

Jesse Tree Introduction:

Christmas. The very word evokes profound meaning in all of us. For many, this time of year is filled with excitement and anticipation, but when the day finally arrives, we are left feeling like something is missing. Perhaps this is because many of our traditions, while good, are not centered around Jesus. If we are not intentional with our time, try as we might, the season will come and go with very little thought of the real reason we celebrate!

What if there is a better way?

This year, we're offering our church family a resource that will help them create a new tradition leading up to Christmas - *Journey to Jesus: A Jesse Tree Advent*. Many of us are familiar with the idea of advent, which comes from the Latin word meaning "coming." But the idea behind Jesse Tree might be new. It comes from Isaiah 11:1, which prophesies of a "shoot" that will sprout from the stump of Jesse's family tree. It is a promise of hope in the coming Messiah and Savior, foretold long before his birth. In the stories of Jesus' ancestors, we can see a foreshadowing of his own life, death, and resurrection.

Will you join us this year?

Together, we will commit to be intentional with our time and set aside just a few minutes every day. Together, we will be like Habakkuk and set a watch post and wait with anticipation for God's answer to the problems of this world. Together, we will be like Zacchaeus who climbed up a tree to get a better glimpse of Jesus. Together, as we spend time each day in God's Word, our hearts will be prepared and our minds will be focused on the real reason we celebrate Christmas.

This year, we will start a NEW Christmas tradition that will remind us again that ALL of the stories in Scripture point to Jesus and show us why his arrival on this earth as, "God made into flesh," was the BEST gift ever!

We are excited to see how God will move in our hearts this year, as we WAIT together in anticipation of the day we get to celebrate the advent of the Promised Messiah.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask! We are more than happy to help!

Email Cheri Hogrefe: cheri@providencechurch.com.

Thank you for joining us on this journey!

All scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Jesse Tree Advent Reading plan:

November 28th: The Shoot from Jesse's Tree	Isaiah 11:1-5, 10
November 29th: The Watchtower	Habakkuk 2:1; 3:16-19
November 30th: In the Beginning	Genesis 1:26-31; 2:7
December 1: The Serpent Crusher	Selections from Genesis 2-3
December 2: God Shows Mercy	Selections from Genesis 6-9
December 3: Abram's Faith	Genesis 12:1-7; Hebrews 11:8-10
December 4: God's Covenant with Abram	Genesis 15:1-18a
December 5: Son of Laughter	Genesis 18:1, 9-15; 21:1-7
December 6: God Provides a Substitute	Genesis 22:1-19; Hebrews 11:17-19
December 7: Jacob's Ladder	Genesis 28:10-22
December 8: Coat of Many Colors	Selections from Genesis 37 & 50
December 9: Engraved on His Hands	Deuteronomy 5:1-22, 28-29
December 10: Scarlet Cord	Joshua 2:1-21
December 11: Kinsman Redeemer	Selections from Ruth 1- 4
December 12: Shepherd King	I Samuel 16:1, 6-13; 2 Samuel 5:1-4
December 13: Living Temple	1 Kings 5:1-5; 6:11-14
December 14: Elijah's Contest	I Kings 18:17-40
December 15: A Great Light	Isaiah 8:22; 9:1-7
December 16: A New Kingdom	Isaiah 11:1-12
December 17: Jonah & the Whale	Jonah 3:1 - 4:4, 11
December 18: The Golden Scepter	Esther 4:10-17
December 19: House of Bread	Micah 5:2-5a
December 20: Zechariah & Elizabeth	Luke 1:5-25
December 21: John the Baptist	Matthew 3:1-12
December 22: Gabriel Visits Mary	Luke 1:26-38
December 23: Joseph's Dream	Matthew 1:18-25
December 24: Census in Bethlehem	Luke 2:1-5
December 25: Our Savior Arrives	Luke 2:6-21



READ: Isaiah 11:1-5,10 (ESV)

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins... In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

ENTER THE STORY:

Jesse Tree...A tree with roots deep into the past, that twist and wind themselves through the stories of the Old Testament. With branches that stretch so high and wide, you can climb atop them and catch a beautiful glimpse of God's grand story from the very first blink of a star over Eden to the blinding light over the stable in Bethlehem.

This Jesse Tree is named after the father of King David, the first royal branch in the tree of the Messiah to come. David, to whom God promised that his line and his throne would be established forever. And when his sons and grandsons and great-grandsons turned away from God and chased after the things of the world...and their kingdoms fell...and it seemed like the whole royal family of Jesse had been chopped off right down to the roots, our covenant-keeping God vowed to bring forth someone NEW from David's line. An heir to his throne that would be a banner of salvation to ALL of the world. *This is one of God's titles: "Yahweh Nissi - Banner of Salvation,"* and it is brought to fulfillment through David's heir...Jesus Christ himself! And on that day, when Jesus comes...ALL of the nations will rally to him because they will recognize that he is the answer.

When all hope seems lost, and nothing but a dead stump remains...God reminds us that he and he alone brings dead things to life. Praise the LORD that we serve a living God who has all the answers and will always work everything out according to His plan.

This is just the beginning of our season of Advent, and already our hearts are FULL of hope and joy! We're going to hear more stories about the people in Jesus's family history and about how they helped God bring new life to his people.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, you truly are our only hope, and we praise you that you bring life from dead stumps. Thank you for sending your Son Jesus, to save us from ourselves and be our banner of salvation! Would you help us pay close attention to him this Advent? Amen.



READ: Habakkuk 2:1, 3:16-19 (ESV)

I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint... I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us. Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

ENTER THE STORY:

Habakkuk was a prophet for the nation of Israel during a very difficult time. Enemies were swarming all around them, and they were conquering Israel with ease. This confused Habakkuk, because Israel was God's chosen people – the apple of his eye, so he did the only thing he knew to do and cried out to God. He asked him, "How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?" (Habakkuk 1:2)

God's answer probably took Habakkuk by surprise. Basically, he told him... "Oh, I know what is going on. I see it all, and trust me, it's going to get worse before it gets better." This must have been very difficult to hear... but Habakkuk knew that God was a good and just God, and he knew God had more to teach him, so he marched up to a tall tower and he waited for God to explain.

A lot has changed since the time of Habakkuk, but his cry to God in this passage still rings true for us today. When we see bad things happening to good people, we too wonder why God doesn't act as quickly as we would like. We, too, are waiting for God to avenge the wrongs and redeem our world.

But – don't miss this part – even after receiving news that the worse was yet to come, Habakkuk chose to rejoice in the LORD and be joyful that God was his Savior. What about us? Is God enough for us too?

Could we say if our Christmas tree had no gifts, there was no delicious Christmas dinner waiting, no fun family gatherings ahead, and we were stripped of everything we had, that we would be glad and rejoice in God as our Savior? If all we could claim in this world was Jesus, would having him alone make us happy – or do we have our hearts set on having more?

Oh, may the love of Jesus alone delight us as we peer from our Jesse Tree like a watchman on a tower leaning off the peak, waiting on God to reveal more of himself to us and looking for the only One in all this world who really matters... Jesus, our Messiah and Savior.

PRAY: Lord Jesus, may we always take our confusing and tough questions to you first and wait for your answer. And may we care little for the things of this world but run to the very heights, anxious for your coming... you who are everything to us and more than enough. Forever. Amen.



READ: Genesis 1:26-31; 2:7 (ESV)

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

...then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

ENTER THE STORY:

Every great story has a beginning that grabs your attention and stirs up your excitement for what is to come! The Christmas story has a beginning like that...and it starts *right here in Genesis*. Out of the dark, empty nothingness – God brings everything into existence by the commanding word of his mouth. For six days he filled the world with everything it would need to grow and thrive and display his glory, and yet he was not done. It's almost like he saved the best for last because when God created man, he didn't speak him into existence, he knelt down and formed him from the dust of the earth – crafting him together with a personal touch. But this dirt-man was not yet alive. In order for that to happen, God needed to breathe into him the breath of life. In the same way that God promised to bring life from a dead stump, in Genesis, he brought life from dust.

The truth is, when God created humans, he had another human in mind – his Son, Jesus. For though Jesus exists as the eternal God, the alpha and the omega, the Christmas story will require him to leave his glorious position in heaven and come to earth to be the perfect human. He will not be merely be made, "in the image of God," like us though, because he IS the image of God. *Colossians 1:15* says, "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." Our beginning was always meant to point forward to his earthly beginning...when Jesus, the very Word of God, is made into flesh and dwells among us (*John 1:1, 14*).

When that fullness of time comes, we will again see God bring light out of darkness as he commands a star to shine so bright in the sky, the nations will know that "The Light of the World" has arrived.

PRAY: Jesus, we are grateful that you are the image of the invisible God, the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his nature. We are thankful that through the Holy Spirit, we can be united to you. We pray that you would shape us to look more and more like you each day. Amen.



READ: Selections from Genesis 2-3 (ESV)

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. . . . And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Genesis 2:8-9, 16-17)

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (Genesis 3:1-7)

Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." (Genesis 3:13-15)

And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them. Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

(Genesis 3:21-24)

ENTER THE STORY:

- It might be hard for us to imagine, but there was a time when sin and death did not exist. We read about this yesterday in Genesis chapter 1. God created the world and everything in it and called it "good". God placed the first two people, Adam and Eve, in the garden and told them to work the land and take care of it. Adam and Eve had a close relationship with God where they regularly walked and talked with him. They were in charge of the garden and everything in it.
- There were trees all over the beautiful garden and they could eat from all of them, except one specific tree in the middle of the garden, the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil."
- Unfortunately, Adam and Eve did NOT live happily ever after, because they chose to listen to the voice of God's enemy... the devil, and disobey God.
- It feels like our story has just begun, and already everything is falling apart.

- Sin has taken root in God's good world like an obnoxious weed. Stubborn and pervasive, it seems impossible to rid the
- garden of it. But contrary to what we might think, God was not surprised or caught off guard by Adam and Eve's
- disobedience. God is omniscient, a big word which means he knows everything. Their disobedience simply set in motion
- the plan that he already had (*remember we said that the story of Christmas actually started in Genesis?*)
- There is always a consequence for sin, whether we can see it or not, and because God is just (*always does what is right*)
- and holy (*set apart and unlike us*), He HAS to punish sin. Even the serpent was cursed for his part in deceiving Eve. The
- bad news for Adam and Eve was that their disobedience caused them to have to leave the garden and the presence of
- their Creator. But in the midst of their pain, God gave them a glimmer of hope.
- In Genesis 3:15, God said that one day – an offspring from Eve's family line would crush the head of the serpent and
- defeat him forever. The word "offspring" in the Hebrew language is the word "seed" and it refers to a single male person.
- Our hope rests completely on the actions of the "seed" of Eve...the prophesied "Serpent Crusher."
- **READ Genesis 3:21 again.** What did God do right before He kicked Adam and Eve out of the garden?
- From the very beginning of time, God establishes a system where the punishment for sin is death. We see this echoed in
- the New Testament as well. **Romans 6:23 says, "...the wages of sin is DEATH..."**
- By "covering" Adam and Eve with the skin of the animal, God was covering the cost of their sin with the death of the
- animal. They tried to cover themselves with fig leaves, but that was not enough.
- Through Adam and Eve...sin and death entered the world and changed everything, but the hope of Christmas is that the
- Serpent Crusher and promised Messiah – Jesus, would be born in human flesh so that he could die and permanently
- cover the cost of our sin.
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- **PRAY:** *Jesus, your mercy in giving up your position in heaven to enter our suffering as a tiny and vulnerable baby is*
- *astounding to us. Along with Adam and Eve, we are the ones who eat the fruit we shouldn't--and we are the ones who*
- *run away from you and hide – yet you are the one who willingly takes our punishment to re-unite us back to the*
- *Father. Forgive us for believing the lies of your enemy, and thank you for providing a way for us to be forgiven. May*
- *the good news of your gospel never grow old to us. Amen.*



READ: Selections from Genesis 6-9 (ESV)

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD." (Genesis 6:5-8)

And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch....For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you.... Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him. (Genesis 6:13-14, 17-18, 22)

And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights....The flood continued forty days on the earth. The waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth....He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. (Genesis 7:12, 17, 23)

But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided...Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. (Genesis 8:1, 20-21)

"Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you...that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. (Genesis 9:9, 11, 12-15)

ENTER THE STORY:

Do you remember a few days ago when we talked about how God created Adam? He knelt down on the ground, took a bunch of dirt and mud, packed it together, and formed it into a dirt-man. It was only when God breathed his own breath into Adam's nose that Adam came to life. He was alive because he had the breath of life in him.

In this story, God takes the breath of life away, but not because he stopped loving people. He never stops loving people. God's heart for his people never changes – it is always the heart of the people towards God that changes.

No – God was taking away the breath of life because wickedness was consuming the land.

Hatred, violence, pain, and suffering were everywhere. People were hurting each other and rebelling against God. As people strayed further and further from the perfection of the garden, it showed only one thing – there is no end to how far man's wickedness will go. It went so far that God's heart was grieved and he was sorry he had ever made man.

- God doesn't always unleash the full force of His anger and wrath towards sin, but this time He chose to act. The result was
- a world-wide flood to punish all of mankind and wipe the slate clean. God hit the reset button. He did this so we would
- know how serious it is to turn our backs on God and run toward the darkness, and so we would know how offensive our
- sin is before a perfect and holy God.

- But God did not totally destroy His creation. Noah found favor with God. *2 Chronicles 16:9* says, "For the eyes of the LORD
- range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him." Everywhere God looked,
- people were turning their backs on him, but not Noah. Noah didn't care what people thought of him. His heart was
- committed to God, and in the midst of one of his greatest acts of judgment, God showed his mercy by saving Noah, his
- family, and a selection of animals that would be part of a new world.

- In this story, we see God punish mankind for their sins and save only *ONE* family. Soon we will see God punish only *ONE*
- man to offer salvation for all mankind. And after Jesus finishes the work God gives Him to do, he will return to heaven –
- but he will not leave us without God's presence. He promises to send another helper; one who will guide us into all
- truth, convict of us our sin and remind us of the things Jesus told us. This helper is the Holy Spirit – who is the very
- breath of God.

-  **PRAY:** *Lord, we admit that it is difficult for us to understand your wrath and anger towards sin. We believe that you*
- *are good and always make the right decisions, so we put our full and complete trust in you. Forgive us, Lord, when our*
- *hearts go astray and we start loving the things of this world more than you. Thank you for your mercy and grace and*
- *sending us your Holy Spirit , the breath of life, who draws us close to you. Amen.*



READ: Genesis 12:1-7; Hebrews 11:8-10 (ESV)

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. (Genesis 12:1-7)

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:8-10)

ENTER THE STORY:

Out of the blue, and without warning, God turns his attention to a man named Abram (soon to be Abraham), a man living in Ur...a city located near Babylon. Babylon was known for the people who tried to build a tower that reached the heavens. God scattered the people and confused their languages as a result. Abram and his family did not move far, however. Where they settled was probably very civilized with access to food and water, well-established homes, and most of all...safety. But God calls Abram to leave all of it behind and set out to a new place that he will show him along the way. No map, no compass, and no GPS to guide him.

If God called you to drop everything and leave the safety of your home, would you be willing to obey?

History is full of stories of people who left something behind in order to seek a better life, but usually these people were leaving a bad situation hoping to find something better. Abram's situation could have been quite the opposite. He seemed to be doing just fine, but when God called...he walked away, and even though he would be a stranger in a strange land and would not see all the fulfillment of God's promises in his lifetime, he will trust God to be true to his word and give him something better. And even though he and his wife Sarai were old and withered and didn't even have one child yet, they believed!

When God calls you to leave something, "good," behind do you believe he has something better for you?

God starts something new when he calls Abram out of Ur. No longer will he only work with one person, he will bind himself to a family, and out of that family will come a nation of people that will be his chosen people. And out of one of the families within that nation, God will send His Son to fulfill this huge promise to Abram...that through one of Abram's descendants, the whole world will be blessed. Jesus' willingness to leave the comfort of heaven and enter into our world means that *the blessing extends to us*. From him, we have received grace upon grace.

We will all gather and celebrate that blessing on Christmas morning!

PRAY: *Jesus, it is so easy to get comfortable in our luxurious lives that we become dull to your calling. Help us not forget that you have called all of your followers to be like strangers in a strange land. To be in the world, but not of it. Help us always look forward to the "city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Amen.*



READ: Genesis 15:1-18a, (ESV)

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." And [Abram] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram...

ENTER THE STORY:

Less than 200 years ago, when people wanted to confirm a promise, they would simply shake hands. This was a symbol of trust between two people. The handshake was to represent the "firmness" of the agreement the two parties were making, and it meant that each of them would be true to their word. But long before that, during Abram's time...the same concept was made with something called a covenant.

Today, we mainly use this word when we are talking about a marriage, but the word covenant in Hebrew actually has a very interesting meaning. It is the word *berit* (*bey-REET*): which is a *solemn binding agreement*. This particular ceremony almost always involved a cutting and passing between pieces of flesh. We see this in the Hebrew word that typically precedes it: *karat* (*ka-RAHT*) which means *to cut*. This means that when people "made a covenant" they were quite literally "carving out an agreement."

In Abraham's time – it meant everything. If someone made a covenant with you, you knew they would be true to their word, because this was a very serious agreement. In fact, in the story above, we see God tell Abram to cut up some animals and make a path with their bloody carcasses. This was called a "blood trail" and the people making the promise would walk between the dead animals with their hands out symbolizing this idea... "As God is our witness, may this happen to me or worse if I break this covenant." *Do you see how serious this was?*

God made some BIG promises to Abram in chapter 12, and here he is expanding on them even more.

Abram...go outside and look up at the stars, and count them if you can. *THAT* is how many offspring you will have.

- Have you ever gone outside at night when the sky is full of stars? Have you ever tried to count them? It's impossible. God
- wanted Abram to be in awe of how big this promise was, *BUT*...we've seen this word before, haven't we? In Genesis
- 3:15, God said that one day – an offspring from Eve's family line would crush the head of the serpent and defeat him
- forever. The word "offspring" in the Hebrew language is the word "seed" and it refers to one single male person.
- Is it Isaac? Yes and No. Isaac would be the first of Abram's descendants with Sarai, yes, but it was bigger than that.
- Galatians 3:16 gives us some insight into the real promise God is making Abraham. *"Now the promises were made to*
- *Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your*
- *offspring," who is Christ."*
- **It's always been about Jesus!** It started with the prophecy and promise in Genesis 3:15 of the Serpent Crusher, and
- here God expounds on that promise with Abram. And this, my friends, is what Abram believed in.
- Because of God's promise to him, he knew that a single, future descendant would come through his family, and would
- bless the entire world (*Genesis 12:3*).
- This is what Abram's faith rested on...and his faith in that special someone is what "reckoned him righteous," a legal
- accounting term, which means, *"Abram was counted (seen) as being in right standing with God."*
- In order to be saved today, one must look back into the past and put their faith in the cross and what Christ accomplished
- for us with his death and resurrection. Abram put his faith forward into the future, but his faith still centered on that
- special seed that would come through his line...on Christ, the Messiah and Savior.
- **Everyone for all time has been saved by faith through the grace of God! Everyone.**
- Jesus cut a new covenant for those that would put their faith in him...but he did not walk through a bloody trail lined
- with the bodies of dead animals. He offered up his own body to be figuratively torn in two so he could say in *John 14:6*,
- *"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life...no one comes to the Father but THROUGH me."* Now all who desire to come close
- to God must walk the trail the Jesus has laid with his own flesh. But be careful...for it is a narrow trail, and most will not
- see him for the treasure he is.
- *Do you see it? Do you see God's precise attention to detail?*
- This alone should cause us to bend our knee this Christmas season and exalt Jesus to his rightful place in our hearts.
-
- **PRAY:** *Lord, we bend our heads low today as we kneel in awe of your purpose and plan that started at the very*
- *beginning and continued to be revealed throughout the pages of scripture. May we never forget the cost of the*
- *covenant Jesus cut for us and may we always see Jesus as the treasure he is and recognize how great his sacrifice was*
- *for us. Amen.*



READ: Genesis 18:1, 9-15; 21:1-7 (ESV)

And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh." (Genesis 18:1, 9-15)

The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." (Genesis 21:1-7)

ENTER THE STORY:

Did you notice the name change? In Genesis 17, Abram and Sarai *STILL* don't have any children, but God intensifies his promise by revealing a subtle change with some new names. God changes Abram, which means "exalted father" to Abraham, which means "father of a multitude", and God assures Abraham that nations and kings would come from him. God also changes Sarai's name, which means "princess," to Sarah, which means "noblewoman," because she will be the source of these nations and kings of peoples shall come from her too.

Being given a new name with a powerful meaning is great, but Sarah, who had likely spent the better part of her life enduring a visceral monthly reminder of the failure of her body to do its job and produce an heir, still didn't have even *ONE* child, let alone a nation of kings.

Naturally, this caused Sarah to question the extent of God's abilities...because it seemed like it was too late. Too much time had passed...24 years to be exact. Abraham was 99 years old, and she was 90. And so she wondered, why did he wait so long? She was too old. She didn't even have a monthly cycle anymore. This is what the text means when it says "*the way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.*" Her body was as good as dead.

But what have we been learning about our God through this advent? He is the God that brings life from dead things. He brought life from dust...he brought life from a dead stump...and now he will bring life from a dead womb.

God's response to her says it all, "*Is anything too hard for the LORD?*"

What about you? Do you believe this statement in the deepest part of your being? Have you ever questioned God's ability to accomplish the impossible?

Sarah did – and God reminded her of this truth. *NOTHING* is too hard for him! God, who made the promise to give them offspring as numerous as the stars, is the same God who made those stars and called them by their name! He is more than capable of opening Sarah's womb and blessing her with a child.

In fact...wasn't that the whole point all along? God's promise would not be accomplished by man. It would be an incredible feat that only God could bring about.

Sure enough, nine months later, Abraham, who was 100 years old, and Sarah, whose womb was as good as dead, gave birth to a bouncing baby boy.

They named their son "Isaac", which means "son of laughter", and Sarah did laugh, but this time it was a deeply joyful laugh, because, as she said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me."

This baby boy was well worth the 25 years it took for him to arrive.

Many years later, God would again accomplish an extraordinarily, impossible feat when he opened another woman's womb, but this woman would not be old in years and past the normal age of childbearing. She would be young and a virgin, not yet married. God would take his Son, and fashion him into a tiny baby boy and by the power of the Holy Spirit place him in this young woman's womb — "The Word made flesh."

He would be born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he would humble himself by becoming obedient to the point of death...even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:7-8 paraphrased).

*What a remarkable way for Jesus to enter our world...but praise God that our ways are not his ways and our thoughts are not his thoughts. May we never forget that *nothing is too hard for the LORD!!**

PRAY: *Heavenly Father, you did the impossible when you gave Abram and Sarai a baby in their old age, and you did it again when you sent your Son to be born of a young virgin girl. Even though people had to wait a very long time for his arrival, he was worth the wait! Now that he has come, we can finally rejoice and laugh because having you with us brings us true joy Amen.*

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Genesis 22:1-19; Hebrews 11:8-10 (ESV)

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided." And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. (Hebrews 11:17-19)

ENTER THE STORY:

Take your son, your only son, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering. Abraham's relationship with God takes an unexpected turn here, doesn't it? I mean, child sacrifice? Isn't that a grotesque sin in the eyes of the LORD? Is this really what God is asking Abraham to do? And why? *These are all valid questions in response to a text like this.*

After all, Isaac was Abraham's *ONLY* son – Phase One of God's promise to give Abraham a family as numerous as the stars. Without him, the plan doesn't work because at this point in time, Isaac has no children. If he dies, God's Word fails and he will break the covenant he made with Abraham.

This doesn't seem like a very good idea...*UNLESS*...there is a much greater purpose to what God is asking Abraham to do. God really is the BEST teacher and he knows how to help Abraham understand just how far a Father must go to save their children.

- And how does Abraham respond? *With unquestioning obedience and unwavering faith.*
- *Do you think you could respond to such a monumental request with that same kind of attitude? What is the ONE thing in your life that would hurt the most to lose? The ONE thing you really, really don't want God to ask you to give up?*
- *Would you give it up if God asked you to... for him?*

Abraham was willing, because he KNEW God would be faithful to his word. He knew, one way or another, BOTH he and Isaac were coming down off of that mountain. He told his servants so, *"Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you."* Whether that meant he had to plunge the knife into his son's bound body lying on that altar and God brought him back to life or God provided a substitute that he could offer up instead. Either way, Abraham trusted God, so he saddled the donkey and set out on yet another journey not knowing the whole story. And after all is said and done, that mountain carries a new name... *Yahweh Yireh - the LORD will provide.*

But of course we know how this story ends, don't we?

This story is a shadow – a reflection of a similar story. One where another Father had a Son he loved very much, and he was also willing to take that Son and offer him up as a sacrifice on that very same mountain. And that Son would also carry his own wood up a long hill, but instead of God providing an animal to be sacrificed in his place, he would BE the LAMB, and he would wear a crown of thorns and lay down his life as a substitute for others.

In this story, the Father would endure the death of his only Son, but death would not be able to hold him long, and after three days he would come back again and be restored to his Father. Praise God!

It's always been about Jesus! Every story either whispers his name or shouts it from the mountain tops so that we can understand what God has been teaching us about his Son all along the way.

Don't miss him this Christmas season because he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!

PRAY: *God, we continue to be amazed at how you weave together such intricate and mysterious stories so that they reflect the beautiful sacrifice of your Son. Lord, we long to know you and trust you as Abraham did, and we long to have the type of unquestioning obedience and unwavering trust that he had. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, God, will you develop those qualities in us? Amen.*

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Genesis 28:10-22, (ESV)

Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you."

ENTER THE STORY:

Yesterday, we saw Abraham's obedience and trust in God - trust that went as far as offering up his promised son, Isaac, to die as a sacrifice. After God met Abraham's trust and provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac, Isaac went on to have two sons. These sons, Jacob and Esau, couldn't have been more different from each other: in fact, they were constant rivals. Jacob, the second born, was a trickster, and he made a plan to steal the birthright of a blessing from his brother. That's what sent Jacob on the road from his home - he was running away from his brother! Imagining being on the run because of your own trickery, and having to lay your head on a hard rock just to sleep at night.

As he lay under the countless stars that night—the same stars his grandfather, Abraham, saw on the night God promised him a family just as numerous—Jacob had a dream.

Have you ever had a really crazy dream that you remembered when you woke up?

Jacob's dream was special - he saw heaven opened up, and a ladder going from earth to heaven with angels going up and down! And standing at the top of the ladder was Yahweh himself! In that moment, Jacob saw heaven and earth connected - something that hadn't happened in the Bible since the garden of Eden. And he heard the very same promises that Yahweh had made to his grandfather: he would give him descendants as numerous as the grains of dust on the ground, and every nation on earth would be blessed through his offspring.

That offspring would ultimately be the very one who will reunite heaven and earth, and reunited the family of God with him - Jesus! What was it the angel said to Joseph, Jesus' dad? He would fulfill the promise of Emmanuel - God with us. He is the only one who can reunite what was separated in Eden, and from all the nations of the earth, create one family for himself.

- Jacob promised to honor God, and give back a tenth of everything God gave him - and he changed the name of the place
- where he had the dream. Have you noticed that name changes are really important in the Bible? The place was called
- Luz, named after an almond tree. Not an exciting name, is it? But the new name fit: *Beth-El*, "House of God."

■ **PRAY:** *Father, please forgive us for our own wrongs, and the ways that we run away from the consequences like Jacob. Thank you that just like him, we're not good enough to earn your goodness, but you decide to give it to us and walk with us out of your own loving heart. Teach us to trust you, so that we will be united to you in Jesus! Amen.*

■ **SING!:** Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Genesis 37:3-11, 17b-28, 31-33 (ESV)

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him. Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind. (Genesis 37:3-11)

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams." But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. (Genesis 37:17b-28)

Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, "This we have found; please identify whether it is your son's robe or not." And he identified it and said, "It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." (Genesis 37:31-33)

ENTER THE STORY:

Jacob had 12 sons, but he loved *ONE* son most of all...Joseph. And to show his love for Joseph, Jacob gave him a special, valuable, and colorful coat. This made Joseph's brothers extremely jealous and angry, which is certainly understandable.

No one likes to feel like they are less valued than someone else—especially when it's your own father, right?

This is the setup for this story...but we don't want to miss God's unseen and providential guidance that will affect the whole outcome of life for this family.

Joseph's brothers were *SO* mad at him that they decided to kill him and throw him in a pit. But when a better deal came by that would put a few silver coins in their pockets, they decided instead to sell him to some travelers passing by. After all...human trafficking at that time was a hot commodity – especially for the wealthy Egyptians, who enjoyed having servants. And that is where Joseph ended up; in the wealthiest civilization around. When the men who bought Joseph took him away, I'm sure his brothers thought they would never see him again. *"Good riddance to that arrogant dreamer!"*

But Joseph's story was only getting started. God had BIG plans for him, and he was orchestrating ALL of this, so that in the midst of Joseph's tragic beginnings, he would wind up exactly where God wanted him to be. First to Potiphar, an official in Pharaoh's court, then to a prison where he would meet former servants who worked very close to Pharaoh, and finally in front of Pharaoh himself, who would promote Joseph to a place of prominence where he would be in a position to save his family.

Even though it took a *LONG TIME* and lots of bad things were going to happen to Joseph along the way, God was right by his side, helping him and protecting him through it all...and Joseph *KNEW* it. This was his **SECRET!** He knew God was up to something big because of the dreams God had given him, so he chose to *TRUST* God and have a good attitude through every setback and discouraging event that came his way. He had the *correct* perspective about his trials!

Eventually, Joseph had a chance to come face to face with his own family, who had betrayed him. It is one thing to be betrayed by someone you don't know very well and to whom you have no allegiance, but when someone is betrayed by their own family, it is a different thing altogether. Let's see how he responds.

READ: Genesis 50:15-21 (ESV)

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you." And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them."

CHRISTMAS CONNECTION:

There is another story in the Bible about a man who was mistreated by his family, betrayed and sold for a few pieces of silver, and falsely accused and arrested even though he was innocent. He too trusted God and had a good attitude despite his circumstances and unfair treatment. But there was **ONE** key difference. Joseph went through bad things and eventually reached a place of power where he could save people from a physical need – a famine. Jesus *left* a place of power and prominence so he could go through horrible things, in order to be in a position to lay down his life in order to save people from a pervasive spiritual problem – sin.

Joseph's story reflects Jesus' story in some ways, but ultimately Jesus does what no one else can do...he reconciles us to his Father. And once Jesus finishes his work, we who were far off are now brought near. That is what we celebrate this Christmas!

PRAY: Heavenly Father, thank you so much for being with us through all of the bad things that happen in our world.

Will you help us to be like Joseph and trust you no matter what? Thank you for sending Jesus to save us from our sins and fill the hunger in our hearts for a Savior. Amen.

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Deuteronomy 5:1-22, 28-29 (ESV)

And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the rules that I speak in your hearing today, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them. The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, while I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD. For you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up into the mountain. He said: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 'You shall have no other gods before me. 'You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.' 'You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.' 'Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.' 'Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.' 'You shall not murder.' 'And you shall not commit adultery.' 'And you shall not steal.' 'And you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.' 'And you shall not covet your neighbor's wife. And you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.' These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me. "And the LORD heard your words, when you spoke to me. And the LORD said to me, 'I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken. Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!

ENTER THE STORY:

These ten rules were given to a group of people who had just experienced God at his most glorious. They personally witnessed the ten plagues he used to dismantle one of the largest, wealthiest, civilizations of its time – the Egyptian Empire. They literally escaped death the night of the Passover, even as they listened to the cries of the Egyptians. The Egyptians even handed over their riches just as God said they would, items the Egyptians were happy to give up,

if it meant they would finally be released from Yahweh's judgment. The Israelites followed the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, even when he led them through the parted Red Sea to escape their enemy. They watched as that same sea closed in on the Egyptian army, which brought an end to the hold Egypt had on them.

They were no longer slaves...they were a redeemed people, freed from the tyranny of slavery. It was time to establish the boundaries of their new relationship with Yahweh, the Creator of the world, their God and soon to be King. These ten rules would govern what the people could and couldn't do, and most importantly how they would reflect their King to the rest of the world. After all, they were supposed to be set apart and distinct so that other nations would be able to KNOW Yahweh through them. They were his representatives, but really this covenant relationship was *SO MUCH* more than that. This was a marriage. Yahweh, the groom, and Israel, his bride.

It makes these rules a lot more relatable when we think of them as, "vows." Each party committed to do their part. God promised to bless them in every way imaginable if they kept their part of the covenant, but he also promised to curse them if they turned their back on him and betrayed him. Can you guess how the people responded to this agreement? *"All that the LORD has spoken, we will do, and we will be obedient!"*

If you've ever wondered how long it took them to FAIL at keeping their word, go read Exodus 32. It didn't take long.

We might be tempted to look at the Israelites and believe that we would have done a better job at keeping these rules. That is, until we get to the gospel of Matthew and hear Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and find out that it was not just about the external action but the inner heart condition. When Jesus equates hating your brother with murder, and says, *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," (Matthew 5:48)*, we all begin to realize how desperately hopeless our situation is.

But God doesn't leave us there. He sends his Son, the perfect human who, as we've already seen a few days ago, IS the image of God (Colossians 1:15). Jesus is the perfect reflection of his Father, and he fulfills every aspect of the law. He keeps the commandments that we have failed to keep, and he reverses the curse of the fall.

Now we who follow him are the ones set apart...distinct so that other people can KNOW God through us. And what does he want us to do? Jesus summed up the law by giving us the two greatest commandments: love God with all our hearts, souls, mind and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves. This is how we represent him. Yahweh is still the groom but now *ALL* who follow him and surrender to him are his bride.

With the first set of commandments, God used his own finger to engrave them onto stone tablets. But through Jesus Christ, we are *"...engraved on the palms of his hands," (Isaiah 49:16)* and the law is engraved on our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through him, we have the power to keep the law; and when we don't, we have the ability to confess our sins and be forgiven.

PRAY: *Jesus, thank you for doing what we could not do and fulfilling all of the requirements of the law. God, we long to be more like your Son, so please continue to work in us as we walk in your Spirit and submit ourselves to your will. Amen.*

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Joshua 2:1-21, (ESV)

...Joshua the son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim (shee-TEEM) as spies, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." And they went and came into the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab and lodged there. And it was told to the king of Jericho, "Behold, men of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land." Then the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land." But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. And she said, "True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. And when the gate was about to be closed at dark, the men went out. I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them." But she had brought them up to the roof and hid them with the stalks of flax that she had laid in order on the roof. So the men pursued after them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. And the gate was shut as soon as the pursuers had gone out.

Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men, "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.

Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house, and give me a sure sign that you will save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death." And the men said to her, "Our life for yours even to death! If you do not tell this business of ours, then when the LORD gives us the land we will deal kindly and faithfully with you."

Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was built into the city wall, so that she lived in the wall. And she said to them, "Go into the hills, or the pursuers will encounter you, and hide there three days until the pursuers have returned. Then afterward you may go your way."

The men said to her, "We will be guiltless with respect to this oath of yours that you have made us swear. Behold, when we come into the land, you shall tie this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and you shall gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your father's household. Then if anyone goes out of the doors of your house into the street, his blood shall be on his own head, and we shall be guiltless. But if a hand is laid on anyone who is with you in the house, his blood shall be on our head. But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be guiltless with respect to your oath that you have made us swear." And she said, "According to your words, so be it." Then she sent them away, and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window.

ENTER THE STORY:

Rahab lived in the city of Jericho, which was located just across the Jordan River in the promised land. It was the first city the Israelites would have to conquer on their journey to recapture the land of Israel God had promised to Abraham. But conquering Jericho would not be an easy feat. It was a highly fortified city, with not just one outer wall, but two; both very thick and very high. As any good military commander does, Joshua sent two spies in to gain intel and figure out how to conquer the city.

Once inside, they entered the house of Rahab, who was a prostitute. She lived on the outer wall of the city, so we're going to give the spies the benefit of the doubt and hope that they entered her house as part of their plan to gain intel. Regardless, because the King of Jericho found out they were there, she hid the spies on her roof and lied to the guards in order to save their lives. She did all of this for *ONE REASON ONLY*: she had heard of Yahweh, the God of the Israelites. She knew what he had done to the Egyptians, and she knew the walls of Jericho were no match for a God like that.

Because she saved their lives, the spies ended up making a deal with Rahab. They agreed to save her and her family, but there was one condition: in order for them to keep their end of the bargain, she had to hang a scarlet cord outside her window. It was, quite literally, her only hope. If your mind just strayed to Princess Leia's line, "Help me, Obi Wan Kenobi; you're my only hope," you're not too far off; because *HOPE* is a concept we want to focus on today.

In Hebrew, there isn't ONE exact word for hope...there are actually 15 different words used to convey a similar message, but there are two words used most often. We are only going to focus on one of them. This word for Hope, is "tiqvah" (tick-vah), and it literally means "a cord (or attachment)." This is where we get "Scarlet Cord." But figuratively it means, "an expectation." Tiqvah comes from the root word "qavah" (Kah-vah) which means "to wait or look for," but is connected to the idea of a measuring cord used for binding. *Do you see where this is going?*

When the Israelite spies told Rahab to hang a "scarlet cord," out of her window, we could say it was her, "scarlet hope," because it's the same Hebrew word: tiqvah.

That scarlet cord was binding or tethering her to the Israelites...it was her lifeline! She chose to bind herself to Yahweh, the God of the Israelites instead of clinging to what seemed like the safe bet in the fortified walls of Jericho.

When Rahab put her CORD out the window and watched the scarlet rope fly, she trusted that her hope was secure.

Was it worth it? Well, because of her oath with the spies, her whole family survived the fall of Jericho and Rahab shifted her allegiance to Yahweh and her new family, the Israelites. As a reward for her faith, God sent her a prince to marry by the name of Salmon, and just like that, Rahab became part of the royal family. From prostitute to princess...she cruised straight into the pages of Hebrews chapter 11, the, "Hall of Faith," and into our hearts as a beloved hero...not because she was a good person or did good things, but because of her *FAITH*. Eventually Salmon and Rahab had a son named Boaz, who would be the father of Obed, who would be the father of Jesse, who would be the father of David – the greatest king in Israel's history. And just like that we're right back to the family of Jesse, and we find ourselves longing for the arrival of the Shoot that comes out of the stump who will be our forever king!

This Christmas...we are putting our hope in the arrival of a tiny little baby. That baby is *OUR* Scarlet Cord, God in the flesh, and all who bind themselves to him will not be disappointed. Our expectation is that we who have waited a long time for him will one day be rewarded!

This hope is an anchor to our soul (*Hebrews 6:19*)...that we have a God who loves us, who will never leave us or forsake us, who will watch over us and give us strength to endure, who will have mercy on us, who can empathize with us, and who, one day, will bring us safely home into His presence.

PRAY: *Jesus, you are our Scarlet Cord, and our only hope—we choose to bind ourselves to you. And while we anticipate and celebrate the arrival of the very first time you came, we wait with great expectation that you will return again to rescue us and bring us home to be with you forever. Amen.*

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Selections from Ruth 1-4 (ESV)

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem.

Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech.

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

ENTER THE STORY:

Bethlehem, the town whose name means, "house of bread," had no bread to offer, so a man named Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and their two sons left the promised land – a place that was supposed to flow with milk and honey, but was barren and desolate. They found themselves in Moab, the land of their enemies... outside the Promised Land, and settled down. Naomi's two sons married two Moabite women, something they were also forbidden to do, and for a while, all seemed well, but in a sad turn of events, Naomi's husband and both of her sons died. She was left alone.

It was not easy for women to make money in those days, and Naomi knew she could not provide for her two new daughters-in-law, so she sent them back to their families. But Ruth clung to her, because her mind was made up.

She wanted Naomi and the Israelites to be her family, and she wanted Naomi's God, Yahweh, to be her God.

Does this sound familiar? It should, because yesterday, we read something similar in Rahab's story, another woman who was not an Israelite, but who desperately wanted to make Yahweh her God, and the people of Israel, her people and her family.

And so Naomi and Ruth traveled back home to Bethlehem in search of family that would help them survive.

In many places around the world throughout the history of time, women have not been not treated well. But Israel at that time was different. God wanted his people to take care of women and treat them with the respect, honor, and value he instilled in them, so he put laws in place that would protect them...especially women who had lost their husband.

One of the rules involved gathering food. The men who owned the fields were supposed to leave some of the grain around the edges of the field so the women could collect it. We saw Ruth doing this very thing, and it just so happened to be in the fields of a family member named Boaz.

But there was another rule...and this one was specifically for widows. If the woman's husband died before they had children, the next closest family member was supposed to marry the widow and help her have a son to carry on her husband's name.

This brother was called a "kinsman redeemer."

This was a critical job, because the "kinsman redeemer" is a rescuer! To redeem something is to purchase something back, or to pay the ransom for it. What a beautiful picture. In this story, Boaz is the kinsman redeemer for Ruth and Naomi, but the picture we are seeing in this story points to a much GREATER kinsman redeemer. A very special someone who will come to rescue his people from something much worse than hunger. He will ransom his people with his own life. It's us...*WE* are his people, and whether we know it or not, we are all just as helpless as Ruth and Naomi.

Like Boaz, this Kinsman Redeemer will step up to marry us...join his life with ours and rescue us.

But let's talk about the picture God is showing us through Ruth. Maybe the famine that sent Elimilech and his family to Moab was part of God's plan. Maybe God had his sights set on a young woman living there. Wouldn't it be just like God not only to rescue her, but also to give her a place of honor in his own Son's lineage? Before Ruth even meets her future husband, we already have a beautiful love story because God found the one he was looking for...the one whose heart was set on him.

And how does the story end? Well, Ruth has a baby boy named Obed, and Obed grows up to be the father of Jesse...who grows up to be the father of David. And once again, we find ourselves back at the stump of Jesse! But this time, we *KNOW* who the shoot is, and we can't wait for him to arrive because when he gets here he will be a great blessing and we will finally be at peace.

And remember Rahab...the mother of Boaz? Imagine the stories Boaz heard as he grew up. Imagine how the impact of having a mother who had been a foreigner and a prostitute, yet was grafted into the olive tree of Israel by the grace of God, affected the way Boaz viewed Ruth that day he saw her gleaning in his field. Other men might have simply seen an outsider scrounging for food, but Boaz saw something else...a woman who had left everything to embrace these people as her true family.

God found exactly what he was looking for in Moab and in Jericho...because sometimes God's light shines the brightest in the most unlikely places.

PRAY: *Jesus, thank you for the story of Ruth, that shows us the beauty of a Kinsman Redeemer. Thank you for rescuing and redeeming us from our sin and grafting us into your family tree, just like you did for Ruth and Rahab! Amen.*

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: 1 Samuel 16:1, 6-13; 2 Samuel 5:1-4 (ESV)

The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons."

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed is before him." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen these." Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here." And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And the LORD said, "Arise, anoint him, for this is he." Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward.

Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "Behold, we are your bone and flesh. In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the LORD said to you, 'You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.'" So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel. David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years.

ENTER THE STORY:

You may have already noticed, but God really likes to use the most unlikely people to accomplish his plans. There was Joseph: youngest son, loved by his father but picked on by his brothers. God raised him up to the second highest position in Egypt, and used him to save his family and people from starvation! There was Jacob: birthright thief, trickster, and downright shady character. But God chose him to carry out his promise to create a family to bless all nations! And let's not forget the Canaanite Rahab, and the Moabite Ruth, both of whom became part of the lineage of the promised Messiah.

And now, back in Bethlehem, God is up to it again. Big, tall, handsome Saul had failed as the king of Israel and deserted God. But God sent his prophet, Samuel, to the little town to meet a little guy - the youngest of a whole family of good-looking, tall, strong brothers. He wasn't even important enough in his father's eyes to bring him out to meet Samuel; he was busy taking care of a flock of sheep.

The boy, David, would turn out not just to be a caretaker of sheep - he would become the shepherd-king of the nation! God was interested in the *heart*, not the looks. And as 1 Samuel 13:14 says, David was a man "after God's own heart." He became a warrior and a poet; a ruler and a songwriter. He showed his people how to follow God boldly, and how to worship God in spirit and truth. For a rebellious and fickle nation that was very much like a stinky, ornery flock of sheep, David was a shepherd. But not a perfect one.

In the end, even David's God-loving heart failed, and he gave in to sin. But there's another Shepherd—another KING—

- *In John 10:14-15, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father*
- *knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep."*
- Even the night of his birth, God was flashing the message in big neon lights - to a bunch of SHEPHERDS, no less: I am
- sending a King who will not look like everyone expects. He will be born where the animals sleep; he will not have a place
- to live or a crown on his head; he will lay down his life and die, rather than fighting to win. And that's how he will redeem
- his people.
-
-

■ **PRAY:** *God, thank you for sending your Son to us as the perfect Shepherd King. Teach us to listen to his voice, follow his lead, and put our lives in his hands. May we always love this good Shepherd with all our hearts*

■ **SING!:** Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: I Kings 5:1-5; 6:11-14 (ESV)

Now Hiram king of Tyre sent his servants to Solomon when he heard that they had anointed him king in place of his father, for Hiram always loved David. And Solomon sent word to Hiram, "You know that David my father could not build a house for the name of the LORD his God because of the warfare with which his enemies surrounded him, until the LORD put them under the soles of his feet. But now the LORD my God has given me rest on every side. There is neither adversary nor misfortune. And so I intend to build a house for the name of the LORD my God, as the LORD said to David my father, 'Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house for my name.' Now the word of the LORD came to Solomon, "Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes and obey my rules and keep all my commandments and walk in them, then I will establish my word with you, which I spoke to David your father. And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people Israel." So Solomon built the house and finished it.

ENTER THE STORY:

From the initial pattern for the tabernacle given to Moses in the wilderness to the glorious temple Solomon built, the goal was the same. In Exodus 25:7 God says, "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." God's desire was to live and dwell among his people, so they could know him and worship him. But since he is also holy, his very presence is not only dangerous but deadly for sinful or impure people. The sanctuary God had them build was the answer to this problem, but there were still restrictions.

In the pattern God gave them, there was a special room at the very back called the "Holy of Holies." This room was separated from all other areas, and protected by a big, thick veil because God's presence dwelled there in the form of a cloud that hovered inside and over that room. This is the same cloud that revealed God's presence and led the Israelites by day when they were leaving Egypt. When this cloud came to "dwell" over the tabernacle, the Israelites referred to it as God's "shekinah" glory which just means "God's settled or dwelling glory."

No-one was allowed in that room, except on one special occasion each year, and even then, it was *ONLY* the High Priest who was allowed in. He had to take incense and blood with him to cover his own sins before he could even offer other sacrifices for the sins of the people. This was just one of many regulations the High Priest had to go through on that day, but the point was clear...it is a sacred thing to walk into the presence of God, and it must be done cautiously, carefully, and exactly as God instructed.

There did come a point in time when, because of Israel's continued rebellion and disobedience, God's dwelling glory lifted up from the temple and left, never to return.

That is...until the day a young mother named Mary and her husband, Joseph, brought their newborn baby into the temple to dedicate him to the Lord. Upon laying eyes on the baby, a righteous man named Simeon, who had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he saw the Messiah, took the baby in his arms and prophesied that he would be, "...a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:32)

We refer to Jesus as "God in the flesh" because in Jesus, all the fullness of God's glory dwells...so when we read, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), we can see the connection ALL the way back to the original tabernacle of God's dwelling.

Through Jesus, God's presence had come to dwell (or tabernacle), among his people again. But Jesus would not have to hide his glory in a cloud or behind a veil...it was on full display for all to see. But God desires to be even closer to his people, so before Jesus left, he promised to send another helper and manifestation of God's presence. This helper would not dwell *AMONG* God's people, but *INSIDE* God's people. God's "shekinah" glory is settled within Jesus' followers as a guarantee of God's promises fulfilled. And the Holy Spirit dwelling in us makes our bodies God's living temple (*1 Corinthians 6:20*). With this assurance inside of us, God's presence will always be with us; he will never leave us or forsake us.

PRAY: *God, thank you for sending your Son Jesus to dwell among us and show us what you are like, and thank you for giving us your Holy Spirit, so that we can always have your presence with us. Keep us close to you always. Amen.*

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: I Kings 18:17-40 (ESV)

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals. Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel.

And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." And all the people answered, "It is well spoken."

Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it." And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down. Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, "Israel shall be your name," and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed. And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." And he said, "Do it a second time." And they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time." And they did it a third time. And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water. And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God." And Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape." And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there.

ENTER THE STORY:

The nation of Israel was designed by God to be a theocracy, which is a system of government where Yahweh is King and Israel is his chosen people. But remember, it was designed to be more than just a government...it was a covenant

partnership, like a marriage – Yahweh, the groom and Israel, the bride. As we’ve already seen, in this covenant there were rules. God gave them ten commandments that would guide them to know how to live with him and worship him. The first commandment is *“You shall have no other gods before me,”* and the second has a similar idea... *“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God...”* (Ex. 20:3-5).

This seems pretty straight forward, but there was just one problem... Israel struggled to be faithful to Yahweh. They were tempted by everything. If it sparkled and shimmered and offered something that looked better, they chased after it and worshiped it with their whole heart, to the devastation of their groom.

The horrors of idolatry continued with King Solomon and his many foreign wives, and as a consequence, God divided the once united nation of Israel into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom kept the name Israel and the southern kingdom became known as Judah. Neither kingdom was truly faithful, but the sin of idolatry stained the entire history of the northern kingdom, which saw ALL nineteen kings fail to obey and follow God. Every single king led the nation of Israel further and further into idolatry and further and further away from the heart of Yahweh.

It is during the reign of the seventh king of the northern kingdom of Israel, King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, that we pick up in our story today with a prophet named Elijah doing battle with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. 850 prophets to two false gods, and Elijah is the ONLY prophet left for Yahweh...or so he thinks. We find out soon enough that there are other prophets God has preserved for himself, but Elijah doesn’t know that and he is out to prove to the people that Yahweh is the ONLY true God.

This leads to a contest between Baal and Yahweh. It’s not a fair fight, of course, because Baal isn’t real. This god is a figment of their imagination, a mutation from a culture that believes in gods with limited power. One god to help with fertility...one god to help with crops...one god to keep you healthy, and on and on it goes. And then there is Yahweh, who claims to do it all with ease, because he is omnipotent and omniscient...all powerful and all knowing.

Baal’s time to shine comes and goes with no response from their “god.” When Elijah’s time comes, however, he wants to leave no doubt who the real God is. He builds a twelve stone altar to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, and he has them pour twelve buckets of water on the wood until it is completely soaked.

He then prays and asks God to show up and reveal his presence and power...and God does just that. Holy fire from heaven rains down on the altar and consumes everything...the offering, the wood, the stones, the dust on the ground AND the water in the trench, because *OUR GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE* (Hebrews 12:29).

And when the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.” They were convinced, and they believed...at least for a while. Unfortunately, their faithfulness wouldn’t last forever. It wouldn’t be long before Israel would turn away from Yahweh again, and look to other gods to satisfy their deepest needs.

Our idols looks a little different today...but our hearts chase after them just the same.

As we sing in the song “Come Thou Fount,” we are all prone to wander and leave the God we love, so we must look to something better to satisfy our needs and hold us close. By God’s grace we have Jesus, who is the bread of life; *and said, “...whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”* (John 6:35)

He alone can satisfy our deepest longings...so let’s continue feasting on his Word this season as we look forward to the celebration of the arrival of the Bread of Life!

SING/PRAY: *Let's combine our prayer time today with our song. Click [here](#) to sing this song as a prayer to God!*



READ: Isaiah 8:22, 9:1-7 (ESV)

And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness.

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. *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.*

ENTER THE STORY:

Throughout the history of the divided kingdoms in Israel, there have been many prophets who brought messages from God to the people, but there is one in particular who carried MORE messages about the promised Messiah than any of the other prophets, and that was Isaiah. He was a prophet to Israel somewhere between 783 BC to 686 BC.

During Isaiah's ministry, the northern kingdom of Israel was on the brink of collapse. They had rejected God's covenant and were heavily involved in worshiping idols and other false gods, so God raised up the Assyrians to conquer them for their ongoing rebellion and wickedness. In chapter 8, Isaiah warns of the impending devastation from the Assyrians, but then chapter 9 opens with a message of HOPE... *"But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish."*

This is a STARK contrast. The people had been walking in darkness, but God had not forgotten them, and their rescuer was coming.

In literature and poetry, darkness can represent many things: blindness, ignorance, or even wickedness. In many ways, light stands opposed to darkness. Light illuminates, light brings knowledge, and light represents goodness and righteousness. It makes sense then why Jesus called himself the light of the world and said "...Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Jesus IS the child that Isaiah said will be born for us. He is the righteous branch from Jesse's stump, who will take up the throne of David. And his reign will be marked by PEACE! The angels even announced to the shepherds on the night Jesus was born, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

This is the hope of Advent. We are waiting for the return of our king, and when he comes there will be no more gloom. So whatever darkness we are facing, we can have confidence in this: a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace is on his way to rescue us!

PRAY: Heavenly Father, sometimes we feel like we are the ones walking in darkness, stumbling about trying to make sense of this world. Shine on us, God, and lift our eyes up to the hope of the coming Lord! Amen.

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Isaiah 11:1-12 (ESV)

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious. In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that remains of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. He will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

ENTER THE STORY:

On the very first day of Advent, we began our journey at the stump of Jesse's Tree, and today we return to it. But this time, we gain additional insight. We've already read Isaiah's prophecy about the righteous branch from Jesse's stump and we learned what type of ruler he will be. But now we get a glimpse into what this new kingdom will be like...and if we're honest, it not only seems improbable, but altogether impossible.

Wolves dwelling with lambs? Cows and bears grazing together? Lions eating straw? Children playing with poisonous snakes? Are we to assume these descriptions are literal, or just literary devices used to paint a picture? It's an interesting question for sure, and one we aren't likely to completely answer today, but it all stems from one verse buried in the middle of the passage. *"They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."*

Whether we know it or not...this is the KEY to unlocking this passage.

In Isaiah chapter 9, we learned that when Jesus comes to usher in a new kingdom, there will be peace. In fact Isaiah 9:7 says, *"Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end."* When we connect that to this idea that *"the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD,"* we see that the changes Jesus' presence brings to this new kingdom extend to all of creation...possibly even the animals.

Paul reinforces this idea of creation being made new again in *Romans 8:19-22b*, *"For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."*

Death and suffering, even in the animal realm, are symptoms of a sin-soaked creation, but Isaiah 11 gives us hope and points us to a future where suffering will be no more, and peace will rule.

It is difficult to imagine a future like this isn't it? Even impossible?

There's that word again...*impossible*. It hangs out there at the end of that sentence like a challenge for God, yet we know this wouldn't be difficult for the one who spoke everything into existence. He already created a world like this in the garden, and like a bookend to the story...God's Word closes in Revelation with a brilliant vision of all things restored.

"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." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son." (Revelation 21:1-7)

(For a fuller view of this kingdom, go back and read ALL of Revelation 21-22).

Can you see it? Can you imagine a world where everything is made right again?

In this new kingdom where Jesus, the Root of Jesse, reigns, all of this improbability becomes not just probable but actual. Isaiah's prophecy is not make believe, and it's not a fairy tale. This is what we have to look forward to!

PRAISE GOD!!

PRAY: *Jesus, we long for your kingdom. We long for you to make all the wrongs right, and to call to an end all of the death and suffering that causes our hearts such pain. Come quickly, Lord. Amen.*

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Jonah 3:1-4:4, 11 (ESV)

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

"And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

ENTER THE STORY:

- Jonah – a story about a man getting swallowed by a huge fish, right? Well, sort of, but not really. That is actually only a tiny part of the story, and it doesn't even drive the MAIN plot.
- No, the story of Jonah is about a prophet who knew EXACTLY who Yahweh was... a merciful, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, kind of God. The kind of God who is delighted when he gets to relent from bringing disaster on people. That was NOT a message Jonah wanted to take to the people of Nineveh, a city in the Assyrian Empire, and Israel's sworn enemy.
- Nevertheless, God asked him to do just that. He sent Jonah to call out their wickedness and evil because he was ready to bring judgment on them, but just as quickly as the request came in, Jonah headed in the opposite direction, because he KNEW that if the people repented, God would relent, and Jonah wanted God to punish them.
- In fact, when he boarded a ship headed in the opposite direction and a huge storm came, he knew exactly what was happening and WHO was causing it! He said to the sailors, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land." Some scholars have noted that it's possible Jonah asked the sailors to throw him in the sea because he would have rather DROWNED than see the Ninevites receive God's mercy. If that was the case, Jonah wasn't sacrificing himself because he was repentant, he was STILL doing his best to get away from God. The fish was God's ironic rescue plan to humble his rebellious and disobedient prophet.
- Go back and read Jonah 1:16. Did you notice that God gets glory even from Jonah's sinful jaunt to Tarshish because the sailors acknowledge Yahweh as Lord and make vows to him?

Jonah, in trying to avoid sharing God's mercy with foreigners, ends up sharing God's mercy with the foreign sailors.

God must truly laugh at our foolish attempts to do things our way, especially when it directly contradicts his will!

Jonah must have learned his lesson, because once he was vomited up on dry land and God asked him a second time to go to Nineveh, he obeyed. He only went one's day journey into the city, and relayed a short, eight word sermon that went something like this, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown."

It's not the most eloquent gospel sermon, is it?

Now, Jonah might seem like the WORST prophet ever, but this story is recorded for a reason, and we would do well to pay attention. This is a story about repentance—or lack thereof—since we can't be sure Jonah actually repented.

Repentance has been described many different ways, but the essence of it is, "turning away from something; or a complete change of mindset." It is a necessary piece to salvation, and it is more than just letting go of something, it is picking something else up. In order to be saved, we must let go of our own ideas and desires, and pick up God's ideas and God's desires and hold them as our own. It also involves a relinquishing of control...over our wealth, our time, our calling, our will, and even our life.

True repentance always involves action...like, for example, what we see with the people of Nineveh. They humbled themselves by taking off their nice clothes and putting on itchy, stinky, uncomfortable sackcloth. They fasted, and they prayed, calling out to Yahweh just in case he was feeling extra merciful. And he was...to Jonah's dismay and disappointment.

This is the posture that is APPROPRIATE before Yahweh! When he sees true repentance, he always responds with mercy, compassion, forgiveness and steadfast love.

It's the same posture some wise men took many, many years later when they brought gifts to a newborn baby...

humbling themselves before the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the Root of Jesse, and the future King.

That same baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, would grow up and tell the people that he was greater than Jonah! Greater because he did *NOT* run away from God when he was asked to do something hard. He was not selfish with his own life. He obeyed and freely offered it up to redeem ALL mankind, not just the Israelites!

Just like Jonah spent three days in a dark fish belly...as good as dead, Jesus spent three days in a dark tomb...actually dead.

And just like the big fish spit Jonah back out on dry land – that dark tomb couldn't hold the Light of the World forever, so after three days, it spit him out (*metaphorically, of course*) alive and well, because God had raised him from the dead!

Jesus has gone through the hard things and overcome them, and he did that so that we can follow in his steps. This season, let's remember that even though it is not always easy to obey God, it is always worth it.

Has God called you to do something you don't want to do? Or are you currently doing something for God that you aren't happy about? Don't be like Jonah, who finally obeyed but didn't experience real joy because of his cold heart. You can trust that whatever God asks you to do, he will equip you to do it, and will give you the strength you need to see it through. We can find TRUE JOY in the hard things because we have experienced God's great love for us!

PRAY: God, we are SO thankful that your love and mercy are for ALL who repent and believe. Help us find true joy in doing the hard things you've called us to do. Thank you Jesus, for being a much greater Jonah. Amen.

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Esther 4:10-17 (ESV)

Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days." And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

ENTER THE STORY:

Throughout their history, the Jews have had many enemies who wanted to wipe them off the face of the earth. In fact, the only reason there are Jews living in Persia is because they had been conquered and taken into captivity by Babylon many years earlier. King Cyrus had decreed that the Jews could return home and rebuild their city, but a remnant chose to continue living in Persia.

Cue the bad guy in the story – Haman – a proud and arrogant man, who, after being insulted by one Jewish man, decided the just retribution was to kill them all. This is especially troublesome when we realize how easy it was for Haman to convince the king to issue an edict in favor of his proposal. It does set up quite a dramatic storyline, though, since a young Jewish girl, who had hidden her identity from the king, was now the new Queen of Persia.

The drama culminates with one of the most famous lines in all of Scripture *"And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"* Mordecai is drawing Esther's attention to the bigger picture – the unseen element in this story. It was NOT an accident that she was chosen to join the king's harem. It was NOT an accident that the king favored her above the other women, and it was NOT an accident that the king chose her to be his queen.

There was a much greater power at work in her life. It's God, of course, but one of the most interesting things about the book of Esther is that God is never mentioned. Not even one time! Yet, we *KNOW* his influence is there, and we can be sure he is involved, because these are still his chosen people – descendants of Abraham and part of the covenant blessings and promises.

In the end, Esther showed incredible courage, and decided to accept whatever fate God had for her, *"If I perish, I perish."* She was willing to risk her life in order to save her people, because she finally understood that her position in the Persian government was given to her for a purpose...so she could save others. By God's grace, the king did extend his golden scepter and spared Esther and she did convince the king to intervene so that her people were spared.

God might not get credit in writing, but those of us who have read the Old Testament stories *KNOW* that his divine intervention is all over this story, which feels eerily similar to Joseph.

- It's another example of God's providence at work behind the scenes. Evil men always intend to harm, and there are times
- when God allows it because it accomplishes a greater purpose. God is *ALWAYS* working things out and moving people
- into positions where they can influence much larger outcomes for the good of those around them. We see this in both of
- these stories and many others, but God's ultimate plan is to save us from something much worse than physical death!
- In verse 14 Mordecai says something more prophetic than he probably realizes: *"For if you keep silent at this time, relief*
- *and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place."* Even though the Jews in Persia were saved from the evil plot of
- Haman, their relief and deliverance was only temporary, because it was based in this world.
- When Jesus came into this world as a tiny little baby, God made into flesh, he brought TRUE relief and deliverance. It
- cannot come from anywhere else. This is what we celebrate at Christmas. Spending time with family is great, and giving
- and receiving gifts is fun, but our deep, abiding joy comes from knowing that our salvation rests in the hands of our great
- deliverer! All of God's people can collectively breathe a sigh of relief because the wait is over!
-

■ **PRAY:** *God, thank you for always working in our lives, even when we can't see it. Give us courage like Esther, when*
• *you call us to take big risks for your kingdom, and thank you for sending us Jesus, our true relief and Great Deliverer!*
• *Amen.*
•

■ **SING!:** Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Micah 5:2-5a (ESV)

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace.

ENTER THE STORY:

From the outside, there was nothing special about this little town called Bethlehem. Out of all the mighty clans of Judah, Bethlehem was the smallest, which usually meant it was the least important as well. Yet, it is CENTRAL to the Christmas story, just as it has been in many of the other stories we've read along the way.

It was the town Naomi and Ruth returned to when they had no where else to go, and the place where Ruth met her kinsman redeemer, Boaz. Their union continued the lineage of Jesse's family tree.

It was the town where David was born, the shepherd king from among the sons of Jesse, who was also the smallest and most insignificant of his brothers.

And it was the town where Jesus, the future King of the world, was born. Just like the ordinary town he was born in, he came in the most ordinary way...in a stable outside with the animals.

Isn't it just like God to use this tiny, insignificant town to bring his own Son into this world? God doesn't determine WORTH by the world's standards, and he isn't tempted by the biggest, brightest and shiniest cities with the most to offer. God is in the business of using the weakest, the poorest, and the most insignificant to reveal his glory to the world.

So out of Bethlehem, whose name means "House of Bread," will come the "Bread of Life" himself, the Christ child who proclaims during his earthly ministry "...whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." (John 6:35)

And out of Ephrathah, whose name means "fruitful," comes the One who is the first-fruits of our salvation, giving us hope that one day, we too will be raised to eternal life just like him.

From the outside, there was nothing special about this little town called Bethlehem, and THAT was the point.

Our song for today is "O Little Town of Bethlehem." As you listen or sing along, pay close attention to the lyrics!

Oh 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.

PRAY: God, thank you for helping us see worth in the things this world despises as weak and useless. Use us this season, Lord, to share your love and glory with others. Amen.

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Luke 1:5-25 (ESV)

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

ENTER THE STORY:

We are twenty two days into this advent, and we finally made it to the New Testament and to the first event that signals the start of something new and exciting, but before we talk about Zechariah, we have to back up a few hundred years.

We first need to understand what preceded the events that led to Christ's birth before we can grasp how the people felt in real time as these events happened. You see, between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament there are approximately 400 years where nothing is recorded in scripture. God sent one final message through the prophet Malachi, and then he went silent...no more visions, no more dreams, no more visits from angels, and no more prophets or messages. There were many interesting and noteworthy things that happened during this period of silence, including the miracle of Hanukkah, so it is reasonable to assume that God was still involved and overseeing the circumstances, he just wasn't vocal about it.

This would have been devastating for the people of Israel!

God had been communicating with them in one way or another for over a thousand years. His silence probably caused many of them to wonder if he still loved them and planned to rescue them from their enemies, which, during Zechariah's time, were the Romans.

After 400 years of silence, an angel shows up in the temple with a message from God.

Can you imagine how the people felt when they realized what had happened to Zechariah? God had RETURNED! This was a pivotal moment for them, but it also explains why Zechariah's initial response was to be afraid. Remember, he had only read about angels. He had never been in the presence of one before.

Have you ever been so shocked or confused by something you saw that you tried blinking and rubbing your eyes to make sure what you saw was REAL? That's what I imagine happened with Zechariah, but he soon found out that he had nothing to fear.

Gabriel's first words were the traditional greeting of an angel with good news, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard..." What prayer had been heard? Was it the same prayer Abraham and Sarah had prayed many years earlier – that God would give them a child? Well, YES, but in that exact moment, Zechariah was performing one of the most solemn, once-in-a-lifetime tasks for a priest: burning incense in front of the veil in the Holy Place. This means he would also have been offering up the traditional prayers for the salvation of Israel and the world, and those prayers were also going to be answered!

Gabriel's announcement looks forward, but it also looks backward because, just like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth were unable to have children and were past the age of childbearing. This is an intentional parallel by the author to connect these two stories!

What is the link? Zechariah's offspring would pave the way for God's fulfillment of his promise to Abraham...that one of his descendants would bless the whole world.

Moreover, when Gabriel prophesied to Zechariah that his son would walk in the power and spirit of Elijah, he was drawing another parallel to the final verses in the Old Testament: Malachi 4:5-6, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

It was all starting to come together! The prophecies from the Old Testament were beginning to unfold right before Zechariah's eyes, and even though he had every reason to believe, his concern for the details caused him to question. In fact, the question he asked was the EXACT same question Abraham asked God when he was told he would inherit the promised land... "How will I know?" In other words, "How can I be sure this will happen?"

This reaction resulted in Zechariah's own period of silence that would last until the day his "just-like-Elijah" baby was born. The baby whose voice would not be silent but would cry out from the wilderness and make ready a people for the Lord. And when this baby arrived, Zechariah would do just as Gabriel told him and give his baby the name John, which means "Yahweh is gracious."

Isn't this exactly what we celebrate at Christmas? The gracious nature of God - who loves so deeply that he is willing to go to ANY LENGTH to rescue his people, even if it means sending his Son into our story to meet us where we are. That Son will come in the most humble of ways but rather than offer up incense before the veil in the holy of holies, he will offer himself up on our behalf.

PRAY: God, you are the master storyteller, and you have created a beautiful tapestry of stories, weaving your glory and your grace throughout every page. Open our eyes this season to all the ways your grace is evident in our lives every single day! Amen.

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Matthew 3:1-12 (ESV)

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'"

ENTER THE STORY:

Throughout the Old Testament, we see God's prophets do things that other people might think are "crazy." Ezekiel laid on his side for 390 days while eating a wheat and bean bread. Isaiah walked around naked for three years. Hosea married a prostitute, and Jeremiah walked into the king's court wearing an oxen yoke, just to name a few. All of these crazy stunts were actually expected because God's prophets were called to communicate their messages in a way that would get the attention of the people.

Now it makes sense why John's "crazy" wasn't actually that out of the ordinary. Camel hair clothes and a weird diet? That was pretty mild compared to his predecessors. Regardless, God had not sent a prophet to Israel for hundreds of years, so naturally, everyone was interested to hear what he had to say.

John's message played on repeat over and over again: Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.

John had ONE JOB. He was supposed to prepare the people for the arrival of the promised Messiah...to help them get their hearts ready. You might think the best way to do that would be to preach about God's love, or his grace and mercy, but that was not his message. It was always about repentance.

It was the same message as Jonah, who warned the people of Nineveh that destruction was coming, and it was the same message as the prophets of old, who urged the people to turn away from their sin and turn their hearts back to God.

Many years earlier, after the people of Israel had broken their covenant with Yahweh for the last time, God removed his presence. The people had been waiting for his return, and it was finally time. THE BRIDEGROOM WAS COMING, and John's message of repentance was necessary in order for the bride to be ready.

This is true for anyone who wants to surrender to Yahweh and receive the gift of salvation. Everyone must approach the King in humility, on bended knee, begging for mercy just like the Ninevites did, and when God sees our repentant heart yearning for more of him, he grants us the gift of his presence. This Christmas, let's ask God to cleanse our hearts so we, too, are ready for his arrival!

PRAY: God, you are everything we need and more, so we humble our hearts and beg for your mercy. Help us incorporate repentance as a regular part of daily life so our hearts are always clean and ready for more of you. Amen.

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Luke 1:26-38 (ESV)

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.

ENTER THE STORY:

The same angel who visited Zechariah in the temple now goes to Nazareth, to bring a message from God to a young Jewish girl named Mary.

The name of this tiny village of Nazareth, a town that isn't mentioned anywhere in the Old Testament, could hold a clue to the identity of this promised child that Mary will bear. Nazareth (Hebrew-Netzarit) may come from the Hebrew word *netzer*, which means "branch" or "shoot."

Can you see where this is going?

We've seen this a few times in our Advent, so you should be very familiar with it by now. This is connected to the prophecy in Isaiah 11, that speaks of a "*shoot that will come forth from the stump of Jesse's tree*." Is it a coincidence that God sends Gabriel to the city of Nazareth, or "*city of the Branch*?" Of course not! Gabriel's message to Mary confirms this!

This child is the One everyone has been waiting for – the promised Messiah. He is the royal descendant of David, the branch from Jesse's tree, and the Son of the Most High. He is set apart from everyone that has come before him and everyone that will come after him.

This title, "Most High," is the Hebrew phrase "El Elyōn." It is used in the Old Testament to refer to God as the King of kings and Lord of lords. It emphasizes his supremacy and sovereignty over all things. As Son of the Most High King, all of those things are also true of Jesus. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last. He is the firstborn over all creation and he is worthy of all the honor and praise and glory.

This was the message Gabriel shared with Mary, but why her? What was special about Mary?

From the outside, maybe nothing. Her family wasn't wealthy or prominent in society, and as we've already seen, Nazareth wasn't famous in that way either.

Doesn't this fit within God's pattern though? God loves to use the weak and insignificant to reveal his glory!

- Mary had surely heard the prophecies about the Messiah her whole life. She knew how long her people had waited, so
- she gladly offered up her body as a vessel that would safely carry the Living God to term.
- *Most of us have heard this story a time or two, but have you ever stopped to wonder why God chose to bring Jesus into*
- *our world in such a unique way?*
- The answer lies all the way back in Genesis chapter 3. God's promise to Eve was that her "seed" would strike the head of
- the serpent, the tempter who led her and Adam (and with them, all of humanity) into sin. By having his own Son born of
- a human mother, but not a human father, God was shouting loud and clear, "THIS is the promised snake-crusher! THIS is
- the one who will destroy sin!" And God would take his Son's new, made-into-flesh body and place him into the womb of
- a young girl who was a descendant of David and Abraham...bringing the promised One into the world a different way.
- He did not come from sinful man, and he never knew sin. All of that was necessary so that, one day, he could bless the
- whole world by being made into sin so that we could, "...become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)
- *May God's precise attention to detail NEVER cease to amaze us. This is, truly, the most incredible story ever told.*
-  **PRAY:** *Most High God, you are the supreme and sovereign Lord over all, and we praise you for that. You are worthy of*
- *all of our praise and honor. Give us servant hearts like Mary this season and help us make space in our hearts for you.*
- *May we joyfully accept your calling on our life and receive it with gratitude and humility. Amen.*
-  **SING!:** Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Matthew 1:18-25 (ESV)

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

ENTER THE STORY:

Have you ever struggled to fall asleep at night because you were struggling with a really difficult decision? I imagine that's what it was like for Joseph when he first found out Mary was pregnant.

We are not privy to the conversation they had where she explained what happened and how she got pregnant. We also don't know Joseph's initial reaction, but there were really only two options: Either Mary had cheated on him with another man and was lying, or she was telling the truth, and she really was carrying God's Son. It's obvious from the story that Joseph assumed it was option one, but in the midst of his decision to divorce her, we learn something important about him. He was a humble and kind man, and he chose to handle the situation in a way many others in that time would not have; a quiet divorce, to spare Mary from further shame.

It's important to remind ourselves that these are real people walking through an incredibly difficult situation. One no other couple in the history of the world has ever had to navigate. If we're honest, it's easy to relate to Joseph. Mary's story seems absurd, and most of us probably would have responded exactly the same way, or worse. Yet, God steps in and shows immense patience and grace with Joseph in the midst of his doubts.

An angel came to him in a dream and confirmed Mary's story. The baby in the womb of Joseph's soon-to-be-wife, was conceived not in infidelity, but in holy fidelity by God himself. More than that, the incarnation of Jesus would be God's irrevocable pledge of fidelity to all mankind. In Jesus, God bound himself to us forever. This is why Isaiah called Jesus "Immanuel - God with us."

Joseph didn't need to be afraid. God chose him to be Jesus' earthly father. Joseph would act as a rescuer of sorts, by taking Mary as his wife and restoring her reputation. And when their baby was born, they would do exactly as the angel had told them and name him Jesus, which means "Yahweh saves" because that is exactly what Jesus came to do...to seek and to save the lost.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, we so often feel alone and empty in this world, afraid to step out in faith and trust that you will be protect us and provide for us. Remind us this Christmas season that your presence is always with us through your Son, Jesus - who is our Immanuel!

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together!

**READ:** Luke 2:1-5 (ESV)

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.

ENTER THE STORY:

God is in control of all things. ALL THINGS. If you have been in church for any length of time, you have probably heard this sentiment many times. The question for all of us is "Do we really believe it?" Do we really believe that God can control the events of history down to the tiniest details?

Do we think it was just by chance that Caesar Augustus called for a census, at that exact moment in time? Did it just so happen that Mary and Joseph were traveling to Bethlehem—the very place Micah prophesied the Messiah was to be born? Luke doesn't seem to think so, and to emphasize this point, he includes specific, key historical details. He includes the name of the Roman emperor, the name of the Roman governor over that specific region, and the connection Joseph has with David.

The truth is, God can use whomever he wants to bring about his plan...even a pagan emperor. This should not be new information. We have seen this numerous times throughout the stories of the Old Testament. Many kings and rulers have thought their actions were based on their own decisions and desires, only to later find out that they were directed by the very God they were trying to defy.

Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will."

God's plan all along was for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, to descendants of the long-ago king David and part of Jesse's tree, bringing about the fulfillment of many promises and prophecies. This is why God set his plans into the heart of a great Roman emperor, who brought about the very thing God desired.

Many of us claim to believe in the sovereignty of God; that he not only reigns over all things, but also asserts himself into his story in order to bring about his purpose and will. But we typically limit the extent to which God does this to the BIG events that impact the overall direction of the Biblical narrative. For example, it is easy to believe that God is in control of the location of Jesus' birth, of how and when he died, and of how and when he was raised from the dead. After all, without those extremely important events, the prophecies in the Old Testament would remain incomplete. God's word would fail, and there would be no victory waiting for us at the end.

The real question we must wrestle with today is, "Does God's rule extend even to the smallest parts of our lives, and if so, how do we respond to that knowledge?"

God's sovereign control over everything in this life should be the single greatest source of peace and comfort because it means there are no random events, accidents, or coincidences. God is always controlling the circumstances in our life for his glory and for our good. Even if we are unaware of it, God has already, on numerous occasions throughout our lives, acted out of sovereign love to lead us where he wants us to go, and to shape us and conform us to the image of his Son.

- If you've ever wondered what God's will for your life is...this is it! His doesn't just want us to experience happiness and
- blessings on this earth. Everything God brings into our lives is to make us more like Jesus. This is why Jesus told his
- disciples to pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done." When we are conformed to the image of Jesus, we are a part
- of bringing God's kingdom into the here and now.
- We have seen God's sovereignty throughout this Advent, as we've looked back at the stories of the Old Testament and
- seen the foreshadowing of Jesus' first and second coming. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we will also celebrate the
- fulfillment of so many of God's promises. But hopefully, we have also seen the benefit of God's sovereignty in each of our
- lives.
- Who knew there was so much to learn from a seemingly coincidental census from a Roman Emperor?
-
-

■ **PRAY:** *God, once again we find ourselves in awe of your sovereignty and control over every detail of our lives. May the knowledge of this bring us immense comfort and joy, and may we rest easy tonight knowing that you are always on your throne, working everything out for your glory and for our good. Amen.*

■ **SING!:** Click [here](#) to sing together!



READ: Luke 2:6-21 (ESV)

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.

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

ENTER THE STORY:

It is ironic that the title for this section of the devotions is "Enter the story," because that is *EXACTLY* what God did when he sent Jesus into our world. Jesus is Immanuel - God with us. He brought the very presence of God *TO US* to allow his people to experience him first hand and to know what God is like.

On the night of Jesus' birth, God himself entered the story he had been writing for thousands of years.

Philippians 2:6-7 says it like this, "...though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

God's timing is one of the most interesting aspects of the Bible. Often, he allows his people to endure incredibly difficult things for long periods of time before he steps in to deliver them. I'm sure we can recall many stories like this, yet we can be sure that God's timing is always perfect, even if we don't understand the "why." But think about this – over the thousands of years between the sin of Adam and Eve and the birth of Jesus, God stayed faithful to his promise to send a Redeemer. The Christmas story is really one BIG promise fulfilled, carrying with it a message from God to all of his children, that in his perfect timing, he will fulfill every other promise he has ever made to us. This is the hope we have in the story of Christmas: hope that may be deferred at times, but that will always reach it's full and final fulfillment in Jesus!

One of the goals in this Advent was to walk a mile in the shoes of those who came before us so that we would feel BOTH the longing and the hope they felt as they waited for the Messiah. There is, however, one more theme that we've seen over and over again that I hope you picked up on.

God is not like us and his ways are different from ours.

A king born in a manger? Who would have chosen that for their grand entrance? The announcement of his birth? Surely that would go to the wealthiest, most influential and important people, right? Nope! It was to shepherds in a field.

Have you ever stopped to wonder why God announced the birth of his Son to shepherds? We have read many prophecies and stories that point to Jesus' second coming, where he will sit on David's throne as the Root of Jesse and rule and reign as King, but that is his second coming. We are still waiting for that day.

TODAY, we are celebrating his first coming and Jesus was no ordinary baby. He was the perfect, spotless Lamb of God, sent in the most humble of positions, "...not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28). THIS is why God sent his angels to shepherds to announce the birth of his Son. Jesus fulfilled many promises with his life. He perfectly obeyed God's law and demonstrated to all of us how to walk out our purpose as image bearers who represent God the Father. He did everything with grace and truth, loving the unlovable, and calling sinners out of their sin. But ultimately, Jesus was born to die.

What a joyous feeling we should have, as we celebrate one of the culminating events in our historical faith... God entering our story as Immanuel, the promised Messiah and foretold King from David's line. After all, God's people had waited a *LONG* time for his arrival. It feels like we've been waiting with them, but looming just a short distance away on our calendars is a very different celebration. A gruesome event that results in the death of our beloved Messiah. Every year, they are mere months apart for us. Moments it seems.

From the time we celebrate the Advent of the promised Messiah to the time when we mourn his death on the cross is about 103 days give or take. This seems like a such a stark turn of events, with an entirely different mood and feel to it, but we cannot, and should not completely separate them in our mind because they are connected in the most complex and beautiful way.

When Jesus was born under that Bethlehem star, he brought light into a dark world. We saw this prophesied in Isaiah 9! But when God's enemy strikes the Messiah's heel, the world will go dark again as we mourn his death. But Easter is coming! Darkness has NO POWER over light. When Jesus has paid the price for our sin and defeated death once for all, he ascended victorious into heaven to the praise of all the angelic host, once again bringing light into a dark world. With Jesus' resurrection, God fulfills another long-awaited promise of the Serpent Crusher!

Hebrews 2:14-15 says, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."

This is what we celebrate at Christmas! Our Savior has finally arrived!

Today, as we participate in all of our holiday traditions today, let's bring Jesus into them!

As we look around at all the beautiful, sparkly lights on houses and on our tree, let's remember that Jesus is the Light of the world, and whoever follows him will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life!

As we feast on our Christmas dinners, let's remember that Jesus is the bread of life and whoever comes to him will not be hungry, and whoever believes in him will never thirst. Let's pray that God would develop in us a hunger and thirst for more of his righteousness.

As we give each other gifts and presents, let's remember that God is the ULTIMATE gift giver! He has given us the BEST gift ever in his Son, who paid the price for our sin so that we could enter the presence of God!

PRAY: *God, you are amazing and worthy of all our praise and glory. As we enjoy all of the beautiful celebrations today with family and friends, help us remember that Jesus, our Immanuel, is also our Sacrificial Lamb, the Good Shepherd and our future King!*

SING!: Click [here](#) to sing together and for a video version of today's devotional!

November 28



December 1



December 4



December 7



November 29



December 2



December 5



December 8



November 30



December 3



December 6



December 9



November 28

*A shoot will come up from the stump of
Jesse; from his roots a Branch will
bear fruit.*

Isaiah 11:1

The Shoot from Jesse's Tree

November 29

*I will stand at my watch and station
myself on the ramparts; I will look to
see what he will say to me...*

Habakkuk 2:1

The Watchtower

November 30

*So God created mankind in his own
image, in the image of God he created
them; male and female he
created them.*

Genesis 1:27

In the Beginning

December 1

*I will put enmity between you and the
woman, and between your offspring
and hers; he will crush your head, and
you will strike his heel.*

Genesis 3:15

The Serpent Crusher

December 2

*But Noah found favor in the eyes of
the LORD.*

Genesis 6:8

God Shows Mercy

December 3

*I will make you into a great nation, and
I will bless you; I will make your name
great, and you will be a blessing.*

Genesis 12:2

Abraham's Faith

December 4

*..."Look up at the sky and count the
stars...So shall your offspring be."*

Genesis 15:5

God's Covenant with Abraham

December 5

*"God has brought me laughter, and
everyone who hears about this will
laugh with me."*

Genesis 21:6

Son of Laughter

December 6

*So Abraham called that place The
LORD Will Provide...*

Genesis 22:14

God Provides a Substitute

December 7

*I am with you and will watch over you
wherever you go...*

Genesis 28:15

Jacob's Ladder

December 8

*You intended to harm me, but God
intended it for good...*

Genesis 50:20

Coat of Many Colors

December 9

*Oh, that their hearts would be inclined
to fear me and keep all my commands
always, so that it might go well with
them and their children forever.*

Deuteronomy 5:29

Engraved on His Hands

December 10



December 11



December 12



December 13



December 14



December 15



December 16



December 17



December 18



December 19



December 20



December 21



December 10

Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you...

Joshua 2:12

Scarlet Cord

December 11

...Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.

Ruth 1:16

Kinsman Redeemer

December 12

...The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

1 Samuel 16:7

Shepherd King

December 13

I will live among the Israelites and will not abandon my people Israel.

1 Kings 6:13

Living Temple

December 14

Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God.

1 Kings 18:24

Elijah's Contest

December 15

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

Isaiah 9:2

A Great Light

December 16

In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Isaiah 11:10

A New Kingdom

December 17

The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Jonah 3:5

Jonah & the Whale

December 18

...and who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?

Esther 4:14

The Golden Scepter

December 19

But you, Bethlehem...though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me One who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.

Micah 5:2

House of Bread

December 20

...Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him

John.

Luke 1:13

Zechariah & Elizabeth

December 21

...Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

Matthew 3:3

John the Baptist

December 22



December 23



December 24



December 25



December 22

...Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High...

Luke 1:30-32

Gabriel Visits Mary

December 23

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means "God with us").

Matthew 1:23

Joseph's Dream

December 24

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

Luke 2:1

Census in Bethlehem

December 25

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Luke 2:11-12

Our Savior Arrives!