faith and openness toward His will?

Is there a brother or sister in Christ around you that is struggling to believe that God will fulfill all He has promised? How can you minister to them in light of the hope of Jesus' return?

### **SONG: "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 host proclaim,  
"Christ is born in Bethlehem."  
Hark! the herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King!"*

*Christ, by highest heav'n adored:  
Christ, the everlasting Lord;  
Late in time behold Him come,  
Offspring of the favored one.  
Veil'd in flesh, the Godhead see;  
Hail, th'incarnate Deity:  
Pleased, as man, with men to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel!  
Hark! the herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King!"*

*Hail! the heav'n born Prince of Peace!  
Hail! the Son of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all He brings,  
Risen with healing in His wings.*

*Mild He lays His glory by,  
Born that man no more may die:  
Born to raise the sons of earth,  
Born to give them second birth.  
Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"*

## PRAYER

Lord, Blessed Trinity, to You alone be the glory this day. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thank You. I thank You for the grace and mercy of Your wondrous salvation. I have done nothing to deserve such a tremendous gift. Even calling salvation a “tremendous gift” does not encompass The fullness of its beauty and wonder. God, You have sent Jesus, Your only beloved Son, To die on the cross and rise three days later To obtain the salvation that may only be found in Him. All who receive Jesus, You have given the right To become Your children, O mighty God. You have saved me. Thank You, Lord. But how easily I forget this salvation in my current daily life. How easily I take it for granted and stop at its face value. But Spirit, You have been, and continue to be, Faithful in helping me to see more of this wondrous salvation. You are saving me. Thank You, Lord. Yet this salvation is also my future guarantee. What I experience right now in part, I will experience later in full This salvation gives me a living, breathing, active hope That is certain as it moves me forward to the life that is to come. You will save me. Thank You, Lord.

–Book of Prayers (Vol. 2), from The Village Church



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## **FAITH TALK**

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### **Lighting of the Advent Candle**

Set aside ten minutes one night this week to talk about how only God is worthy of all glory. Consider sitting outside as you talk about the journey of the Magi, drawing particular attention to the stars in the night sky above you. The only materials needed is your Advent wreath, candles, matches and a Bible.

### **Scripture Reading**

Have one person read the following passages out loud.

*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*

**Matthew 2:1-2**

*The journey that had begun so many centuries before had led three Wise Men here. To a little town. To a little house. To a little child. To the King God had promised David all those years before.*

The Jesus Storybook Bible

## **Reflection**

**Have an adult read the commentary below.**

The first people God told about Jesus' birth were the shepherds. He used a spectacular mass of angels to shout from the skies that Jesus had come. But the angels were not alone in proclaiming the good news that night, and the shepherds were not the only people to learn of the Rescuer's coming.

That same night, God placed a special star in the sky, a bright body of light that announced the birth of the King. Some men in a faraway country saw this star. These men were called Magi. They were educated men who studied the skies and nature. Most scholars believe these men came from Persia, or modern-day Iran. There was something very special about these men.

Throughout the Bible, God promised to send a Rescuer to save the Israelites from their sins. But these Magi were not Israelites. They were Gentiles. That means they were not from Abraham's family and likely did not know and worship God. But that night, God did something that no one expected.

By placing that star in the sky, God showed unbelievable mercy toward all people. In showing the Magi that Jesus, the King of heaven, had been born, God was extending salvation to people of all nations.

When the Magi saw the special star that God had placed in the sky, they left their home country to find Jesus. Their journey took a long time. They did not arrive in Bethlehem the night Jesus was born. In fact, it may have taken them up to two years to reach the place where Jesus was.

The Bible tells us that when the Magi found the place where Jesus was living with Mary and Joseph, they entered the house, bowed down and worshiped this small child who had come to save sinners. They then gave Jesus precious, costly gifts.

**Ask: Why do you think the Magi were willing to leave their homes and families and travel for such a long time to find Jesus? What did they know and believe about Him? Why do you think they brought baby Jesus such special, expensive gifts?**

Throughout the Advent story, we see that God is generous. He sent a company of angels to shout the good news of Jesus' birth to the shepherds, and He put a special star in the sky to guide men from a faraway country to Jesus. He desires that all people know, love, trust and obey Him. And God promises that one day men, women and children from every tribe, tongue and nation will worship Jesus. God will rescue people from all over the world, and we will worship Him as He deserves.

God shows us many things about what He's like through the birth of Jesus. How do you see that God is worthy—that only He deserves all glory—in this part of the Advent narrative? What other attributes of God do you see?

### **Prayer**

Have one family member say a prayer to praise God and ask Him to show people of all nations the good news that Jesus came to save sinners.

### **Song**

As a family, sing or listen to "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." As you do, read carefully through the lyrics and explain any words that might be unfamiliar to your kids. Ask them what they learn about Jesus from this song.

## **FAITH WALK**

*Faith Walks are activities or discussions in the course of daily life that turn a child's attention toward the presence and power of God in every part of life.*

### **Around the World**

Spend time this week looking at a map of the world. Play a game where you name a country and your kids try to find it. Talk together about what it would be like to live in a different culture with a different language and customs. Point out places in the world where people aren't free to openly worship Jesus or talk about Him.

Look together at the list of missionaries on our church website. Pick one person or family and pray for them by name. If possible, write them an email or note of encouragement.



# Christmas Eve

December 24

Joy to the World; The Lord is come;  
Let Earth receive her King...



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## **FAITH TALK**

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### **Lighting of the Advent Candle**

Have one person light all the candles in the Advent wreath, remembering together what you've learned about God's faithfulness during Advent.

### **Scripture Reading**

Have one person read the following passages out loud.

*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,*

*"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*

*When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

**Luke 2:1-20**

### **Song**

Sing or listen to "Joy to the World" together. As you do, read carefully through the lyrics and explain any words that might be unfamiliar to your kids. Ask them what they learn about Jesus from this song

*Joy to the world! The Lord is come:  
let earth receive her King!  
Let every heart prepare him room  
and heaven and nature sing.  
Joy to the earth! the Savior reigns:  
let men their songs employ  
while fields and floods rocks hills and plains  
repeat the sounding joy.  
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.  
He rules the world with truth and grace  
And makes the nations prove  
The glories of His righteousness  
And wonders of His love  
And wonders of His love  
And wonders, wonders, of His love*

# Week Four

December 23-29

When on the day the Great I am,  
the faithful and the true,  
The Lamb that was for sinners slain,  
is making all things new....



## READING PLAN

**Sunday:** Luke 2:1-7

**Monday:** Luke 2:8-20

**Tuesday:** Matthew 2:1-12

**Wednesday:** Luke 4:16-21

**Thursday:** Revelation 21:1-5

**Friday:** Romans 5:6-11

**Saturday:** Galatians 4:4-7

## PASSAGE: ISAIAH 9:2-7

*“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;  
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.  
You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest,  
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.  
For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder,  
the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.  
For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult  
and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.  
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.  
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*

## **DEVOTIONAL**

There's a feeling common to most of us; it usually comes on in late afternoon or early evening Christmas Day. After all the presents have been opened and most of the food has been eaten (at least the first round of it), you look around at the remnants of Christmas morning and a sense of sadness begins to creep in. All the buildup over the last month (or half of the year for your favorite craft store)—the decorations, the music, the parties, the shopping—has led to this moment, and now it's over. Christmas melodies fade into post-Christmas melancholy.

It's because there is more. We're conditioned to think that Christmas is an end in and of itself—that the gifts and the lights are the real stuff. And so, when the day has passed, we're left with 365 days to wait until we do it all over again. But here's the truth—Christmas does not signify an end, but a beginning. As Jesus begins His earthly ministry in Mark's Gospel, He proclaims, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." The good news is that Jesus has come to reign as our King and is coming again soon to fully realize His kingship.

## **REFLECTION**

What was Christmas typically like when you were growing up? What event signaled the end of Christmas for you? How did you feel as the season came to a close?

What are some practical ways you can continue to live in the joy of the Savior's reign, even after the Christmas activities are all finished?

Isaiah reminds us that Jesus is the Prince of Peace and of His government and peace there will be no end. Where might God be leading you to be a messenger of His peace this season? What steps can you take this week to speak words of Jesus' peace?

## **SONG: "ALL GLORY BE TO CHRIST"**

*Should nothing of our efforts stand  
No legacy survive*

*Unless the Lord does raise the house  
In vain its builders strive  
To you who boast tomorrow's gain  
Tell me, What is your life?  
A mist that vanishes at dawn  
All glory be to Christ!*

*His kingdom come, His will be done  
On earth as is above  
Who is Himself our daily bread  
Praise Him, the Lord of love  
Let living water satisfy  
The thirsty without price  
We'll take a cup of kindness yet  
All glory be to Christ!*

*When on the day the great I Am  
The faithful and the true  
The Lamb who was for sinners slain  
Is making all things new  
Behold our God shall live with us  
And be our steadfast light  
And we shall e'er his people be  
All glory be to Christ!*

*All glory be to Christ our king!  
All glory be to Christ!  
His rule and reign we'll ever sing  
All glory be to Christ*

## **PRAYER**

Dear Heavenly Father, we sing with great enthusiasm, "Joy to the world, the Lord has come, let earth receive her King." Yet as we review the true desires of our hearts we would confess that we are more prone to seek the gifts and benefits that Christ can grant than actually receive him deep within our lives. There are times when we are frightened by what might happen if we truly took Jesus

seriously and resolved to invite him into all the diverse dimensions of our lives. Lord, have mercy upon us and cleanse us. Forgive the distorted images we hold of Christ which prevent us from living with him with the same trust and obedience as Joseph and Mary. Renew your sustaining Spirit within us that we might truly know and live in your joy through Jesus' redeeming name. Amen! –

*-The Services of the Christian Year (Vol. 5) by Robert Webber*



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## **FAITH TALK**

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### **Lighting of the Advent Candle**

As a family, light all five candles. Talk about how Jesus, the Light, came into the world to pierce the darkness of sin once, and He will return to do away with it forever.

### **Scripture Reading**

Have one person read the following passages out loud.

*"And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*

**Luke 21:27-28**

*"I am going to show you a secret, John," Jesus said, "about when I come back... Write down what you see so God's children can read it, and wait with happy excitement... I'm on my way," said Jesus. "I'll be there soon."*

## **Reflection**

### **Have an adult read the commentary below.**

Jesus came, just like God said He would. But God's promises don't end there. Just like God's people waited with eager anticipation for Jesus to come and rescue them from their sins, we are waiting too. God made us another promise. He promised that Jesus would return to earth. He has already saved us from our sins if we love and trust Him. But when He comes the second time, He will save us from all the brokenness that sin has caused in the world.

Just like before, God has given us hints and clues about how and when Jesus will return. And just like before, we wait. Sometimes we wait patiently. Sometimes we wait with tears and frustration because we can't wait to live in a world without any sin. Sometimes we forget and wonder if Jesus really will come back. But God is faithful—even when we are faithless. And Jesus will come back.

### **Ask: How do you think we should be waiting for Jesus' return? What should we do as we wait?**

This time, Jesus will not come in the middle of the night as a baby. He will not be weak and helpless. The Bible tells us that when Jesus comes back, He will ride out of the sky on a horse, carrying a sword. He will do battle with Satan. And He will win. Our Rescuer is coming back!

While we wait, we wait with hope. We live lives of joy, peace and compassion. We strive to be more like Jesus, every day putting sin to death. And we tell others that Jesus came to save sinners in hopes that they will love and trust in Him, too. Jesus is coming back. We don't know when, but we know He's coming. Soon. So be ready. Soon we will worship our King, as He deserves, forever. Come, Lord Jesus, come!

### **Ask: As we read these verses and remember God's faithfulness to send a Rescuer and His promise that Jesus will come again, what attributes of God do you see?**

## **Prayer**

Have one family member say a prayer, asking Jesus to come again soon.

## **Song**

As a family, sing or listen to “All Glory Be To Christ”. As you do, read carefully through the lyrics and explain any words that might be unfamiliar to your kids. Ask them what they learn about Jesus from this song.

## **FAITH WALK**

*Faith Walks are activities or discussions in the course of daily life that turn a child's attention toward the presence and power of God in every part of life.*

## **Watching and Waiting**

Together, read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and talk about what Jesus' return will be like, look like and sound like. What do you learn from this passage?

Ask your children what questions they have about Jesus' return and if it's something that scares them to think about. Assure them that Jesus' return will usher in a world with no more sin, sickness, sadness, fights, punishment or having to eat foods they don't like. Even better, those who love and trust Jesus will be with Him forever with no separation. We should look to and long for Jesus' return. And while we wait, we should take seriously His command to love Him first and most, know His Word, care for the poor and share the gospel.



# Articles for Reflection

# COME, THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS

**Pastor David Orr**

Waiting can be so hard! Growing up I can remember getting up early with my older brother and sister while it was still dark on Christmas morning. We were so excited! We would sit in front of the Christmas tree for what seemed like hours waiting on Mom and Dad to wake up. Before long we would begin to accidentally make noise hoping to wake them. When their door opened, the celebration would begin!

In those days, waiting for a couple of hours seemed like forever. I can only imagine what it was like for the nation of Israel as they waited for the coming of Messiah.

For hundreds of years they waited for the coming One spoken of by the prophets. God would bless His people Israel in a special way and the Throne of David (2 Samuel 7:12-13, 16, 25-26) would be established forever. The Messiah would rule in righteousness, full of wisdom and power. He would be their strength and redeemer. Yet God's people, Israel, would often grow discouraged as they waited.

Waiting can be so hard, especially when we have to wait a long time.

Charles Wesley wrote the song, *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*, in 1744. He was captivated by Haggai 2:7 - *"and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory, says the Lord of hosts."* He understood Jesus to be the "Desire of All Nations."

He looked at the many orphans and pondered the class divide in 18<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain. He considered their plight and knew that only Jesus could provide what they really needed. He thought of Israel and how they had waited for the promised Messiah. Only Jesus could provide what Israel needed.

Then he wrote this song of hope.

*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.*

The first stanza focuses on Jesus as the promised Messiah. Only He can bring forgiveness and rest to our souls. Only Jesus can free us from our fears and sins. He is our strength and hope. Jesus is the only source of enduring joy for every longing heart.

I remember in college when my Dad called and asked me to come home immediately. My Mom was diagnosed with cancer and they would operate the next day. I was shaken and scared. That season of fear and asking God to help her was a part of God drawing me to salvation through Jesus.

Ten months later when I finally put my trust in Jesus, the burden of my sins was lifted. I have had many fears since that time; but God has a way of calming my spirit and seeing me through.

I have found that in Jesus I can truly find “rest” in my soul.

# O COME, O COME EMMANUEL

**Pastor David Barrett**

I want to tell you about the O's. And not just any O's, I want to tell you about the Great O's. And not the Baltimore O's either. Not too much great about last season was there...

Too soon?

The Great O's I'm talking about are specific to the Advent season. No, these Great O's aren't found in Camden Yards. These Great O's are found in the echoes of Christmas past and the sound of Christmas present. And what I find truly inspiring (and surprising) is the way we use them in our church as a perfect representation for what we are doing when we observe Advent as a church family!

## **THE O's OF CHRISTMAS PAST**

So there are Great O's that we could say are the echoes of Christmas past called the O Antiphons. The O Antiphons, also known as the Great O's, are seven statements that are spoken as worship to Jesus on the seven days before Christmas Eve. They all start with the word "O" and are an attribute of Jesus mentioned in the book of Isaiah.

They go like this:

- December 17: O **S**apientia.....(O Wisdom, *Isaiah 11:2-3*)
- December 18: O **A**donai.....(O Lord, *Isaiah 33:22*)
- December 19: O **R**adix Jesse.....(O Root of Jesse, *Isaiah 11:1, 10*)
- December 20: O **C**lavis David.....(O Key or House of David, *Isaiah 22:22*)
- December 21: O **O**riens.....(O Dayspring, *Isaiah 9:2*)
- December 22: O **R**ex Gentium.....(O King of the Nations, *Isaiah 9:6*)
- December 23: O **E**mmanuel.....(O With Us is God, *Isaiah 7:14*)

The Great O's are an ancient worship practice in the Church. In fact, they have been a part of Advent worship for centuries, referenced as far back as the 6th century.

This worship practice has been around a long time and has been a major part of the Church's celebration of the Advent season. But without going into too much historical detail, and with respect to Andy Hallmark's historical attention span, the content of the Great O's are a remarkably deep and beautiful way to worship our King who has come and will come again.

Each statement is piece of Jesus' true identity and when we reflect on them individually during the Advent season, focus and wonder from Scripture illuminate our minds.

Oh and notice that I highlighted the first letter of the Latin word after the initial "O"? In addition to the individual worshipful exclamations of who Jesus is, the Great O's taken as a whole and backward from December 23 - December 17 form the acrostic "**Ero Cras.**"

This is some real Indiana Jones/National Treasure puzzle stuff right here. "**Ero Cras**" is Latin for "tomorrow, I will come." So, in effect, from December 17-23, the Great O's give us a focused way to worship Jesus by pondering His first coming, all the while resting in the promise of His second coming! (Rev. 22:12).

Now you may be like, "That's cool and all, but the only "O" I've ever sang was with my friends during the National Anthem at Camden Yards. I'm not really a high-church-liturgical kind of person." To be fair, the Great O's are typically found further back into church history or in more liturgical-based denominations with Lutherans, Anglicans, and Presbyterians.

However, even if you find yourself in a low-church tradition, as is the case at Weems Creek, I guarantee that during the Christmas season you have recited the Great O's and didn't even know it!

## **THE O's OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT**

*O Come, O Come Emmanuel* is one of my favorite Christmas carols. The melody. The words. And when there are woodwind instruments involved...glorious.

The song, as we all most likely know it, was first published in English as a part of the 1861 hymnal entitled *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, but its words echo a melody from a distant time. There is a connection from the modern to the ancient

in this song — the first line of each verse of this song we sing each Christmas is an echo of Christmas past...one of the Great O's!

There are five verses in the hymn *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* and here are the first lines:

*O come, O come Emmanuel*.....(*O Emmanuel*)  
*O come, thou Rod of Jesse*.....(*O Radix Jesse*)  
*O come, thou Dayspring*.....(*O Oriens*)  
*O come, thou Key of David*..... (*O Clavis David*)  
*O come, Adonai, Lord*.....(*O Lord*)

Five verses...five Great O's! Now this is, to me at least, pretty cool. You have been channeling high-church liturgy Christmas after Christmas and didn't even know it! Awesome. But aside from Southern Baptists getting a bit squirmy at the prospect of sharing a song with Lutherans and Anglicans, why is it important to know that a classic Christmas carol has its roots in the liturgy of the ancient church?

### **ADVENT: THE SYMPHONY OF EMMANUEL CONTINUES**

What connects a song published in an 1861 hymnal to a ritual that goes as far back as the 6th century? What's the relation? Well, obviously the words are similar, but I would argue that there is something deeper.

Think of the *O Antiphons* and *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* as different movements of a symphony that began long ago.

Almost twenty centuries ago, a divine symphony was given to a young couple, shepherds, and wise men that resounded Jesus Christ — God with us, the Rod of Jesse, the Dayspring, the Key of David, the Lord — had come to earth. That symphony has been passed down from generation to generation of believers so that the music played on an ordinary night in Bethlehem at our King's first coming is still played today and will be played until the glorious day of His second coming.

So when we sing *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* or when a family observes Advent on the stage on Sunday and in their homes throughout the week, we are all joining in the symphony of believers from all generation and in doing so are conserving the symphony for the next generation.

## **YOUR PLACE IN THE SYMPHONY**

So many things compete for our time, attention and resources during the holiday season. Seemingly in the blink of an eye, the beauty and intent of Christmas can be ironically consumed by consumerism and activities. Surrounded by these competing orchestras, it is easy to lose the melody of the true symphony and what was meant to sound like the glory of Handel's *Messiah* is replaced with a one-man band's cheap imitation; flashy and trite with no depth or the power to make us sit back in awe.

However, when we carve out time to ponder and remember the coming of Christ, when we just take a moment and stop looking for the deals and sales, we not only find the peace our Prince promises, but we conserve the original, divine symphony for the next generation.

If you are observing Advent this year, you received it from someone else who received it from someone else. The good news that Emmanuel has come travels at the speed of relationships and when we take time to focus on His coming, especially when we do it with our children and grandchildren, the divine symphony given long ago is conserved and passed on for a future generation of believers.

## **THE TAKE AWAY**

Take time to learn the original sheet music from God's divine symphony this year. As a believer, you are a part of a faithful symphony resounding the wonder and hope of Advent.

The instruments may change throughout the centuries – some chant the O Antiphons while others sing *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* – but the faithful performance of the Advent symphony is conserved and continued until our blessed hope in Christ's return is realized!

Until then, let the symphony of Emmanuel play on!

## HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING

**Pastor Alex Streitmater**

Hark! The herald angels sing, “Glory to the Christmas Tree!”

I know... I know... The words actually say, “*Glory to the Newborn King!*” but within our culture, which one is often more celebrated? Even within Christian homes; what things do we typically tie to Christmas? Look, I know we all know the **right** answer, but I wanted the truthful answer. To many (myself included), the Christmas season is often a celebration of decorated trees, colorful lights, delicious cookies, and of course presents.

However, we need to be constantly reminded of the true focus of the Christmas season—the birth of Christ. In order to do that let’s take a quick look at these four Christmas traditions and how they relate to the famous carol “*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!*” and more importantly to the Savior of the world.

### **PLEASED, AS MAN, WITH MEN TO DWELL, JESUS, OUR IMMANUEL!**

The Christmas Tree is a staple in modern day Christmas celebration. Families gather around their living room to spend time decorating their freshly chopped down or purchased from Walmart Christmas tree with ornaments they have collected over the years. In my house, it truly was the “kickoff event” for the Christmas season. But how often do we really think about the tree itself?

The most common trees used for Christmas trees are spruce or fir. Each tree has thousands upon thousands of needles that were all uniquely made and hand placed on that specific tree by the creator of the universe. As you look around the world, you will notice the beauty and glory of all that God has created. However, all it takes is a few minutes of watching the local nightly news to notice that the world God created as perfect has also become a place full of evil and sin.

Seeing this brokenness, Jesus came into the world, the world that He had helped create (John 1:1-3), amongst the very trees that He had created. This Christmas, look at the tree, and first see the beauty of God’s creation. But then also remember the reality that Jesus entered into this world, humbling Himself, to dwell amongst the same creation He had once formed.

“Light and life to all He brings, Risen with healing in His wings.”—Jesus refers to Himself as both “the light of the world” (John 8:12), and “the bread of life” (John 6:35). The most common denominator between both light and bread is that they are both **necessary** for life. Take away the sun and the earth will freeze over. Don't eat any food for a month and your body will stop working. Both things **must** exist for life to exist and it is no different when it comes to Christ.

My family and I would always drive around to different neighborhoods around Christmas time to look at all the extravagant light decorations. You know what my family has never done though? We have never driven around in a neighborhood at night when there are no Christmas lights up just to stare at dark houses. Why not? Because we are attracted to light and beauty! Jesus is that beautiful light we must turn to.

When you are looking at all the marvelous Christmas light displays, remember the one man who claims to be “the light”, Jesus Christ, Immanuel. Another Christmas tradition in the Streitmater house is helping make (and of course eat) my mothers amazing Christmas cookies. Just like light, food is necessary to live, and though I do not recommend a Christmas cookie diet, they do fall under the category of food.

So this Christmas season, as you sit down to enjoy one or two or twenty Christmas cookies, work to remember who claims to be “the bread of life”; once again, Jesus Christ, Immanuel.

## **PEACE ON EARTH, AND MERCY MILD, GOD AND SINNERS RECONCILED**

Every Christmas my mom gets on me because I never give her ideas for Christmas gifts until Christmas is about a week away. Giving (and obviously receiving) gifts is one of the most exciting traditions of Christmas. However, we can get so caught up in physical wrapping and unwrapping of boxes on December 25 that we often times will forget the greatest gift we continue to receive daily from God; His grace.

Through God sending His son, Jesus, to dwell amongst man, and be unjustly crucified we have received the gift of reconciliation back into a proper relationship with God. Regardless of what gift you give or receive this Christmas,

they will all pail in comparison to the gift we have received through Christ. With every gift that you give this Christmas, remember the ultimate gift we have received from Christ. With every present that you unwrap on Christmas, remember that the greatest present you could have ever received has already been given to you.

This Christmas. Remember Jesus more. Enjoy the tree. Enjoy the lights and the cookies. Enjoy the presents. But above all, be sure to enjoy Jesus.

## ALL GLORY BE TO CHRIST

**Pastor BJ Hallmark**

Christmas is my favorite time of the year. People seem to have attitude adjustments at this time of year. They seem to be happier and more open and hospitable to others.

My first memory in my life was Christmas when I was six years old. We were in the country and didn't have much, and Christmas was not as commercialized as it is today. I really didn't know if I would even get a present. On Christmas morning, I had one present and as I opened it, I had a train. It was about five or six cars with an engine that you wound up with a key and it even smoked.

It went round and round that little circle of track. WOW! It was awesome. As I got older, I didn't go to church much. As a 13-year old boy, I was on the farm for the summer and had a chance to help put up a tent for a TENT REVIVAL. In that revival, I accepted Christ and realized that year what Christmas was all about: **JESUS** - born of a virgin, lived a perfect life, had a three-year ministry, was crucified and died; but after three days he rose again. He went to heaven and will return for us at His Second Coming.

There's a song, "All Glory Be To Christ", that says it all. It tells about His kingdom, His love, His sacrifice and our time when we will live with Him forever. Advent speaks of the arrival of a notable person, thing or event. For us, that is the coming of Jesus, as a baby, lying in a manger, worshiped by shepherds, later worshiped by wise men in a house and now worshiped by us with all we are and have. In His time, there will be His second coming when He returns.

The chorus of the song says:

*"All glory be to Christ our king!  
All glory be to Christ!  
His rule and reign we'll ever sing  
All glory be to Christ!"*

Christmas means that...

*He descended that we might ascend (John 14:3)*

*He was born that we might be born again (John 3:3)*

*He became a servant that we might become sons (Galatians 4:6-7)*

*He was forsaken that we might not be forsaken (Matthew 28:20)*

*He died that we might live (John 5:24)*

In December 1903, after many attempts, the Wright brothers were successful in getting their “flying machine” off the ground. Thrilled, they telegraphed this message to their sister Katherine. “We have actually flown 120 feet. Will be home for Christmas.” Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper and showed him the message. He glanced at it and said, “How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas.”

He totally missed the big news—man had flown!

Have you missed the big news? JESUS, now and forever!!!



# **Additional Ideas for Families**

The hope and goal for believing parents in raising their children and grandchildren is to point them to the gospel of Jesus continually in hopes that God will save them. This can seem like an overwhelming task at times. Where do we start? What do we do? How do we point our children to Jesus in the everyday rhythm of life?

To help answer these questions, we ask parents to consider three areas of life as they think about family discipleship: Faith Talks, Faith Walks, and the Faith Path.

**Faith Talks** will help you build intentional time into the rhythm of family life for the purpose of thinking about, talking about, and living out the gospel.

**Faith Walks** are activities or discussions in the course of daily life that turn a child's attention toward the presence and power of God in every part of life.

**The Faith Path** suggests a focus of specific spiritual disciplines and milestones of God's work in the life of the family and child at certain ages. For more info about where your child is on the Faith Path, go to [www.weemscreek.com/faithpath](http://www.weemscreek.com/faithpath).

In an effort to help families focus on Faith Talks, Faith Walks and the Faith Path during the Advent season, we have given additional activities in each of these areas.

Activities to help you create intentional **Faith Talks**:

- Make a set of Christmas ornaments to remind you of the prophecies of Jesus' birth and their fulfillments.
- Spend time imagining what the "glory of the Lord" shining down on the shepherds was like. Draw what you think it looked like. Or turn off the lights and recreate it with flashlights, candles, props and loud singing.
- Make a Christmas card for someone who does not love and trust Jesus. Wish them a merry Christmas and tell them that Jesus came to save sinners!
- Consider a way your family can serve in the community during the Advent season. Here are a few ideas:
  - Adopting an angel and shopping for them together.
  - Visiting an elderly care center and singing carols for the residents.
  - Serving a meal at a homeless assistance shelter.
  - Taking dinner to someone you know who is lonely or in need.

- Create luminaries for your front yard, sidewalk or porch to remind your family of the star God put in the sky to tell the Magi of Jesus' birth. Take paper lunch bags and draw or punch out a star on each bag. Fill the bottom of the bags with sand to keep them from blowing away. Place a battery-operated candle inside.
- Play hide-and-seek and talk about how Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Thank God for sending Jesus.

#### Ideas for capturing teachable **Faith Walks:**

- Give hints about Christmas gifts that your children will be receiving to build anticipation in their hearts. Remind them of the "hints" God gives us in Scripture of what Jesus' birth and second coming will be like. There is no greater gift than loving and trusting Jesus!
- Have a kid-friendly nativity set for your children to play with. As they play, retell the Christmas narrative.
- As you're out shopping, look for opportunities to remind your children that all material things are temporary and will ultimately never satisfy them. The only lasting hope is Jesus.
- When you see Christmas lights, talk about which lights and houses are your favorites and why. We are attracted to lights because we are made for the light. Talk with your children about how these lights remind us of Jesus, the best and perfect Light of the World.
- If carolers come to your house, remind your children of the angels who appeared to the shepherds proclaiming the good news of Jesus' birth.

#### Ways to recognize and remember on **the Faith Path**

- Milestones are significant moments in the life of a family. Not every family will have a milestone to remember this Advent season. If your family does, take time to recognize the work that God is doing in your family and worship Him.
- Celebrating a new family member – If another person joined your family this year, there is much to celebrate. Families grow through the birth or adoption of a child, marriage or taking in a person who needs love and support. Often, when a new person joins a family, they do not have many Christmas ornaments to add to the family tree. Make or purchase a special ornament for your new family member to recognize and remember God's goodness to bring you together.

- First Christmas without a family member – Celebrating can be hard when your family is grieving the loss of a loved one. Take time to help your child remember and talk about that special person if they need to. Help them to remember the good times and memories they have about that person. If your loved one was a believer, talk about the beautiful reality that they are now with Jesus. Hang an ornament or put out a special decoration that reminds your family of that person. Be honest with God about your sadness and ask Him to make your hearts joyful again.