

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 New International 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
December 4: God's Covenant with Abram	Genesis 15:1-6
December 5: Son of Laughter	Genesis 18:1, 9-15; 21:1-7
December 6: God Provides a Substitute	Genesis 22:1-14
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	Selections from 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, 6-7, 10-13; 2 Samuel 5:2b
December 13: Living Temple	1 Kings 5:1-5; 6:11-14
December 14: Elijah's Contest	I Kings 18:17-39
December 15: A Great Light	Isaiah 9:2, 6-7
December 16: A New Kingdom	Isaiah 11:1-10
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 5:2-4
December 20: Zechariah & Elizabeth	Luke 1:5-25
December 21: John the Baptist	Matthew 3:1-6
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 2:6-20



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

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist... 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.

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 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, *"Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot – YES, A new branch bearing fruit from the old root. In that day the heir to David's throne will be a banner of salvation to all the world. The nations will rally to him, and the land where he lives will be a glorious place."* (Isaiah 11:1,10 NLT)

This verse includes one of God's many titles: Yahweh Nissi - Banner of Salvation, and it is Jesus who fulfills this promise!

When all hope seems lost, and nothing but a dead stump remains, God again 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' family history and 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 (NIV)

*I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint...
I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.*

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 Habakkuk 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)

Unfortunately for Habakkuk, God's answer was not all that comforting. He basically 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 waited for God to explain.

A lot has changed since the time of Habakkuk, but his questions for God in this passage still ring 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 fix the problems and make our world right again.

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 that if our Christmas tree had no gifts, and there was no delicious Christmas dinner waiting or yummy treats in our stockings, 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 only Christ, would having Jesus 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, 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. 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 (NIV)

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

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 brought everything into existence by the commanding word of his mouth. For six days, he filled the world with everything it needed to grow and thrive and display his glory, but 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 that the nations will know "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 (NIV)

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. . . . And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” (Genesis 2:8-9, 16-17)

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (Genesis 3:1-7)

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, ‘Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And 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 3:13-15)

The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth 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 that 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 temporarily 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.
- **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. Thank you, Jesus, for giving up everything for us. May the good news of your gospel never grow old to us. Amen.*



READ: Selections from Genesis 6-9 (NIV)

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the LORD said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created –and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD." (Genesis 6:5-8)

God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out... I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you... Noah did everything just as God commanded him." (Genesis 6:13-14, 17-18, 22)

And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights... For forty days the flood kept coming on the earth, and as the waters increased they lifted the ark high above the earth... Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; people and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark. (Genesis 7:12, 17, 23)

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded... Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done." (Genesis 8:1, 20-21)

"I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you... Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life." (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, but 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 to 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 disrespectful
• 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 this new world.

• In this story, we saw 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. After Jesus finished the work God gave him, he returned to heaven, but he
• did not leave us without God's presence. He promised to send another helper; one who would guide us into all truth,
• convict of us our sins, and remind us of the things Jesus told us. That helper was the Holy Spirit, who is the very breath of
• God.

■ **PRAY:** *Lord, we admit that it is difficult for us to understand your anger towards sin, but 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 for sending*
• *us your Holy Spirit, who draws us close to you. Amen.*



READ: Genesis 12:1-7 (NIV)

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. 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. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."

So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

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. As a punishment for their pride, God scattered the people and confused their languages, but Abram and his family stayed close by. The place they were living was probably very civilized, with access to food and water, well-established homes and most of all, safety, and God called Abram to leave all of it behind and set out to a new place that he would 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 do it?

History is full of stories of people who have 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. 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 trusted 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!

Would you believe?

God starts something new when he calls Abram out of Ur. God's blessings will allow Abram to create a family, and out of that family will come a nation of people that will be God's chosen people. Out of *ONE* of the families within that nation, God will send his own Son to fulfill this huge promise to Abram that the whole world will be blessed through one of his descendants. 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. Lord, 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 15:1-6 (NIV)

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

ENTER THE STORY:

God made some BIG promises to Abram in chapter 12, and today we are seeing God give Abram a little bit more detail. God takes Abram outside and has him gaze up at the beautiful night sky full of twinkling stars and tells him to count the stars if he can because that is how many offspring he will have.

Have you ever tried to count the stars? It's impossible, isn't it? That's the point! God wanted Abram to know that he would have so many grandchildren, and great-grandchildren and so on, that it would be impossible to count them.

We've seen this word "offspring" 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. But remember, that word is actually referring to **ONE SPECIFIC MALE**. Is it Isaac? Yes and no. Isaac would be the **FIRST** of Abram's descendants with Sarai, but God's promise was much bigger than one descendant. Galatians 3:16 shows us 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."

Who is the special offspring God promised to Abram? Jesus! It's always been about Jesus!

It started with the promise of the Serpent Crusher, and now God continues that promise with Abram. This, friends, is what Abram believed. A single, future descendant that would come through his family and bless the entire world (Genesis 12:3). This is what Abram's faith rested on, and his faith in that special someone was "credited to him as righteousness!" Abram's legal status in heaven was changed and God gave him righteousness because of it!

When Jesus came to earth as a baby boy, those blessings were shared with everyone, and that includes us!!

In order to be saved today, we look back into the past and put our faith in the cross and what Christ accomplished for us with his death and resurrection. Abram had to put his faith forward into the future, but his faith still centered on that special seed that would come through his line... Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Savior.

Everyone from the history of time has been saved by faith through the grace of God! Everyone.

PRAY: Lord, your plan to send Jesus through Abram's family to bless the whole world is amazing, and we are so thankful. Please help us have faith like Abram and always believe your covenant promises! May we see these stories with new eyes over the next few weeks as we celebrate the Advent of Jesus Christ as a baby. Amen.



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

The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. . . "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?" Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son." Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh." (Genesis 18:1, 9-15)

Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." And she added, "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 that Abram is now referred to as Abraham, and Sarai is now Sarah? In Genesis 17, Abram and Sarai *STILL* don't have any children, so God ups the ante on his promise yet again and reveals 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" or "mother of kings", because she will produce nations and kings too.

Being given a new name with a powerful meaning was great, but Sarah wasn't worried about nations and kings. She just wanted one baby, and with each month that passed and still no baby, she was reminded that her body was failing to do its job.

Naturally, this caused Sarah to question God's plan. It seemed like it was too late. Too much time has passed... 24 years to be exact. Abraham was 99 years old, and she was 90!! They were OLD and GRAY! And so she wondered why did God wait so long? As old as she was, 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 a dead stump... he brought life from dust... 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 full of joy, because God had restored her laughter and knew everyone would laugh along with her.
- *This baby boy was well worth the 25 years it took for him to arrive.*
- Many years later, God would again accomplish another impossible feat with a young girl who was not yet married. And
- God would take his Son, fashion him into a tiny, baby boy, and by the power of the Holy Spirit place him in this young
- woman's belly. *"Jesus – The Word made into flesh."*
- What a remarkable way for Jesus to enter our world! 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 Abraham and Sarah 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 22:1-14, (NIV)

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

ENTER THE STORY:

Abraham's story takes an unexpected turn here, doesn't it? Take your son, your only son, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering. 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.*

After all, Isaac was Abraham's *ONLY* son, and the first phase 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 is the *BEST* teacher, and he knows how to help Abraham understand just how far a Father must go if they really want to save their children.

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, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you."

- There were only two options: either he would have to kill his only son, and God would bring him back to life, or God
- would provide a substitute that he could offer up instead. Either way, Abraham knew God would keep his word, and he
- trusted God. So, he saddled the donkey and set out on yet another journey, not knowing the whole story. 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 another story. In that story, we have another Father who had a Son that he loved
- very much, and he was also willing to take his only Son and offer him up as a sacrifice on that very same mountain. That
- Son would also carry his own wood up a long hill, but instead of God providing a substitute, he would BE the LAMB, and
- instead of getting caught in a thorn bush, 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 hold him, and after three
- days, he would come back again and be restored to his Father. Praise God!

• *Do you know who the Father is? Do you know who his only Son is? It's God and his Son, Jesus!*

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

- Don't miss him this Christmas season because while we celebrate his birth as the babe in a manger, he is also the lamb
- of God who takes away the sins of the world!

■ **PRAY:** *God, we are continuously amazed at how you weave together all of the stories in the Old Testament so that they reflect the beautiful sacrifice of your Son. 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, (NIV)

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."

ENTER THE STORY:

A few nights ago, we saw God take Abraham outside and tell him to look up at the sky and try to count the stars. God wanted him to know that, like the stars, he would, also, have such a big family that he wouldn't be able to count them. Isaac was the first son born into this BIG family, and then he had two sons, Jacob and Esau.

You couldn't have had two more different sons. Esau was big, strong, really hairy, and he liked to hunt. Jacob was not quite as big, maybe a little less strong, with much less hair, and he liked to cook. These two brothers did NOT get along very well, and after making some not-so-great decisions (like deceiving his father, Isaac, into giving him Esau's blessing), Jacob ended up running away.

One night when Jacob laid down to sleep under another sky full of stars, he had an AMAZING dream. He saw a stairway coming down from heaven with angels going up and down the ladder, and standing at the top of the ladder was Yahweh himself! Then Jacob heard a voice calling out to him. It was GOD speaking to him! God made *BIG* promises to Jacob. He promised to give him *SO MANY* children they would be like the dust of the earth. He told him that *ALL* the nations of the earth would be blessed through his family.

These are the EXACT SAME promises God made to Abraham about a special offspring who would come through his family and eventually bless the entire world.

Do you remember who that special someone was? It was Jesus! Now he would come through Jacob's family too!

At the end of this amazing dream, God told Jacob that he would be with him and would watch over him wherever he went. God promised NOT to leave him until he had kept ALL of his promises to him.

Have you ever had a dream while you were sleeping? Did you remember it when you woke up?

When Jacob woke up, he remembered his dream, and he KNEW God had been speaking to him. He was amazed at the wonderful promises God had made him, and he wanted to remember that special place, so he set up a stone pillar.

- He poured oil all over it and gave the place a new name so that he would never forget what God had promised him.
- 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," because that is where he saw the ladder connecting heaven and earth.* Where did the ladder lead to?
- The presence of God. But if we know anything about God, we know that NOBODY is allowed into his presence...
- *UNLESS...* they are made clean and forgiven of their sins.
- *Do you know who can make us clean and forgive us of our sins? Jesus!*
- This Christmas season, we need to understand that Jesus is our ladder! We have *NO WAY* to get to heaven without him.
- But when we put our faith in Jesus, the Serpent Crusher and promised seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we, too, can climb onto Jesus, and he will make sure we make it all the way to heaven!
- That special night under the stars changed Jacob, and it was all because he now trusted God, too, just like his father, Isaac and his grandfather, Abraham.

■ **PRAY:** *God, forgive us when we try to run away from you because of bad choices. Thank you that despite our weakness and our sin, you promise to watch over us wherever we go. We don't ever want to be separated from you, Lord, so keep us close and help us be changed and more like Jesus every single day. Amen.*

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



READ: Genesis 37:3-8 (NIV)

Now Israel [Jacob's new name] loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him. Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it." His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.

ENTER THE STORY:

Abraham had Isaac, and Isaac had twin boys - Jacob and Esau. God chose to use Jacob's family to bring his really BIG promises to the world. Jacob had 12 sons, but he loved *ONE* son more than all of his other sons, Joseph. To show his love for Joseph, he gave him a special, colorful coat. This made Joseph's other brothers really mad.

Have you ever gotten mad when your brother or sister got something you didn't? Well, it's kind of like that.

Joseph's brothers were SO mad at him that they threw him in a pit, but later they decided it would be better to sell him for a few pieces of silver money. When the men who bought Joseph took him away, his brothers thought they would never see him again. "Good riddance to that dreamer," they said.

But Joseph's story was only getting started. God had BIG plans for him, and even though it was going to take 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* power! He knew God was up to something big because of his dreams, so he chose to *TRUST* God and have a good attitude no matter what.

Eventually, Joseph got a chance to see his brothers again. Let's see what happens.

READ: Genesis 50:15-21, (NIV)

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly'... When their message came to him, Joseph wept. His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

CHRISTMAS CONNECTION:

There is another story in the Bible about a man who was mistreated by his family and sold for a few pieces of silver, and he too trusted God and had a good attitude no matter what. 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 problem. This other special person left a really, really wonderful place where he was in a place of power so he could go through bad things, and eventually die to save people from a much bigger problem... their sin.

Do you know who this special someone is? It's Jesus, the Serpent Crusher and Abraham's special offspring!

■ **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: Selections from Deuteronomy 5:1-22, 28-29 (NIV)

Moses summoned all Israel and said: Hear, Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them.

And he said: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

"You shall have no other gods before me."

"You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them..."

"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."

"Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do..."

"Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

"You shall not murder.

"You shall not commit adultery.

"You shall not steal.

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

"You shall not covet your neighbor's wife...or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

These are the commandments the LORD proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain...and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.

The LORD heard you when you spoke to me, and the LORD said to me...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!

ENTER THE STORY:

These ten rules were given to a group of people who had just experienced Yahweh God in a powerful way. They saw the ten plagues and escaped in the dead of night on Passover. They were led by day with a pillar of cloud and by night with a pillar of fire, and they were there when he parted the Red Sea.

They were no longer slaves! After 400 years, they were free! God rescued them so they could be in a relationship with him! He loved them very much and he wanted them to understand what he expected of them. These rules were supposed to act like ten walls built up around them to protect them and to give them boundaries to keep them safe and happy. They would show the people of Israel what they could and couldn't do and how they could best reflect God to the rest of the world, but *EVEN MORE* than that...their relationship with God was supposed to be like a marriage.

God is the groom, and the people of Israel are his bride. God wanted his people to love him more than anything else because he knew that is what was best for them.

• But no matter how hard they tried, they could not do it. They could not obey God's laws. The good news is, just like with
• Adam and Eve in the garden, God *KNEW* that the Israelites wouldn't obey, and he also *KNEW* that you and I wouldn't be
• able to obey either. We are just as bad at keeping God's Laws, especially when Jesus says that hating your brother or
• sister is the same as killing them in your heart...YIKES~! It doesn't take very long for us to see how desperately hopeless
• our situation is.

• *But God doesn't leave us alone! Do you know who God sends to help us? It's Jesus!*

• He is the perfect human and the EXACT image of God (Colossians 1:15). Jesus is the perfect reflection of his Father, and
• he fulfilled every aspect of the law. He obeyed all of the commandments we failed to keep, and he reversed the curse of
• the fall.

• Now, those of us who follow him are his representatives so that through us, other people can KNOW God, too. Jesus, the
• perfect law-keeper, summed up the law by giving us the two greatest commandments: Love God with all our hearts,
• souls, and minds 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 can confess our sins
• and be forgiven.

■ **PRAY:** *Jesus, thank you for doing what we could not do by perfectly obeying all of the law. We long to be more like
• you Jesus, so please continue to work in us as we walk in your Spirit and do our best to follow you. Amen.*

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



READ: Selections from Joshua 2:1-21 (NIV)

Joshua, the son of Nun, sent two spies from Shittim. He sent them in secret. He said to them, "Go and look over the land. Most of all, check out Jericho." So they went to Jericho. They stayed at the house of a prostitute. Her name was Rahab... Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, "I know that the LORD has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

"Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them—and that you will save us from death." "Our lives for your lives!" the men assured her. "If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the LORD gives us the land."

Now the men had said to her, "This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house... But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear." "Agreed," she replied. "Let it be as you say."

So 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, a very strong city with two big walls surrounding it, both very thick and very high, but she had a secret. She had heard about ALL of the things God had done to Egypt when he rescued the Israelites from slavery, and she wanted to leave Jericho and join God's family. When Joshua sent the two spies into her city, she helped them hide from the king, and she made a deal with them. They agreed to save her and her family on one condition; she had to hang a scarlet "cord" outside her window. It was the *ONLY HOPE* she had to be saved!

The word for hope in Hebrew is "tiqvah" (tick-vah), and it means "a cord or attachment." This is where we get "Scarlet Cord." It is connected to a word that means "to wait or look for," but here's the cool part...it can also mean "to tie or bind two things together." *Do you see it?*

The "cord" that Rahab hung out of her window is really her "hope!"

When she put that scarlet cord out of her window, Rahab was binding herself to the Israelites and placing her *HOPE* in Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, to save her and her family! And God did save her and her family!

After Israel defeated Jericho, Rahab joined them and married a prince named Salmon. Because of her *FAITH*, Rahab went from being a nobody to being a princess in the royal family! God blessed Rahab and Salmon with a baby boy named Boaz. Boaz would grow up and have a son named Obed, who would have a son named Jesse, who would grow have a son named David - who would grow up to be the *GREATEST* king of Israel.

Just like that, we are back to Jesse's tree. Do you remember what God promised would come out of the stump of Jesses's tree? A Shoot that would be our *FOREVER KING*! A very special someone who would bless the whole world.

- *Do you know who this special someone is? It's Jesus!*
- This Christmas, we are reminded that our hope is in a tiny little baby. That baby is *OUR* Scarlet Cord. He is God in the
- flesh, and all who bind themselves to him will not be disappointed. Our expectation is that those of us who have
- waited a long time for him will one day be rewarded!
- This hope is an anchor to our soul 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, 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 (NIV)

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were...from Bethlehem in Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there...Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye...but Ruth clung to her. "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."

When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her...So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz... Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain..." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife...and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth." Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

ENTER THE STORY:

The town of Bethlehem, whose name means "house of bread" had no bread to offer, so a woman named Naomi and her family leave in search of food. They settled in the land of Moab, and Naomi's two sons married two Moabite women, but in a sad turn of events, Naomi's husband and both of her sons died, and 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. Ruth had already made up her mind that she wanted Naomi and the Israelites to be her family, and she wanted Naomi's God, Yahweh himself, to be her God.

Does this sound familiar? It should because yesterday, we read Rahab's story. A 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.

So Naomi and Ruth travel back home to Bethlehem in search of family that could help them survive.

• In many places around the world at that time, women were not treated well at all, but Israel was different. God wanted
• his people to take care of women and treat them well, so he put laws in place to protect them, especially women who
• had lost their husbands.

• One of the rules involved gathering food. The men who owned the fields were supposed to leave some of the grain
• behind so the women could go around the edges of the field and 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 [*widows are women whose husbands have died*]. If
• the woman's husband died before they had children, then one of his other family members was supposed to marry the
• widow and help her have a son to carry on her husband's name.

• **This brother was called the "kinsman redeemer."**

• This was a very serious job because the "kinsman redeemer" would act as a rescuer! He would take care of the woman
• and her family by paying for food, giving them a place to live, and carrying on the family name.

• In this story, Boaz is the kinsman redeemer for Ruth and Naomi, and he chooses to marry Ruth and provide for her and
• protect her so that her family could continue. Much later in the Bible, we read about another kinsman redeemer. A very
• special someone who will come to rescue his people, but he will save them from much more than just hunger...he will
• save them from their sins.

• ***Do you know who this special someone is? It's JESUS!***

• Whether we know it or not, we are all just as helpless as Ruth and Naomi were. The Bible says Jesus is like the groom at a
• wedding, and the church is his bride. Like Boaz, he steps up to marry us, to join his life with ours and to rescue us.

• And Ruth and Boaz? Well, they have a baby boy named Obed, who is a great blessing to Naomi, who had lost so much.

• And Obed grows up to be the father of Jesse who grows up to be the father of David. Yet again, we find ourselves back to
• the stump of Jesse! But this time, we *KNOW* who the Shoot is, and we can't wait for him to arrive because, just like
• Naomi, when he gets here he will be a great blessing, and we will finally be happy.

■ **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 sins 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, 6-7, 10-13; 2 Samuel 5:2b (NIV)

The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king."

When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, "The LORD has not chosen these." So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse answered. "He is tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him..." So he sent for him and had him brought in.

He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one." So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David...

And the LORD said to [David], 'You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler.'"

ENTER THE STORY:

Back to Bethlehem we go to find a new king from Jesse's family. Surely it must be the oldest brother, right? The tallest, the best looking, and the smartest? **NOPE!** It was David, the youngest of all his brothers. He wasn't the tallest, or the smartest, or the best looking, but God wasn't looking for those things. God was looking for someone who loved him more than anything else, and David did. 1 Samuel 13:14 says David was a, *"man after God's own heart."*

God didn't just want another king, God wanted someone to be a SHEPHERD for his people, and David was **VERY FAMILIAR** with sheep! After all, it was his job to take care of the sheep every day. Sheep are funny animals, aren't they? They aren't very smart, they are really, really stubborn, they can't protect themselves if predators attack them, and they don't make good decisions when they are hungry.

Does that sound like anyone you know? Of course it does. It's US! We are just like sheep! That is why God needed someone who would be a good shepherd and lead his people the right way. The first king, King Saul, did NOT do a good job, but David would be different. David would love God's people and show them how to worship and follow God.

David was the most famous king in all of Israel's history, but God chose him to prepare the people for an even **BETTER** King that would come much, much later. This King would come from David's own family tree, which means he would come from Jesse's tree. He would fulfill ALL of God's promises to Adam and Eve, and to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and to Moses and David too. He IS the shoot that will come from the stump of Jesse, and when he comes, he will be a Good Shepherd to God's people, and he will love God with all of his heart and show us how to love God too.

Do you know who this BETTER King will be? It's Jesus, of course!

Jesus tells us this himself! 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."*

Samuel went to Bethlehem looking for a new king...and he found what he was looking for, but this won't be the last time someone travels to this town looking for a new king.

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

When Hiram king of Tyre heard that Solomon had been anointed king to succeed his father David, he sent his envoys to Solomon, because he had always been on friendly terms with David. Solomon sent back this message to Hiram: "You know that because of the wars waged against my father David from all sides, he could not build a temple for the Name of the LORD his God until the LORD put his enemies under his feet. But now the LORD my God has given me rest on every side, and there is no adversary or disaster. I intend, therefore, to build a temple for the Name of the LORD my God, as the LORD told my father David, when he said, 'Your son whom I will put on the throne in your place will build the temple for my Name.' The word of the LORD came to Solomon: "As for this temple you are building, if you follow my decrees, observe my laws and keep all my commands and obey them, I will fulfill through you the promise I gave to David your father. And I will live among the Israelites and will not abandon my people Israel." So Solomon built the temple and completed it.

ENTER THE STORY:

From the very first 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, "...let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." God wanted to live and dwell among his people, so they could know him and worship him, but God is also holy, which means he is set apart from us because of his perfect and pure nature. His holy presence is not only dangerous, but deadly for sinful people. The place God had them build fixed this problem, but there were still restrictions.

God told them to have a special room at the very back called the "Holy of Holies". This room was separated from all the other rooms by a big, thick veil so that no one could see past it. God's presence dwelled there in the form of a cloud that hovered inside and over that room. This is the same cloud that contained 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, *ONLY* the High Priest was allowed back there, and he had to take a sacrifice with him to cover his own sins before he could offer sacrifices for the sins of the people. The point of this special day was clear, it is a *VERY SPECIAL* thing to walk into the presence of God, and it must be done carefully, and exactly as God instructed.

God's presence dwelled among Israel like this for a long, but when Israel's constant rebellion and disobedience went on long enough, God's Shekinah Glory lifted up from the temple and left...never to return.

That is, until almost 600 years later when a young mother named Mary and her husband, Joseph brought their newborn baby into the temple to dedicate him to the Lord. Through baby Jesus, God's presence had come to dwell 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. And after Jesus' work on this earth was finished, he would return to his Father in heaven, but before he left, Jesus promised to send another helper, who would also bring God's presence to the people.

This helper is the Holy Spirit, but he does not dwell inside a temple or *AMONG* God's people. When a person puts their faith in Jesus' death and resurrection to pay the penalty for their sins, God forgives them and puts His Spirit *INSIDE* his people as a guarantee of his promises fulfilled.

- God's "Shekinah glory" is settled within Jesus' followers as a guarantee of God's promises fulfilled. The Holy Spirit
- dwelling in us will make our bodies God's living temple (*1 Corinthians 6:20*), and with this assurance inside of us, God's
- presence will always be with us and he will never leave us or forsake us.
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■ **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 18:17-39 (NIV)

When [Ahab] saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" "I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the LORD's commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel.

Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." But the people said nothing. Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. 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." Then all the people said, "What you say is good."

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which had been torn down. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood." "Do it again," he said, and they did it again. "Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!"

ENTER THE STORY:

The first commandment that God gave the Israelites was "You shall have no other gods before me." The second commandment had a similar idea... "You shall not make for yourself a carved image...you shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God." (Exodus 20:3-5)

The nation of Israel was in a covenant relationship with Yahweh, and his rules were clear, but there was just one problem, Israel was never any good at being faithful to Yahweh. They were tempted by everything. If it sparkled and shimmered and offered something better, they chased after it and worshiped it with their whole heart.

Even King Solomon got swept away in the worship of false gods, and as a consequence for his sin, God took the once united kingdom of Israel and divided it into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom was called "Israel" and the southern kingdom was called "Judah." There were 19 kings in total throughout the history of the northern kingdom.

Can you guess how many of the 19 kings in the northern kingdom remained faithful to God and led their people to worship ONLY him? ZERO!

Every single king led Israel further and further into idolatry and further and further away from the heart of Yahweh.

In our story today, King Ahab is reigning. He was a wicked and cruel king, with an even more wicked wife, Jezebel. They worshiped many different false gods, and encouraged the people of Israel to do the same. In fact, there were 450 prophets of a false god called "Baal," and 400 prophets to a different false god called "Asherah." These false prophets lived in the palace and even ate at the king's table. Can you image how angry that made God?

Elijah was one of God's prophets, sent to warn King Ahab what would happen if he didn't stop worshipping false gods.

In fact, in order to prove to the people, once and for all, that God was the only true God, Elijah arranged a battle of the gods. Baal vs Yahweh. Whichever god showed up with fire to burn up the animal sacrifice, was the ONE true God.

When it was time for Baal to show up with fire, what do you think happened? NOTHING!

That is because Baal is NOT real, he is a pretend god and a figment of their imagination.

When it was Elijah's turn, he didn't want there to be any doubt who the real God was, so he built a twelve stone altar to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, and had them pour twelve buckets of water on the wood until it was completely soaked.

Have you ever tried to light wet wood on fire? It's IMPOSSIBLE, isn't it? But what have we learned about God over the past few days? He is the God who does IMPOSSIBLE things! More than that... impossible things are easy for God!

So Elijah prayed and asked God to reveal himself, and he did! Holy fire from heaven rained down on the altar and burned up everything... the offering, the wood, the stones, the dust on the ground, and ALL of the water in the trench! When the people saw it, they fell on their faces and cried out, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God."

They were convinced, and they believed, at least for a while. Sadly, their faithfulness wouldn't last. It wouldn't be long before Israel would turn away from Yahweh again, and look to other gods to give them what they thought they needed most.

Our idols look a little different today, but our hearts chase after them just the same. It might be needing to have the newest toy or game, or it might be needing to be liked by others, or needing to be seen as "pretty" or "handsome." These desires can quickly consume our thoughts and lead us to worship them if we aren't careful.

This Christmas season, let's remind ourselves of the only thing in life worth worshipping and waiting for... Jesus. Let's chant together, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God," because we know that the other things of this world can't bring us true happiness. He alone can give us exactly what we need, so let's look to him to fill our hearts with joy as we look forward to celebrating his arrival as our Promised Messiah!!

PRAY: Heavenly Father, forgive us when our hearts wander away from you and fall in love with the things of this world. Thank you for showing yourself to us when we doubt you, Lord. Remind us this Christmas season of the ONLY gift worth waiting for! Amen.

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

**READ:** Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 (NIV)

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.
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 two kingdoms in Israel, there were 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.

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 Assyrian Empire to conquer them for their ongoing rebellion and wickedness. Isaiah spent all of chapter 8 warning the people about what was coming. It was a sad and gloomy message, but then chapter 9 opens with words of HOPE... *"But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish."*

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

In books and movies, darkness can represent many things: blindness, ignorance, or even wickedness. In many ways, light is the very opposite of darkness. Light illuminates, light brings knowledge, and light represents goodness and righteousness. It makes sense then why Jesus said, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never 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 king from Jesse's Tree, 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. When Jesus came for the first time as a baby, he brought hope to the people. For us who are waiting for Jesus a second time, we know that there will be no more gloom when he comes back. Whatever darkness we are facing, we can have confidence in this: a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace is on his way to rescue us!

PRAY: *Heavenly Father, sometimes it can feel like we are the ones walking in darkness, stumbling around trying to make sense of this world. We need your light to shine on us, God, and reveal your love and glory to us! Help us wait with expectant hearts for the celebration of Jesus - our Messiah. Amen.*

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



READ: Isaiah 11:1-10 (NIV)

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra’s den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. 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.

ENTER THE STORY:

On our very first night of advent, we began our journey at the stump of Jesse’s Tree, and today we return to it, but this time, we’ve learned something NEW! We got a glimpse into what this new kingdom will be like with Jesus ruling and reigning as the perfect king, and if we’re honest, it seems CRAZY!!

Wolves snuggling with lambs? Cows and bears eating together? Lions eating straw? Children playing with poisonous snakes? Is this REALLY going to happen, or is Isaiah trying to teach us something with this picture of animals living in peace? Well, before we answer that question, we need to go back and read one verse in particular that will help us. Verse 9 says, *“They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with 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 this 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.”* Connect that with this idea that *“the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD,”* and we see that the changes Jesus brings to this new kingdom extend to all of creation...possibly even the animals!

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul adds to this idea of creation being made new again in *Romans 8:19-21 (NLT)*, *“For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God’s curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay.”*

Death and suffering – even a world where animals attack and eat each other – these 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? Maybe even impossible?

There’s that word again...*impossible*. It hangs out there at the end of that sentence like a challenge for God, but we know it 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 out in Revelation
- with a brilliant vision of all things made new again.
- *Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no*
- *longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride*
- *beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now*
- *among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their*
- *God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order*
- *of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:1-4)*
- *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 craziness becomes not just possible 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!!
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■ **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 Jesus. Amen.*

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



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

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD, "Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." But the LORD replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

"And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

ENTER THE STORY:

Have you ever been asked to do something you just did NOT want to do? This is how Jonah felt when God asked him to go talk to the people of Nineveh. You see, Jonah's people, the Israelites, and the people of Nineveh, which are Assyrians...well, they were NOT friends. Not even close. In fact, they hated each other, so when God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and warn the people that God was REALLY, REALLY mad at them and was going to destroy them, Jonah ran away as fast as he could, and got on a ship headed in the opposite direction.

We didn't read that part of the story today, but running away from God didn't go well for Jonah. The ship he was on got caught up in a big storm. *Any idea who caused the storm? God, of course!* Once everyone on the ship found out it was Jonah's fault, they had no choice but to toss him overboard.

But that isn't the end of the story, because Jonah had a job to do...he was one of God's messengers after all, so God sent a giant fish to swallow him whole. Jonah spent three days in the belly of that fish with nothing to do but think and pray.

Can you imagine sitting in a dark, stinky fish belly with fish guts all around? No thank you!

When three days had passed, God spoke to the fish and it spit him out on dry land. This time, when God asked Jonah to go to Nineveh, he obeyed. Now, it seems like Jonah has had a change of heart, but this story is STILL not over!

Jonah went to Nineveh and told them exactly what God told him to say. Do you remember what his message was?

"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

It's not the most eloquent gospel message, is it? But guess what? It WORKED!

The people listened to Jonah's warning and they REPENTED! That means they STOPPED doing the bad things they used to do and STARTED doing the good things God wanted them to do. They also humbled themselves to prove to God how serious they were. They took off their nice clothes and put on itchy, stinky, uncomfortable sackcloth. They stopped eating and drinking, and they started praying! They called out to Yahweh and begged him to forgive them. God heard their prayers and saw their repentance and he forgave them. He stopped being angry towards their sin and he decided NOT to punish them.

Now, you might think this would make Jonah happy because his message WORKED, but he was not happy at all. In fact, he was VERY angry. He hated the people of Nineveh and he didn't think they deserved God's mercy. He wanted God to punish them.

Jonah did NOT understand that God loves EVERYONE. He thought God only loved his special people, the Israelites, but God's plan all along was to send a very special someone to bless the whole entire world. This person is WAY better than Jonah, because he did NOT run away when God asked him to do something he didn't really want to do. Instead, he obeyed God even though it required him to lay down his life.

Do you know who this special someone is? It's Jesus, of course!

And 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...the 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 raised him from the dead!

This season, let's be different than Jonah, who reluctantly obeyed, but didn't experience true joy because of his cold heart. Let's find joy in obeying God, even if he asks us to do things we really don't want to do.

PRAY: God, we are SO thankful that your love and mercy are for ALL who repent and believe. Help us have humble hearts that are willing to admit when we are wrong. Thank you Jesus, for being a much greater Jonah. Amen.

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



READ: Esther 4:10-17 (NIV)

Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king." When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

ENTER THE STORY:

Over the years, the Jewish people have had many enemies who wanted to destroy them. In fact, the only reason there were Jews living in Persia is because they had been conquered and taken into captivity many years earlier. King Cyrus had decreed that the Jews could return home and rebuild their city, but some chose to stay in Persia. This made one person in particular very angry because he HATED the Jews.

His name was Haman, and the reason he hated the Jews was because Mordecai, Esther's uncle, had refused to bow down to him. Mordecai still worshiped Yahweh, and he knew that God's people weren't supposed to bow down to anyone other than him. Haman was SO mad at Mordecai that he decided to kill ALL of the Jews...every last one of them. Haman told the king that the Jews were causing trouble in his kingdom so the king agreed to let Haman get rid of them.

What the king didn't know was that his new queen, Esther, was also a Jew. She had not told the King that she was a Jew because she was afraid he wouldn't let her be the queen anymore. But now, ALL of the Jews were in danger of being destroyed, and they needed Esther to tell the king the TRUTH and try to save their lives. There was only one problem... NOBODY was allowed to go before the king without being called. The punishment was DEATH, unless the King extended his golden scepter out to you.

Esther was afraid, but Mordecai assured her that she had NOT been chosen to be queen by accident. God had put her in that position for that VERY moment – so she could save her people. Esther showed great courage and risked her life, and by God's grace, when she went before the king, he extended his golden scepter and spared her. And when she told the king the truth of Haman's plot to kill the Jews, the king reversed the law and saved Esther and her people!

This made the Jews SO HAPPY, but unfortunately, their relief and deliverance would not last. It would not be long before they faced yet another enemy that hated them.

They needed a BETTER RESCUER...someone who would bring TRUE relief and FULL deliverance. The good news is that we have this in Jesus, who came to us as a baby so he could save us. This is WHY we celebrate Christmas! Jesus is Immanuel, God with us! Spending time with family is wonderful, and giving and receiving gifts is great, but our deep, abiding joy comes from knowing that our salvation rests in the hands of our great deliverer! Knowing this allows all of God's people to collectively breathe a sigh of relief because the wait is over!

■ **PRAY:** *God, give us courage like Esther, so that when you call us to take big risks for your kingdom, we are ready to trust you, and thank you for sending us Jesus, our true relief and Great Deliverer! Amen.*

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



READ: Micah 5:2-4 (NIV)

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, 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." Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

ENTER THE STORY:

From the outside, there was nothing special about this little town called Bethlehem. Out of all of the mighty clans of Judah, Bethlehem was the smallest, which usually meant the least important as well, and 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 nowhere 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 seemingly least important of his brothers. But this is the place 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 VALUE by the world's standards, and he isn't tempted by the biggest, brightest and shiniest cities. God is in the business of taking the weakest, the poorest, and the most insignificant and using them 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)

Out of Ephrathah (Eff-raw-thaw), which 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. The town is not special, but WHO comes out of this town will change everything!

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 the value in the things this world despises as weak and useless. Help us to see more of your glory today and hunger after the "Bread of life," who alone can satisfy all of our needs. Amen.

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

**READ:** Luke 1:5-25 (NIV)

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "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. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

ENTER THE STORY:

Have you ever tried blinking quickly or rubbing your eyes to make sure what you were seeing was REAL? That's what I imagine happened when Zechariah opened his eyes and saw the angel standing in front of him.

Fortunately for Zechariah, 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 during that exact moment, Zechariah was performing one of the most serious tasks for a priest. He was burning incense in front of the veil in the Holy Place. This means he would 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 is about an event in the future, but it is also about the past because, like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth were also unable to have children and were past the age of childbearing. The author does this on purpose. We are supposed to understand that these two stories are connected!

What is the connection?

• *Zechariah's son will pave the way for God's fulfillment of his promise to Abraham... that one of his future great, great, great, grandsons would bless the whole world.*

• *BUT WAIT!* There is more! When Gabriel prophesied to Zechariah that his son would be similar to Elijah, he was pointing back 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 when God made some BIG promises to him... *"How will I know?"* In other words, *"How can I be sure this will happen?"*

• This reaction caused Zechariah to suffer through his 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. 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 GRACE of God - who loves so deeply that he is willing to go to *ANY LENGTH* to rescue his children, even if it means sending his own 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 3:1-6 (NIV)

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' " John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

ENTER THE STORY:

Throughout the Old Testament, we have seen God's prophets do things that other people might think are "crazy." Ezekiel laid on his right side for 390 days while eating bread made out of wheat and beans. Isaiah walked around naked for three years. Hosea married a woman with a bad reputation, and Jeremiah walked into the king's court wearing wooden bars made for big farm animals, just to name a few. All of these stunts were actually expected because God wanted his prophets to communicate their messages in a way that would get the attention of the people.

Maybe John's crazy wasn't actually that out of the ordinary? Camel hair clothes and a weird diet? That was pretty mild compared to the prophets that came before him. Regardless, God had not sent a prophet to his people for hundreds of years, so naturally, everyone was interested to hear what he had to say.

John's message was simple, and it played on repeat over and over again: Repent for God's kingdom is close!

John had ONE JOB. He was supposed to help God's people get ready for the arrival of the long-awaited promised Messiah. You might think the best way to do that would be to talk 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.

Do you know who the Bridegroom is? It's Jesus! It would not be much longer before the people actually got to see him and talk to him, but FIRST, they needed to deal with their sin so their hearts would be clean!

This is true for anyone who wants to come to Yahweh and receive the gift of salvation. Everyone must approach the King with a humble heart, 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 do the work of getting rid of sin and cleaning our hearts so that 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 (NIV)

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "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. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left 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.

Is it a coincidence that God sent Gabriel to this specific girl in the town of Nazareth? Of course not! The name of this tiny village, 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. The Hebrew word for Nazareth (Netzarit) comes from the Hebrew word *netzer*, which means "branch" or "shoot."

Do you remember talking about a special branch or shoot in this Advent?

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." It was NOT a coincidence that God sent Gabriel to the city of Nazareth or the "City of the Branch!" There are no coincidences with God!

Gabriel's message to Mary confirms this! The child that Mary will have 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 all sounds amazing, but why her? Why did God choose Mary?

From the outside, nothing seemed special about Mary. Her family wasn't wealthy or prominent in society, and nobody famous had ever been born in Nazareth, so it wasn't famous for anything.

Can you already see how this fits within God's pattern?

God loves to use the weak and insignificant to reveal his glory! He looks at what is on the inside, and like her long-ago relative David, Mary had a heart that loved God. She may not have understood everything, but she received the news with humility and gratitude because she knew it was a blessing! She had heard the prophecies. 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 into this world.

• *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!"

• When it was time, God would fashion his Son into a tiny baby through the power of the Holy Spirit and place him into the womb of a young girl who was a part of David and Abraham's family tree...bringing the promised descendant into the world just as he said he would.

• Jesus did not come from sinful man, and he himself never sinned. This was necessary so that, one day, he could bless the whole world by becoming sin on the cross. He did this so 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. Amen.*

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



READ: Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV)

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

ENTER THE STORY:

Have you ever struggled to fall asleep at night because you couldn't quit thinking about something?

I imagine that's what it was like for Joseph when he found out that Mary, his soon-to-be wife, was pregnant. I bet he tossed and turned for a long time before he finally drifted off to sleep, but just as soon as he started to dream, an angel showed up with a message from God.

You see, Joseph didn't believe Mary's story, and he had decided to leave her, but God had other plans. God chose Joseph to be the earthly father of his Son, and he wanted Joseph to take Mary as his wife and raise her baby as his own son. Even though this baby was God in the flesh, he would still have to grow in knowledge like any other child.

In this story, Joseph acted as a rescuer by taking Mary as his wife and restoring her reputation. And when their baby was born, they would do exactly as the angel told them and name him Jesus, which means "God saves" because that is exactly what Jesus came to do...to seek and to save the lost.

Many years later, at the perfect time, Jesus would act as a rescuer, too, for Mary and Joseph and anyone else that would put their faith in him. He would not merely rescue them from a difficult situation; he would do something FAR better. Jesus would lay down his life to pay the price for their sin. He is the bridge that brings us back into the presence of God. That is why we call him Immanuel - God with us.

If we have learned anything during this Advent, it's that God does things very differently than we do. This is why the Christmas story is so unique. Take a few moments today to think about what it means for us that through Jesus, we can enter into the very presence of God the Father.

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

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



READ: Luke 2:1-5 (NIV)

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a 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 phrase 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 from the town of Bethlehem—the very place Micah prophesied the Messiah would be born? NO WAY! Did you notice the specific key historical details in the passage we just read? It included the name of the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, the name of the Roman governor over that specific region, Quirinius, and Joseph's connection to the house and family of David.

The truth is God can use whoever he wants to bring about his plan...even a pagan Roman emperor. This should not surprise us. 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. Remember Pharaoh of Egypt? Or King Nebuchadnezzar?

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 Mary and Joseph, descendants of king David and from that same town. This is why God set his plans for a census into the heart of a great Roman emperor, who brought about the very thing God desired.

God has always been in control of everything, even before he created the world. In the Advent stories we've read, we have been able to see the foreshadowing of Jesus' first and second coming. Tomorrow, as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we will also celebrate the fulfillment of so many of God's promises. This should give us great joy and comfort because it means that we can trust God too! He has always been true to his word, and he will always be true to his word. If he promises something will happen, we can be sure he will keep his promises.

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 2:6-20 (NIV)

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 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. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

ENTER THE STORY:

It is interesting 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! Its what Christmas is all about!

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

We have been journeying back in God's story through the Jesse Tree Advent, and one of our main goals was for you to relive some of the stories in the Old Testament that point to Jesus' first and second coming in a brand new way.

Hopefully, over these past twenty-eight days, you have been able to feel BOTH the longing and desperation and the hope and anticipation the Israelites 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 most important people, right? Nope! It went to shepherds.

Have you ever stopped to wonder why God announced the birth of his Son to shepherds? I'm sure we've heard that in God's kingdom, the last will be first and the first will be last, so he went to the stinky, dirty shepherds instead of the wealthy or famous. I'm sure there is some truth to that, but I think there is more. We have read many prophecies and stories that point to Jesus coming a second time. When that happens, he will sit on David's throne as the Root of Jesse and rule and reign as King, but that has not happened yet. 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 *ALL* of God's laws and showed us what it looks like to represent Yahweh to the rest of the world. He did everything with grace and truth, loving the unlovable and calling sinners out of their sin. But ultimately, Jesus was born to die.

We are supposed to be full of joy today as we celebrate one of the *BIGGEST* events in the Bible...God entering our story as Immanuel, the promised Messiah. 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. An event that results in the death of our beloved Messiah.

From the time we celebrate the Advent of the promised Messiah to the time we mourn his death on the cross is mere months apart for us. Moments it seems. This is 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! When God's enemy strikes the Messiah's heel, as prophesied in Genesis 3, the world will go dark again as we mourn his death. But Easter is coming, and that darkness will not last because it has *NO POWER* over light. After Jesus paid the price for our sin and defeated death once and for all, he ascended into heaven victorious, to the praise of all the angelic host, bringing light once again into a dark world. With Jesus' resurrection, God fulfilled another long-awaited promise of the Serpent Crusher!

This is what we celebrate at Christmas! YES! God entered his own story by sending Jesus, our Immanuel - God with us, but he is also the Serpent Crush and our Savior, "...the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:29)

Today, as we participate in all of our holiday traditions, let's give them new meaning by bringing Jesus into them!

As we look around at all the beautiful, sparkly lights on houses and on our trees, 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, we are blown away by how good you are. You are worthy of all our praise and glory. As we enjoy all of the beautiful celebrations of Christmas 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!

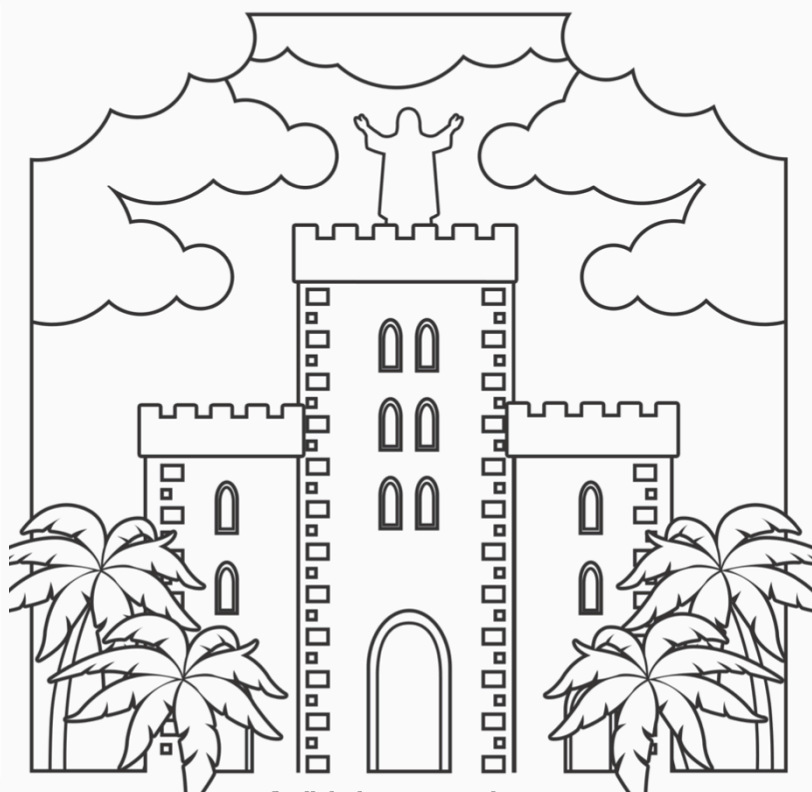
November 28th

The Shoot from Jesse's Tree



November 29th

The Watchtower



November 30th

In the Beginning



December 1st

The Serpent Crusher



December 2nd

God Shows Mercy



December 3rd

Abram's Faith



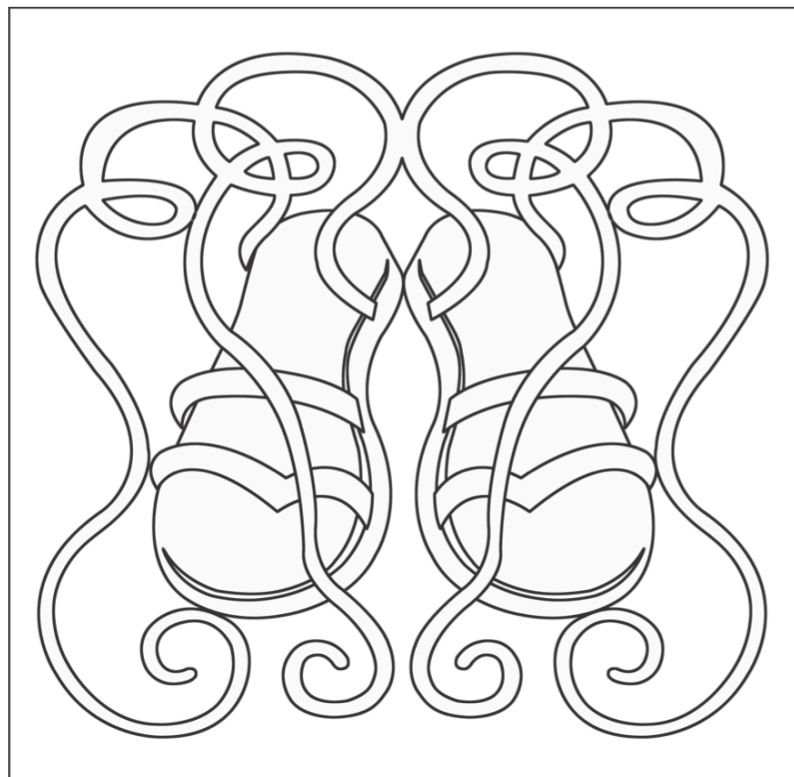
December 4th

God's Covenant with Abram



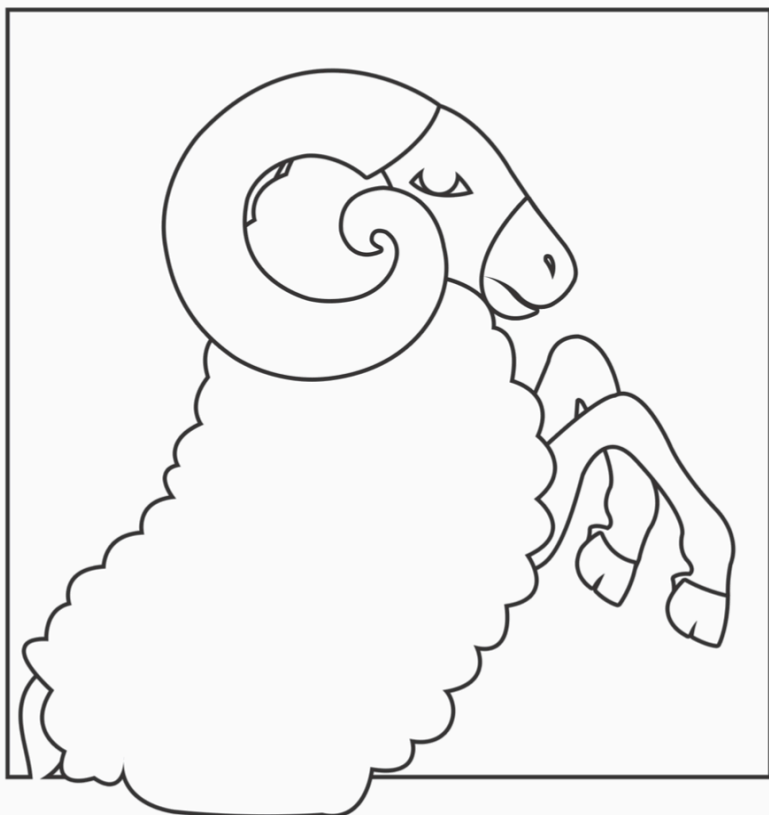
December 5th

Son of Laughter



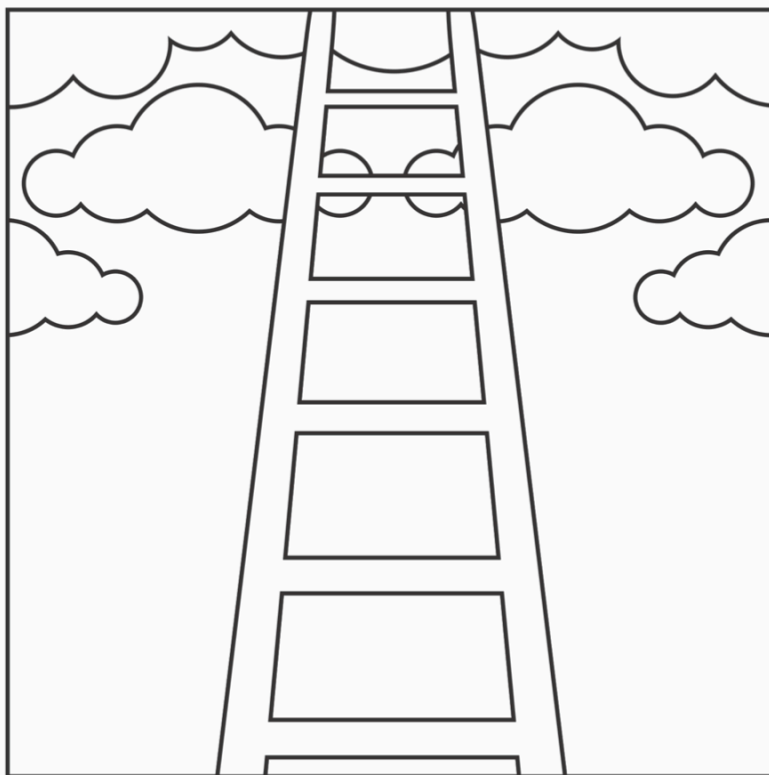
December 6th

God Provides a Substitute



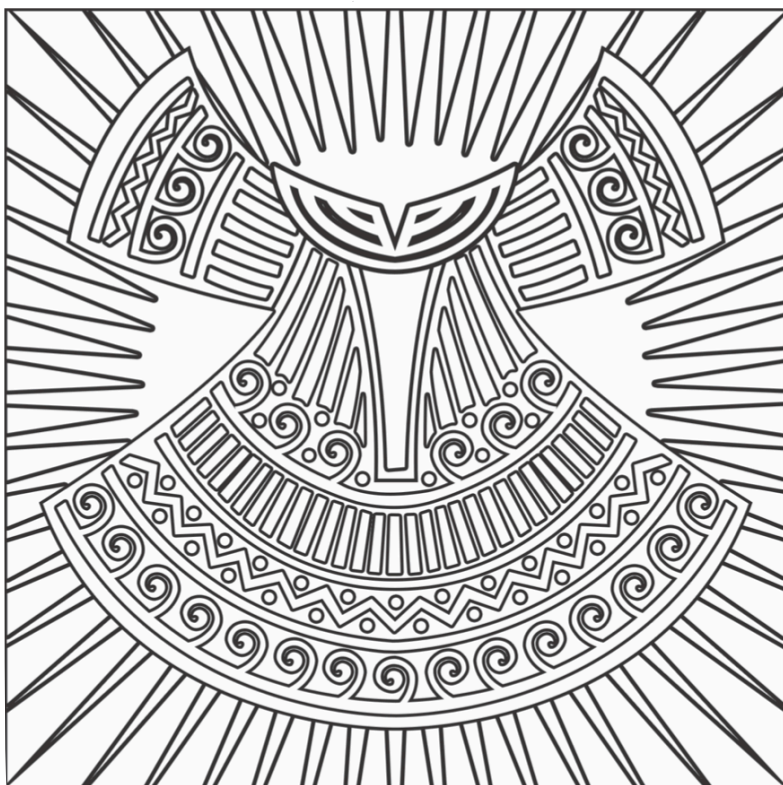
December 7th

Jacob's Ladder



December 8th

Coat of Many Colors



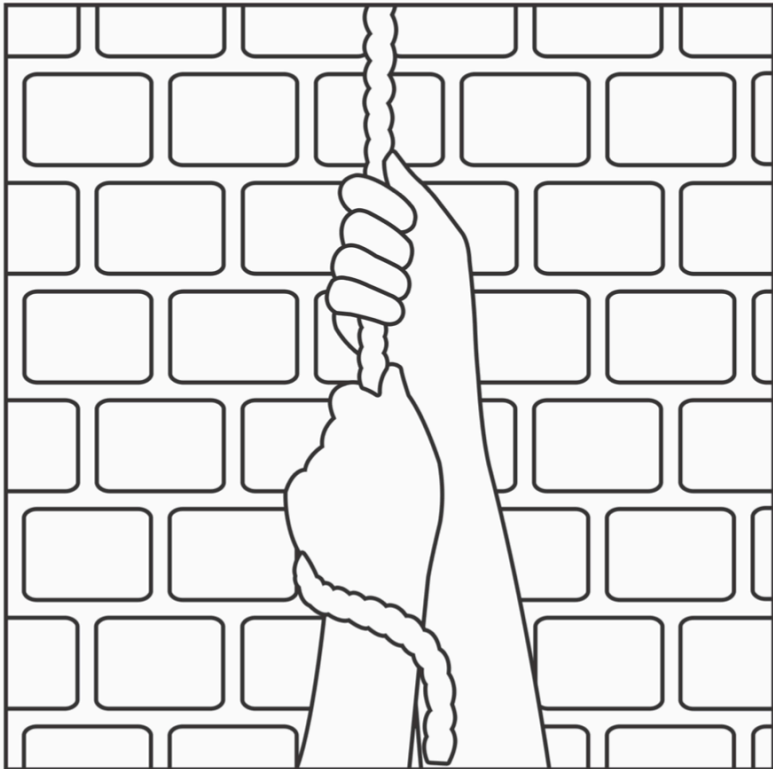
December 9th

Engraved on His Hands



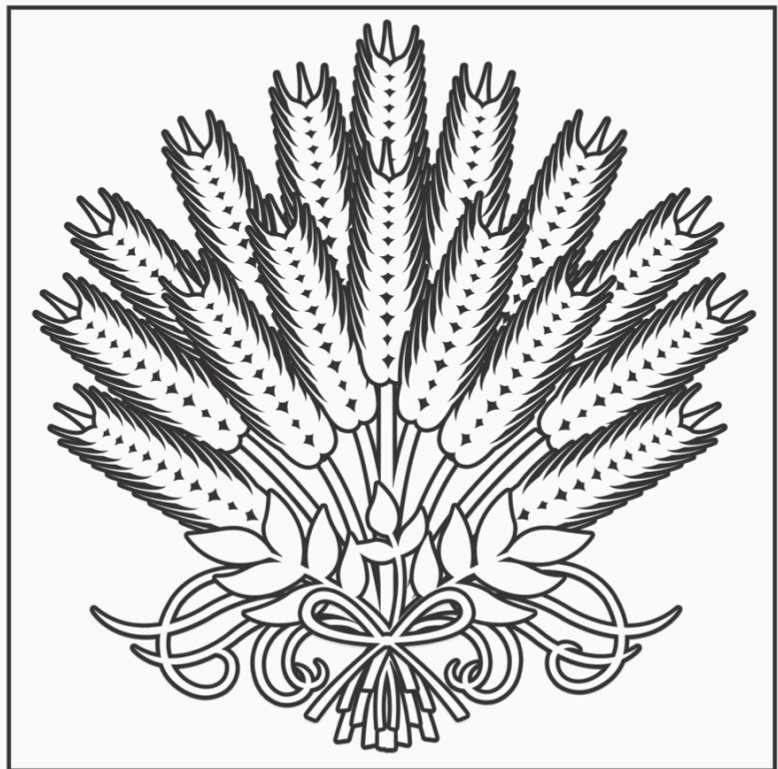
December 10th

Scarlet Cord



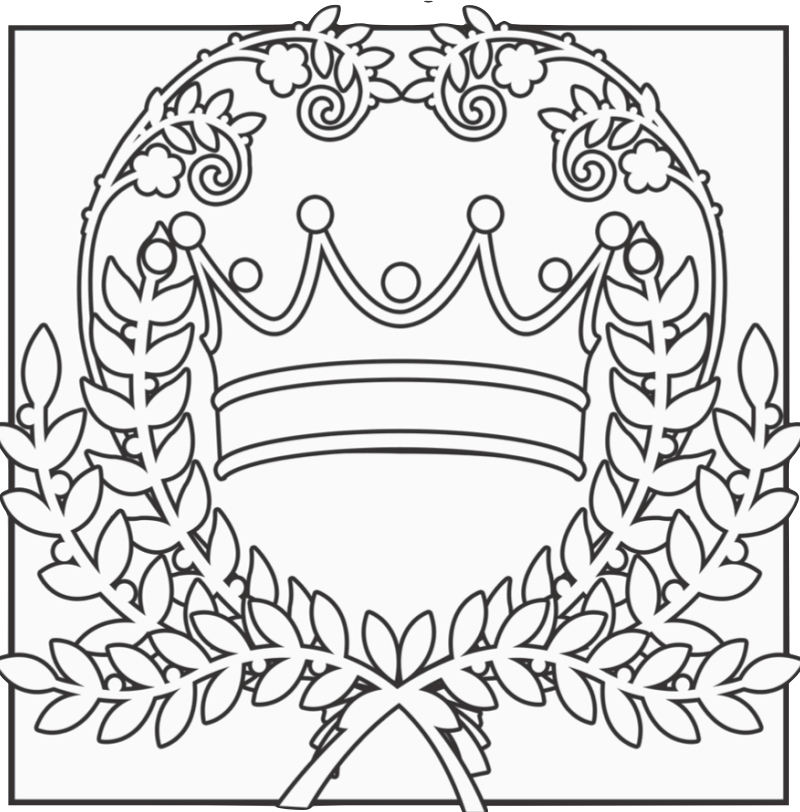
December 11th

Kinsman Redeemer



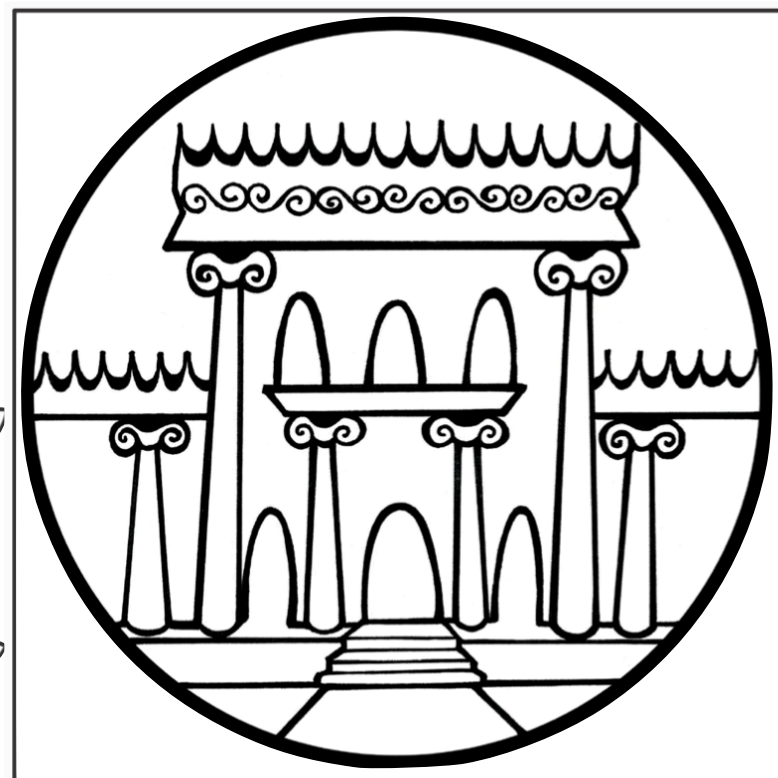
December 12th

Shepherd King



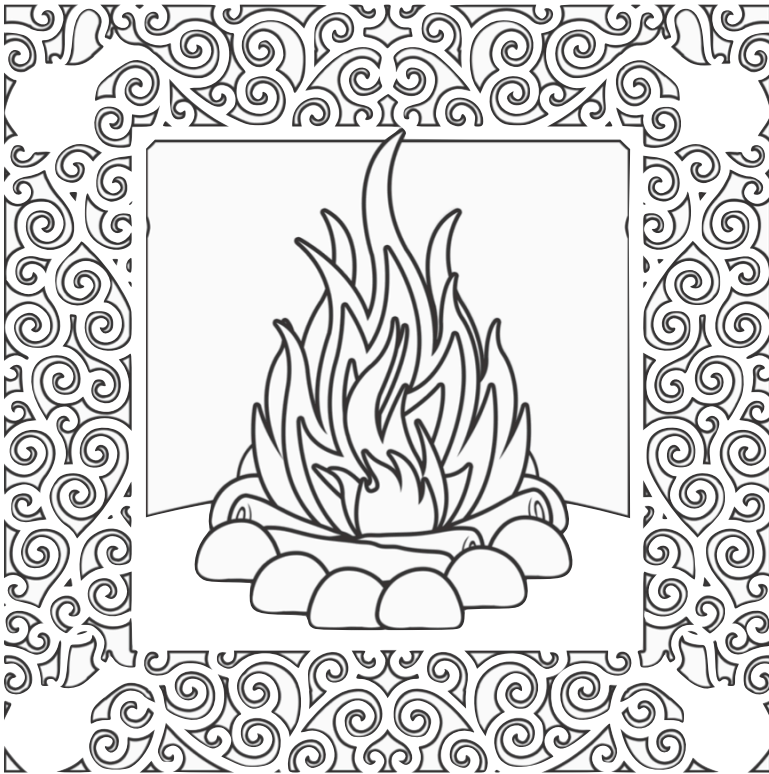
December 13th

Living Temple



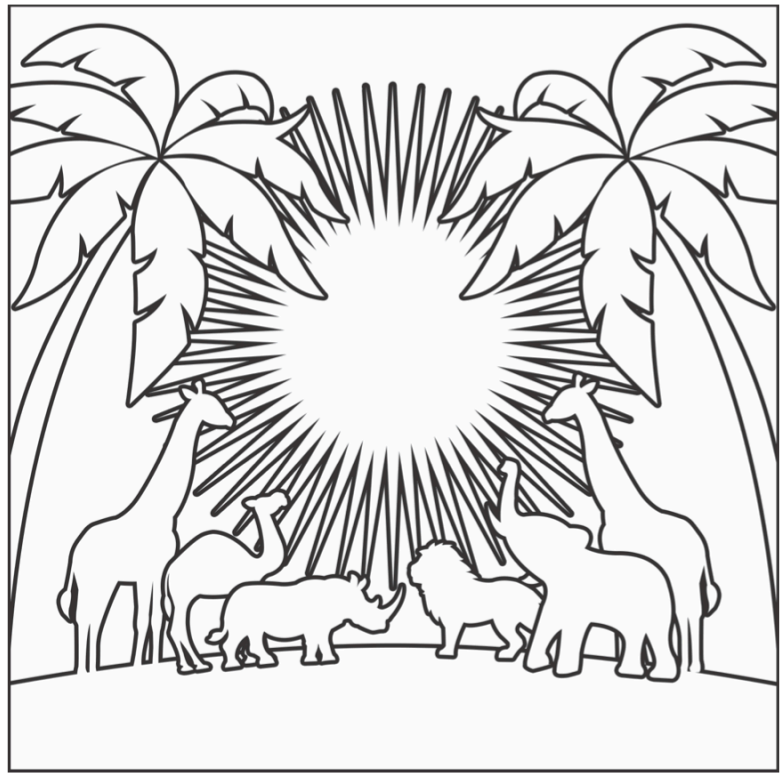
December 14th

Elijah's Contest



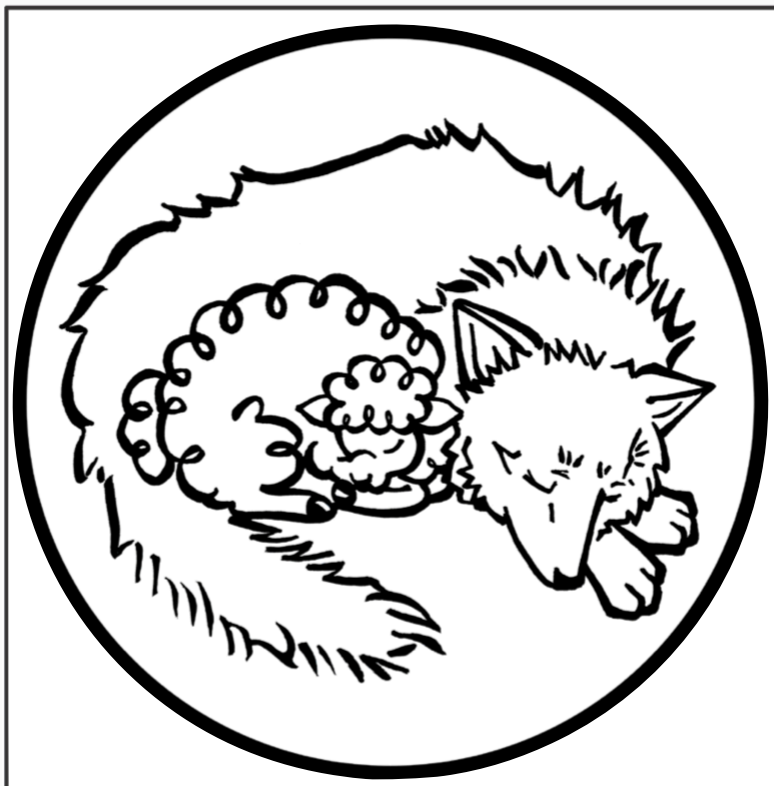
December 15th

A Great Light



December 16th

A New Kingdom



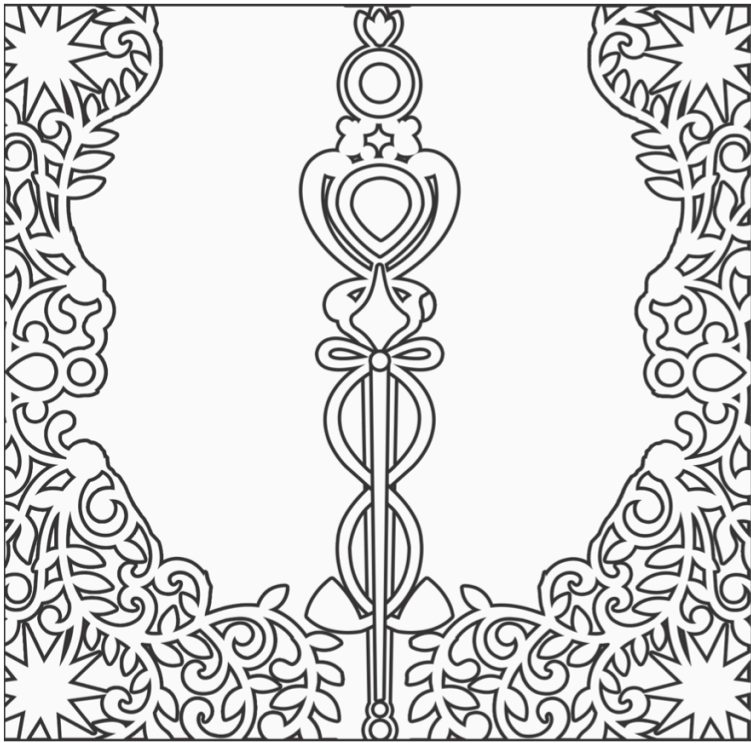
December 17th

Jonah & the Whale



December 18th

The Golden Scepter



December 19th

House of Bread



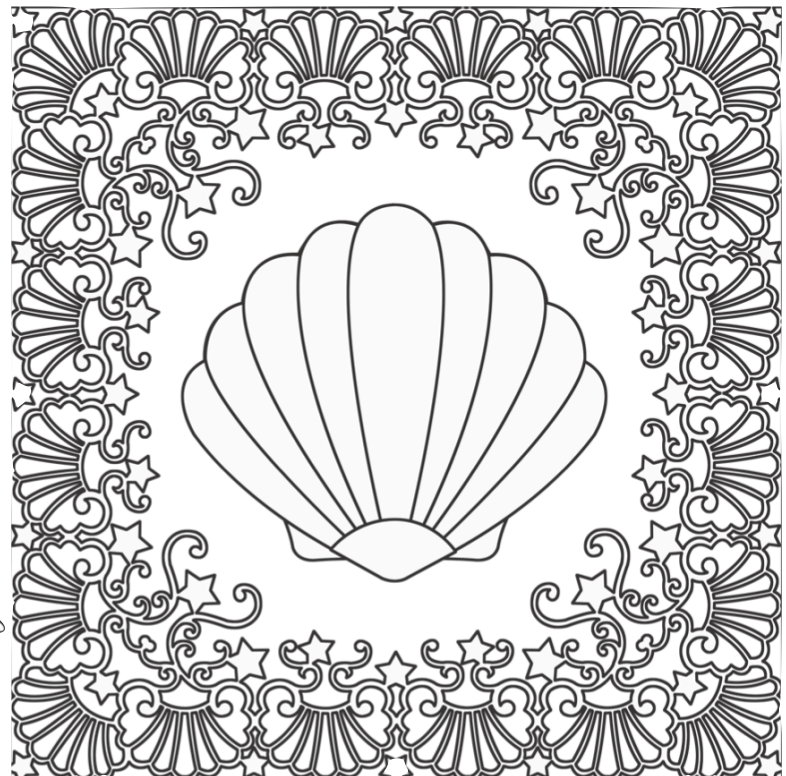
December 20th

Zechariah & Elizabeth



December 21st

John the Baptist



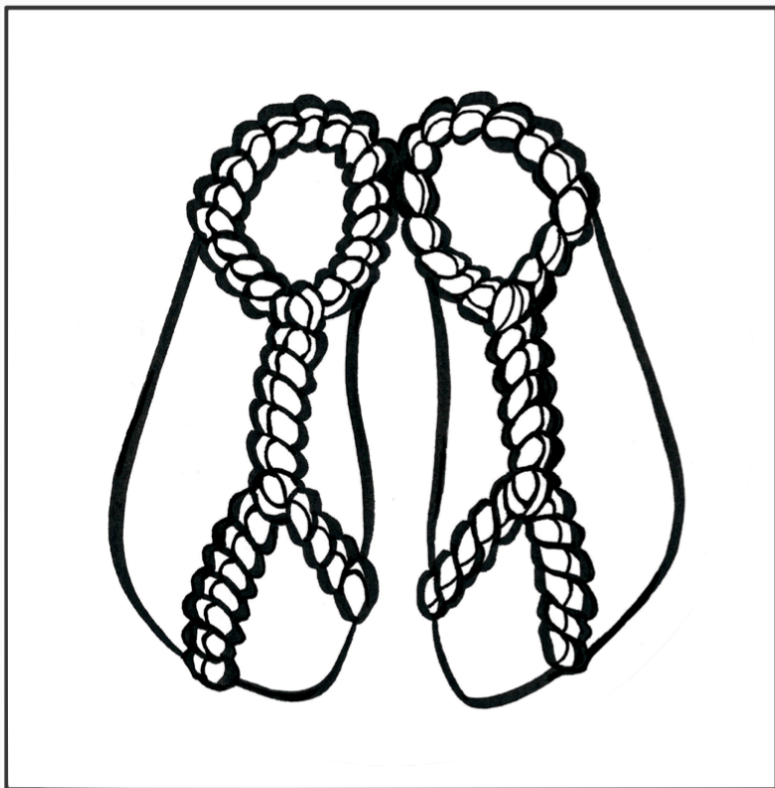
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