

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!

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; 3:2, 16b-19
November 30th: In the Beginning	Genesis 1:26a, 27-28, 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 12:1-4, 7
December 4: God's Covenant with Abram	Genesis 15:1-6
December 5: Son of Laughter	Genesis 21:1-7
December 6: God Provides a Substitute	Genesis 22:1-2, 6-14
December 7: Jacob's Ladder	Genesis 28:11b-16
December 8: Coat of Many Colors	Selections from Genesis 37 & 50
December 9: Engraved on His Hands	Selections from Deuteronomy 5
December 10: Scarlet Cord	Selections from Joshua 2
December 11: Kinsman Redeemer	Selections from Ruth 1-4
December 12: Shepherd King	I Samuel 16:1, 6-7, 10-13
December 13: Living Temple	1 Kings 5:1-5; 6:11-14
December 14: Elijah's Contest	Selections from I Kings 18
December 15: A Great Light	Isaiah 9:2, 6-7
December 16: A New Kingdom	Isaiah 11:1-4b, 6-10
December 17: Jonah & the Whale	Selections from Jonah 1-3
December 18: The Golden Scepter	Esther 4:10-17
December 19: House of Bread	Micah 5:2-5a
December 20: Zechariah & Elizabeth	Luke 1:5-20
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 2:6-21

Preschool families! Here's a few helpful tips for introducing Jesse Tree:

The basic idea of a Jesse Tree Advent is this:

1. Read one Bible story per day that begins on November 28th, and ends on Christmas Day with the birth of Jesus.
2. Hang an ornament each day with a picture and verse that is a visual reminder of the story. *(Pictures of the ornaments are also provided so your children can color!)*

How to explain it to your **Toddler**:

For a toddler, I'd explain very little. Just do it! If you can keep your Jesse Tree activity short and sweet and at the same time each day, the toddler will learn what to expect. Maybe it's with breakfast or after nap time. Give this activity a name and say it every day. *("Time for Jesse Tree Ornament time.")* Put that day's ornament & Bible story out on the table. Read as much as the toddler can sit through while they're eating a snack. *(Feel free to skip paragraphs or paraphrase!)* When the reading is done, let the toddler hang the ornament on the tree. I bet after a few days, your toddler will know what to expect and get excited about it even though they don't really understand the meaning of a Jesse Tree. You can always say something super simple like, *"The Jesse Tree ornaments tell the story of God's plan to send Jesus to save us from sin. This is the true meaning of Christmas."*

How to explain it to your **Preschooler**:

For a preschool child, I'd introduce the idea on November 27th, the day BEFORE you are going to start. *"This December, we're going to celebrate Advent! Advent means 'coming,' and it's a month when we celebrate that Jesus came to earth as a human to save us from sin. To celebrate the Advent season, we're going to read from the Bible every day and hang an ornament on the tree that goes with the story. These are called Jesse Tree ornaments because Jesse was one of the great-great-great-great-great-grandparents of Jesus."*

How to create a lasting tradition:

>> Be Consistent: For preschool children, consistency is everything. Pick the right time of day for your family and stick to it!

>> Be Concise: Short devotionals can be just as meaningful as long ones, so keep the main thing the main thing!

>> Be Prepared: This includes the content of the devotional, but most importantly, whatever you need to engage the kids. You might want to have a basket of supplies that you pull out each day. This keeps everything in the same spot, so you don't have to waste time playing hide and seek to find what you need.

>> Be Prayerful: Bathe these times in prayer before and after they happen. Ask God to soften your children's hearts and give them a joyful spirit to receive these stories and believe they are true.

We will also be praying for your family as you set out to create new Christmas traditions focused on Jesus!

All scripture quotations are from the New International Early Reader's Version (NIRV).



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

Jesse's family is like a tree that has been cut down. A new little tree will grow from its stump. From its roots a Branch will grow and produce fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on that Branch. The Spirit will help him to be wise and understanding. The Spirit will help him make wise plans and carry them out. The Spirit will help him know the Lord and have respect for him. The Branch will take delight in respecting the Lord. He will not judge things only by the way they look. He won't make decisions based simply on what people say. He will always do what is right when he judges those who are in need. He'll be completely fair when he makes decisions about poor people. When he commands that people be punished, it will happen. When he orders that evil people be put to death, it will take place. He will put on godliness as if it were his belt. He'll wear faithfulness around his waist. At that time, here is what the man who is called the Root of Jesse will do. He will be like a banner that brings nations together. They will come to him. And the place where he rules will be glorious.

ENTER THE STORY:

Imagine a tree with roots that go deep into the ground, and twist and turn throughout your whole yard. *Can you see it?* Now imagine it has really big branches that are so high you have to squint at the sky to see them. That is what our Jesse Tree is like, but it's not a real tree, silly! It's just a picture that represents a family with lots of people in it.

You see, Jesse was the father of David, the boy who threw a stone and took down a giant. *Do you remember David?* He was the young shepherd boy who became a mighty king. God made a really BIG promise to David. God told him that his sons, and grandsons, and great-grandsons would ALWAYS be king and sit on the throne. Forever and ever and ever. But David's sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons did not obey God or follow after him. They loved the things of the world more...and their kingdoms fell...and it seemed like the whole family of Jesse and David had been chopped off right down to the roots. Nothing was left but a dead stump.

But God is faithful to his word, so he promised to send someone NEW from David's line to rescue his people. This person would sit on David's throne and be the best king and a banner of salvation to ALL of the world.

Who do you think this NEW person is? It's Jesus!

When Jesus comes – ALL kinds of different people will race to see him because they will know that he is the special someone God promised to send.

When all hope seems lost, and nothing but a dead stump remains, God reminds us that he and he alone brings dead things to life. Praise the LORD!

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 about how they helped God bring new life to his people.

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



November 29

The Watchtower

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

I will go up to the lookout tower. I'll station myself on the city wall. I'll wait to see how the Lord will reply to me. Then I'll try to figure out how his reply answers what I've complained about. Lord, I know how famous you are. I have great respect for you because of your mighty acts. Do them again for us. Make them known in our time. When you are angry, please have mercy on us... But I will be patient. I'll wait for the day of trouble to come on Babylon. It's the nation that is attacking us. The fig trees might not bud. The vines might not produce any grapes. The olive crop might fail. The fields might not produce any food. There might not be any sheep in the pens. There might not be any cattle in the barns. But I will still be glad because of what the Lord has done. God my Savior fills me with joy. The Lord and King gives me strength. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer. He helps me walk on the highest places.

ENTER THE STORY:

Habakkuk was a messenger for God to the people of Israel, and he lived during a very hard time. Israel's enemies were attacking and conquering them, and they were very sad. Habakkuk was confused about this because Israel was God's special people, and he didn't understand why God wasn't protecting them. Instead of getting mad at God, he decided to go straight to him and ask him what he was doing and why he wasn't listening to their cries.

Unfortunately for Habakkuk, God's answer was not all that comforting. God basically told him that he DID hear the prayers of his people, but things were going to get worse before they got better. WOW! Can you imagine hearing that from God? This must have been very difficult, but Habakkuk knew that God was a good and just God, so he marched up to a tall tower and waited for God to explain.

After God explained to Habakkuk more of what was going to happen, Habakkuk left a bit afraid and nervous, but despite his fears, he chose to trust God's plans and be joyful that God would save his people in the end.

What about us? Is God enough for us?

Could we say that if we had no gifts this Christmas, and there was no delicious Christmas dinner waiting or yummy treats in our stockings, that we would be glad and trust in God as our Savior? If Jesus was all we had in this world, would that be enough and make us happy – or would we always want more?

This Christmas, we want to be like Habakkuk as we peek down from our Jesse Tree like a watchman on a tower, leaning over to get a better look and hoping to see 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 1:26a, 27-28, 31; 2:7 (NirV)

Then God said, "Let us make human beings so that they are like us... So God created human beings in his own likeness. He created them to be like himself. He created them as male and female. God blessed them. He said to them, "Have children so that there will be many of you. Fill the earth and bring it under your control. Rule over the fish in the seas and the birds in the sky. Rule over every living creature that moves along the ground."
God saw everything he had made. And it was very good. There was evening, and there was morning. It was day six.
Then the LORD God formed a man. He made him out of the dust of the ground. God breathed the breath of life into him. And the man became a living person.

ENTER THE STORY:

Every great story has a beginning that grabs your attention and makes you excited for what is to come! The Christmas story has a beginning like that, and it starts *right here in Genesis*. Out of the darkness and empty space, God creates everything by speaking words. "Let there be light!" As soon as God spoke, whatever he said happened. Light appeared, land appeared, trees appeared, and birds appeared! For six days, he filled the world with all sorts of beautiful things, and it all showed how wonderful he was... but he was not finished.

He saved the best for last, and when God created man, he didn't speak him into existence. He knelt down and formed him from the dust of the earth, making him with his own hands. When God was finished forming the dirt-man, he breathed into his nose, and the dirt-man came to life! God named him Adam. *Can you imagine that?*

This is just like the story of the Jesse Tree. In that story, we saw God bring life from a dead stump! Now he brings life from dust and mud!

When God created the first humans, he was thinking of another human—his own Son, Jesus. Jesus is like God in every way. He has always existed and was WITH God in the beginning, but in the Christmas story, we will see him leave heaven and come to earth to be made into the perfect human. He will do this, so he can show us how wonderful God is. While he is on the earth, he will NEVER mess up, and he will NEVER disobey God. This is such good news for us because we mess up all the time, and we disobey God all the time. We need Jesus to come to earth and SAVE us!

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

PRAY: Jesus, we are grateful that you have shown us what God is like. We are thankful that through the Holy Spirit, we can know you and be united to you. We pray that you would shape us to look more and more like you each and every day. Amen.



READ: Selections from Genesis 2-3 (NIRV)

The Lord God had planted a garden in the east in Eden. He put in the garden the man he had formed. The Lord God gave the man a command. He said, "You may eat fruit from any tree in the garden. But you must not eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you do, you will certainly die."

(Genesis 2:8, 16-17)

The serpent was more clever than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. The serpent said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat fruit 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 the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden. Do not even touch it. If you do, you will die.'" "You will certainly not die," the serpent said to the woman. "God knows that when you eat fruit from that tree, you will know things you have never known before. Like God, you will be able to tell the difference between good and evil." The woman saw that the tree's fruit was good to eat and pleasing to look at. She also saw that it would make a person wise. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her. And he ate it. Then both of them knew things they had never known before. They realized they were naked. So they sewed together fig leaves and made clothes for themselves. *(Genesis 3:1-7)*

*Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What have you done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me. That's why I ate the fruit." So the Lord God spoke to the serpent. He said, "Because you have done this, 'You are set apart from all livestock and all wild animals. I am putting a curse on you. You will crawl on your belly. You will eat dust all the days of your life. I will make you and the woman hate each other. Your children and her children will be enemies. Her son will crush your head. And you will bite his heel.'" *(Genesis 3:13-15)**

ENTER THE STORY:

It might be hard for us to imagine, but there was a time when sin and death did not exist and nothing bad ever happened! God's world was "good" and the first two people, Adam and Eve, lived in a wonderful garden. God put them in charge of the garden and told them to work the land and take care of 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.

Adam and Eve loved being with God because they could walk and talk with him whenever they wanted.

Sadly, Adam and Eve did NOT live happily ever after because they chose to listen to the voice of God's enemy, the devil, and they disobeyed God.

It feels like our story just started, and already everything is falling apart. Sin is nasty and once it gets into God's good world, it spreads like a sickness. It seems impossible to get rid of it, but we need to know that God was NOT surprised when Adam and Eve disobeyed. God knows EVERYTHING, so he knew they would disobey him, and it was all part of his plan *(remember when we told you that the story of Christmas actually started in Genesis?)*

There is always a punishment for sin, whether we can see it or not, and the bad news for Adam and Eve was that their disobedience caused them to have to leave the perfect garden and be separated from God's presence, but in the midst of their pain, God gave them a glimmer of hope.

- In Genesis 3:15, God said that one day a special someone from Eve's family line far, far, into the future would come and
- crush the head of the serpent and defeat him forever. Our hope rests completely on the actions of this special person –
- this "Serpent Crusher."

- *Do you know who this special someone might be? It's Jesus!*

- Through Adam and Eve, sin and death entered the world and ruined everything, but the hope of Christmas is that the
- Serpent Crusher – Jesus Christ, would be born as a human, so that he could die to pay the price for our sins.

■ **PRAY:** *Jesus, we are amazed at how much you love us. You love us so much that you left heaven to enter our world as a tiny baby. Even though we are the ones who disobey you and don't follow after you, we know that you are the one who willingly takes our punishment to bring us back to the Father. Thank you, Jesus, for giving up everything for us. May your good news never grow old to us. Amen.*



READ: Selections from Genesis 6-9 (NIV)

The Lord saw how bad the sins of everyone on earth had become. They only thought about evil things. The Lord was very sad that he had made human beings on the earth. His heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, "I created human beings, but I will wipe them out. I will also destroy the animals, the birds in the sky, and the creatures that move along the ground. I am very sad that I have made human beings." But the Lord was very pleased with Noah." (Genesis 6:5-8)

So God said to Noah, "...make yourself an ark out of cypress wood. Make rooms in it. Cover it with tar inside and out...I am going to bring a flood on the earth...It will destroy every living creature that breathes. Everything on earth will die. But I will make my covenant with you. You will go into the ark. Your sons and your wife and your sons' wives...Noah did everything just as God commanded him. (Genesis 6:14, 17a, 18, 22)

"I am now making my covenant with you and with all your children who will be born after you...The waters of a flood will never again destroy all life." God continued, "...Here is the sign of the covenant I am making. I have put my rainbow in the clouds. It will be the sign of the covenant...Sometimes when I bring clouds over the earth, a rainbow will appear in then. Then I will remember my covenant between me and you and every kind of living creature. The waters will never again become a flood to destroy all life. (Genesis 9:9, 11a, 12-15)

ENTER THE STORY:

Do you remember a few days ago when we talked about how God created the first man, 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 God's breath in him.

In this story, God takes his breath away from some people, but not because he stopped loving them. He never stops loving people. No, God took his breath away from people because everywhere he looked, they were doing really, really bad things and hurting each other. It made God very sad.

God is not happy about ANY sin or disobedience, but during Noah's time, it was SO bad that he didn't have a choice. He needed to fix the mistakes people were making, so God hit the reset button. He caused water to rise up everywhere and cover the whole wide world in a flood. He did this so we would know just how serious sin is.

But God did not totally destroy His creation. **Remember Noah?** Noah loved God. Everywhere God looked, people were turning their backs on him, but not Noah. Noah didn't care what people thought of him. Noah's heart was committed to God, so God showed mercy by saving Noah, his family, and a few of the animals.

In this story, we see God punish everyone for their sins and save **ONLY ONE** family. Soon, we will see God punish **ONLY ONE** man to offer salvation for everyone.

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

After Jesus finished the job God gave him to do, he returned to heaven but he did not leave us without God's presence. He promised to send another helper, One who would help us know the truth and make us feel sorry for our sins. This helper is the Holy Spirit, and he **IS** the very breath of God.

PRAY: Lord, forgive us when we make mistakes and do bad things, especially when we hurt those closest to us. Thank you for your amazing love and for sending us your Holy Spirit, who draws us close to you. Amen.



READ: Genesis 12:1-4, 7 (NirV)

*The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's family. Go 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. You will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you. I will put a curse on anyone who puts a curse on you. All nations on earth will be blessed because of you." So Abram went, just as the Lord had told him...
The Lord appeared to Abram...He said, "I will give this land to your family who comes after you." So Abram built an altar there to honor the Lord, who had appeared to him.*

ENTER THE STORY:

Out of the blue, and without warning, God called a man named Abram (*soon to be Abraham*) to pack up his things, leave the only home he had ever known, and go make a new home in a new place.

If God called you to pack everything up and leave the safety of your home, would you do it?

Abram did! When God called, he left everything behind, and even though he and his wife Sarai were old and gray and didn't even have one child yet, they believed that God would give them everything he promised!

God called Abram because he wanted to do something new through him. He wanted to bless Abram and his family so that they could share those blessings with others.

How could Abram share God's blessings? Well, with God's help, we will see Abram create a family, and out of that family will come lots and lots of people, and they will be very special to God. Out of all the other people on the earth, he will love them MOST! Out of *ONE* of those families, God will send someone special to make good on his promise to Abram -- that through one of Abram's children's, children's, children's, children -- the *WHOLE WORLD* would be blessed.

Do you know who this special someone is? Its Jesus!

Jesus happily left his home in heaven and came into our world. This means *the blessing God gave to Abram was given to us, too, through JESUS! This is why we celebrate Christmas!* Our wonderful, amazing Savior, Jesus, has come to help bring us back to God!

PRAY: *Jesus, it is so easy to get comfortable in our homes with all the things that we have and not listen for your voice calling out to us! Help us be like Abram and trust you no matter what. Help us believe you will always be true to your promises. Amen.*



READ: Genesis 15:1-6 (NIRV)

Some time later, Abram had a vision. The Lord said to him, "Abram, do not be afraid. I am like a shield to you. I am your very great reward." But Abram said, "Lord and King, what can you give me? I still don't have any children. My servant Eliezer comes from Damascus. When I die, he will get everything I own." Abram continued, "You haven't given me any children. So this servant of mine will get everything I own." Then a message from the Lord came to Abram. The Lord said, "When you die, what you have will not go to this man. You will have a son of your own. He will get everything you have." The Lord took Abram outside and said, "Look up at the sky. Count the stars, if you can." Then he said to him, "That's how many children will be born into your family." Abram believed the Lord. The Lord was pleased with Abram because he believed. So Abram's faith made him right with the Lord.

ENTER THE STORY:

Have you ever gone outside when it was dark, looked up at the skies, and tried to count the stars?

In our story today, God takes Abram outside and tells him to look up at the beautiful night sky, full of twinkling stars, and God tells Abram to try to count them if he can because that is how BIG his family will be.

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

Can I tell you a secret? There is a treasure buried deep within the word "offspring." In Genesis 3:15, God said that a "Serpent Crusher" would come from Eve's family and defeat the bad, evil serpent. But remember, we've seen this word before! The word offspring is actually referring to *ONE VERY SPECIAL MAN*. Isaac was Abram's first child, but this promise was SO MUCH bigger than Isaac!

Do you know who this special offspring God is promising to Abram might be? It's Jesus!

It's always been about Jesus!

As soon as God shared that special promise with Abram, the Bible tells us that Abram BELIEVED the Lord. Abram trusted God to keep his really BIG promise and God saved him because of his faith.

I have more good news! This BIG promise God made to Abram, that a special someone from his family would bless the entire world, that can be for US, TOO! When God showed Abram all those stars, he was including you and me and everyone that BELIEVES and TRUSTS in God. We can be a part of Abraham's family too because of Jesus Christ!

PRAY: *Lord, thank you for sending Jesus through Abram's family to bless the whole world. Please help us believe and trust in you just like Abram did! Help us 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 21:1-7 (NIRV)

The LORD was gracious to Sarah, just as he had said he would be. The LORD did for Sarah what he had promised to do. Sarah became pregnant. She had a son by Abraham when he was old. The child was born at the exact time God had promised. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah had by him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him. He did it exactly as God had commanded him. Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, "God has given laughter to me. Everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." She also said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would breast-feed children? But I've had a son by him when he is old."

ENTER THE STORY:

Did you notice that God changed Abram and Sarai's names? God changes Abram to Abraham, which means "father of a multitude," and God promises Abraham that kings would come from his family. God also changes Sarai's name, which means "princess" to Sarah, which means "noblewoman" or "mother of kings." God changed her name because she will have kings come from her too.

Being given a new name with a powerful meaning is great, but Sarah wasn't worried about nations and kings, she just wanted one baby, and it seemed like it was impossible now. Abraham was 99 years old, and she was 90! Sarah's body was as good as dead, and this made Sarah very sad.

But what have we been learning about 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 think there is anything God cannot do? Of course not! Nothing is too hard for God!

After all, God, who made the promise to give them a family as numerous as the stars, is the same God who made those stars and calls them by name! It would be easy for God to help Sarah have a baby.

In fact, wasn't that the whole point all along? God's promise would be impossible for Abraham and Sarah on their own. God would have to do it for them! **AND HE DID!**

Nine months later, Sarah gave birth to a bouncing baby boy. They named their son "Isaac," which means "son of laughter," and Sarah laughed, and laughed, and laughed, because God had given her joy again and now everyone could laugh with her. *This baby boy took 25 years to arrive...but he was WORTH IT!*

Many years later, God would do something impossible again, but this time it would be with a young girl who wasn't even married yet. God would take his Son, and fashion him into a tiny, little baby and by the power of the Holy Spirit place him inside this young woman's belly. What an amazing way for Jesus to enter our world!

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, 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 SO 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!



December

6

God Provides a Substitute

READ: Genesis 22:1-2, 6-14, (NirV)

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," Abraham replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son. He is the one you love. Take Isaac. Go to the place called Moriah. Give your son to me there as a burnt offering. Sacrifice him on the mountain I will show you." ...

Abraham had his son Isaac carry the wood for the burnt offering. He himself carried the fire and the knife. And the two of them walked on together. Then Isaac 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 walked on together. They reached the place God had shown Abraham. There Abraham built an altar. He arranged the wood on it. He tied up his son Isaac. Abraham placed him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand. He picked up the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven. He said, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," Abraham replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not harm him. Now I know that you would do anything for God. You have not held back from me your son, your only son." Abraham looked around. There in a bush he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram. He sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham named that place The Lord Will Provide. To this day people say, "It will be provided on the mountain of the Lord."

ENTER THE STORY:

What an odd thing for God to ask Abraham to do! Take your son and offer him as a burnt offering. After all, Isaac was Abraham's *ONLY* son and the beginning of God's promise to give Abraham a family as numerous as the stars. Without Isaac, the plan doesn't work. If Isaac died, God's Word would fail and he would break his promise.

This doesn't seem like a very good idea...*UNLESS*... God has a plan that we can't see. God is the **BEST** teacher and he knows how to help Abraham understand just how *FAR* a Father must go to save his children.

How does Abraham respond? *With faith and obedience!*

When you are asked to do something at home, are you good at obeying the very FIRST time? It's hard to obey, isn't it?

Abraham obeyed because he **KNEW** God would be faithful to his word. He knew – one way or another – he would be coming back down that mountain with his son, so he saddled up his donkey and set out on yet another journey where he didn't know the whole story. In the end, he was right! God provided a substitute so that Isaac was saved.

This story is a picture of another very important story in our Bible!

In that story there is another Father who was also willing to take the Son he loved very much and offer him up as a sacrifice. Instead of finding an animal caught in a thorn bush, that Son would wear a crown of thorns and lay down his life for others. His Father would be **SO, SO** sad when his Son died, but death would not be able to hold him, and after three days he would raise from the dead and go back to heaven to be with his Father.

Do you know who this special Father and Son are? It's God, and his Son Jesus!

It's always 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 he is the baby boy in the manger, he is also the lamb of God who
- takes away the sins of the world!
-
-

■ **PRAY:** *God, we are always amazed at how you weave together 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 want to have faith and obey like Abraham did too. God, help us always trust your plan even if we don't understand. Amen.*

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

**READ:** Genesis 28:11b-16, (NirV)

Then [Jacob] lay down to sleep. In a dream he saw a stairway standing on the earth. Its top reached to heaven. The angels of God were going up and coming down on it. The Lord stood beside the stairway. He said, "I am the Lord. I am the God of your grandfather Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your children after you the land you are lying on. They will be like the dust of the earth that can't be counted. They will spread out to the west and to the east. They will spread out to the north and to the south. All nations on earth will be blessed because of you and your children after you. I am with you. I will watch over you everywhere 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."

Jacob woke up from his sleep. Then he thought, "The Lord is surely in this place. And I didn't even know it."

ENTER THE STORY:

A few days 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 too was going to have such a big family he wouldn't be able to count them. Isaac was the first son born into this BIG family, and he had two sons, Jacob and Esau. You couldn't have had two, more different sons. Esau was big and strong, really hairy, and he liked to hunt. Jacob was not quite as big, maybe a little less strong, much less hair, and he liked to cook. These two brothers did NOT get along very well, and Jacob ended up running away after making some bad choices.

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 and there were angels going up and down the ladder, and then a voice called 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, and he told him that all the nations in the whole wide world would be blessed through his family.

God made the *SAME* promises to Abraham about a special person 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!

But there is more, because the *BEST* promise was yet to come: 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. This 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, we are so thankful that you 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 (NirV)

Israel [Jacob's new name] loved Joseph more than any of his other sons. That's because Joseph had been born to him when he was old. Israel made him a beautiful robe. Joseph's brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them. So they hated Joseph. They couldn't even speak one kind word to him. Joseph had a dream. When he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Listen to the dream I had. We were tying up bundles of grain out in the field. Suddenly my bundle stood up straight. Your bundles gathered around my bundle and bowed down to it." His brothers said to him, "Do you plan to be king over us? Will you really rule over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dream.

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. And 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 that you didn't? Well, it's kind of like that.

Joseph's brothers were SO mad at him that they decided to throw 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 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, (NirV)

Now that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers were worried. They said, "Remember all the bad things we did to Joseph? What if he decides to hold those things against us?"... So they sent a message to Joseph. They said, "Your father gave us directions before he died. He said, 'Here's what you must say to Joseph. Tell him, "I'm asking you to forgive your brothers. Forgive the terrible things they did to you. Forgive them for treating you so badly." '... When their message came to Joseph, he wept. Then his brothers came and threw themselves down in front of him. "We are your slaves," they said. But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Do you think I'm God? You planned to harm me. But God planned it for good. He planned to do what is now being done. He wanted to save many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I'll provide for you and your children." He calmed their fears. And he spoke in a kind way 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 and gave up his 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.
.
.
.
.
.
.

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



READ: Selections from Deuteronomy 5:1-22, 28-29 (NirV)

Moses sent for all the Israelites. Here is what he said to them. Israel, listen to me. Here are the rules and laws I'm announcing to you today. Learn them well. Be sure to obey them.

The LORD said, "I am the LORD your God. I brought you out of Egypt. That is the land where you were slaves.

"Do not put any other gods in place of me."

"Do not make statues of gods that look like anything in the sky or on the earth or in the waters. Do not bow down to them or worship them. I am the LORD your God. I want you to worship only me.

"Do not misuse the name of the LORD your God..."

"Keep the Sabbath day holy. Do this just as the LORD your God has commanded you. Do all your work in six days. But the seventh day is a sabbath to honor the LORD your God. Do not do any work on that day.

"Honor your father and mother, just as the LORD your God has commanded you..."

"Do not murder.

"Do not commit adultery.

"Do not steal.

"Do not be a false witness against your neighbor.

"Do not want to have your neighbor's wife. Do not desire anything your neighbor owns..."

These are the commandments the LORD announced in a loud voice to your whole community. He gave them to you there on the mountain. He spoke out of the fire, cloud and deep darkness. He didn't add anything else. Then he wrote the commandments on two stone tablets. And he gave them to me.

The Lord...said to me, "I have heard what these people said to you. Everything they said was good. But I wish they would always have respect for me in their hearts. I wish they would always obey all my commands. Then things would go well with them and their children forever.

ENTER THE STORY:

God used ten plagues to save his people, the Israelites, from slavery in Egypt. Now he gives them just ten rules that they must keep in order to have a healthy, happy relationship with him.

Ten rules? That doesn't seem so hard, right?

What about you? Do you think it is EASY to obey everything your mom or dad tells you to do?

God loves his people very much, and he wants the very best for them. These ten rules were like ten walls – built around his people to protect them, and to keep them safe and happy. These boundaries would show the people of Israel what they could and couldn't do and how they could best show God to the rest of the world, but *EVEN MORE* than that, this relationship was supposed to be like a marriage between God and his people.

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

No matter how hard they tried, they could not do it. They could not and would not obey God's laws.

The good news is, God *KNEW* the Israelites would not obey, and he also *KNEW* that you and I wouldn't be able to obey either. We are just as bad at obeying God's Laws. We need HELP too!

• And of course God helps us because he loves us! He sends his Son, Jesus, who obeyed *ALL of the law!!* He did what we
• could not do, and he fixed the bad things that happened in the garden, because he IS the Serpent Crusher!
• Now, those of us who love him can share his love with the world, so that other people can KNOW God too. And Jesus, the
• perfect law-keeper, summed up the law like this: love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your
• neighbor as yourself.
• The first time God gave them the ten rules, God used his own finger to engrave, or carve them onto stone tablets, but
• through Jesus, we are "...engraved on the palms of his hands," (*Isaiah 49:16*) and through the power of the Holy Spirit,
• the law is engraved on our hearts! Through him, we have the power to obey and when we don't, we have the ability to
• confess our sins to him and be forgiven.

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

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



READ: Selections from Joshua 2:1-22 (NirV)

Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. "Go, look over the land," he said, "especially Jericho." So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there... The king of Jericho was told, "Look! Some of the Israelites have come here tonight. They've come to check out the land." So the king sent a message to Rahab. It said, "Bring out the men who came into your house. They've come to check out the whole land." But the woman had hidden the two men... Rahab went up on the roof before the spies settled down for the night. She said to them, "I know that the LORD has given you this land. We are very much afraid of you. Everyone who lives in this country is weak with fear because of you. "Now then, please give me your word. Promise me in the name of the LORD that you will be kind to my family... Promise that you won't put any of us to death." The spies had said to her, "You made us give our word. But we won't keep our promise unless you do what we say. When we enter the land, you must tie this bright red rope in the window. Tie it in the window you let us down through. Bring your father and mother into your house. Also bring in your brothers and everyone else in your family..." "I'll do as you say," Rahab replied. So she sent them away, and they left. Then she tied the bright red rope in the window.

ENTER THE STORY:

Rahab was a woman from Jericho, a strong city with really big walls, but she had an even bigger 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 two spies into her town to find out what the city was like, she helped them hide from the King, and 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!

Did you know that the word cord or rope in Hebrew is the same word for *HOPE*? That word can also mean "to tie or bind two things together," so that "scarlet cord" is really her "scarlet hope!"

By hanging that cord out her window, Rahab was binding herself to the Israelites and putting her *HOPE* in God to save her and her family! And God did save her and her family!

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

Just like that, we are back at Jesse's tree. Do you remember what God promised would come out of the stump of Jesse'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, and everyone who binds themselves to him will be saved just like Rahab and her family.

PRAY: Jesus, you are our Scarlet Cord, and our only hope. We choose to bind ourselves to you and wait with great expectation for you to 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 (NIRV)

While Naomi was in Moab, she heard that the LORD had helped his people. He had begun to provide food for them again. So Naomi and her two daughters-in-law prepared to go from Moab back to her home.... Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Both of you go back. Each of you go to your own mother's home. You were kind to your husbands, who have died. You have also been kind to me. So may the Lord be just as kind to you... Then she kissed them goodbye. ... But Ruth held on to her. "Don't try to make me leave you and go back. Where you go I'll go. Where you stay I'll stay. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God..." Naomi realized that Ruth had made up her mind to go with her. So she stopped trying to make her go back... So Naomi returned from Moab. Ruth, her daughter-in-law from Moab, came with her. They arrived in Bethlehem just when people were beginning to harvest the barley.

Naomi had a relative on her husband's side of the family. The relative's name was Boaz. He was a very important man from the family of Elimelek... Ruth said [to Naomi], "Let me go out to the fields. I'll pick up the grain that has been left..." Naomi said to her, "My daughter, go ahead." So Ruth went out to a field and began to pick up grain... As it turned out, she was working in a field that belonged to Boaz.

... Boaz married Ruth... The LORD blessed her so that she became pregnant. And she had a son. The women said to Naomi, "We praise the LORD. Today he has provided a family protector for you. May this child become famous all over Israel! He will make your life new again. He'll take care of you when you are old. He's the son of your very own daughter-in-law. She loves you. She is better to you than seven sons." Then Naomi took the child in her arms and took care of him... They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David.

ENTER THE STORY:

The town of Bethlehem, whose name means, "house of bread," had no bread, so Naomi and her family left in search of food. They settled in a new land, but sadly, Naomi's husband and both of her sons died, and she was left alone with the two women her sons had married.

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. She had made up her mind – she wanted Naomi and the Israelites to be her family, and she wanted Naomi's God to be her God.

Does this sound familiar? It should, because yesterday, we saw the same thing in Rahab's story. Another woman who wanted the people of Israel to be her family, and wanted their God to be her God!

And so Naomi and Ruth traveled back home to Bethlehem in search of family that could help, and God, who loves when people ask him for help, provided the answer!

You see, there was a special rule in Israel — if a woman's husband died before they had children, one of his other family members was supposed to marry her and help her have a son to carry on her husband's name.

This person was called the "kinsman redeemer." This was a very special job, because the, "kinsman redeemer," would rescue people!

In this story, Boaz steps up as the kinsman redeemer for Ruth and Naomi. He chose to marry Ruth and provide for her and protect her so that her family could continue.

Much later in the Bible, we read about a *MUCH BETTER* kinsman redeemer. A very special someone who will come to rescue his people, but he will save them from so much more than hunger... he will save them from their sins.

• Do you know who this special someone is? It's JESUS! Like Boaz, Jesus steps up to provide for us and rescue us.
• And what about Ruth and Boaz? Well, they have a baby boy named Obed...who makes Naomi so happy. And Obed
• grows up to be the father of Jesse, who grows up to be the father of David. And yet again, we find ourselves right back at
• the stump of Jesse! But this time, we *KNOW* who the shoot is, and we can't wait for him to arrive because when he gets
• here...he will be a great blessing and we will finally be happy, just like Naomi was when Ruth gave her a grandson.
•
•

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

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



READ: I Samuel 16:1, 6-7, 10-13 (NIRV)

The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you be filled with sorrow because of Saul? I have refused to have him as king over Israel. Fill your animal horn with olive oil and go on your way. I am sending you to Jesse in Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king."

When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab. He thought, "This has to be the one the LORD wants me to anoint for him." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider how handsome or tall he is. I have not chosen him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outside of a person. But the LORD looks at what is in the heart." Jesse had seven of his sons walk in front of Samuel. But Samuel said to him, "The LORD hasn't chosen any of them."

So he asked Jesse, "Are these the only sons you have?" "No," Jesse answered. "My youngest son is taking care of the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him" . . . Jesse sent for his son and had him brought in.

He looked very healthy. He had a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the LORD said, "Get up and anoint him. This is the one." So Samuel got the animal horn that was filled with olive oil. He anointed David in front of his brothers. From that day on, the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully on David.

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.

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. Sheep are funny animals, aren't they? They aren't very smart, they are really stubborn, they can't protect themselves and they make *baaaaaad (say it like a sheep)* decisions when they're hungry.

Does that sound like anyone you know? Of course it does because IT'S US! We are just like sheep! That is why God needed someone who would be a good shepherd to his people, and David would do just that. He would love God's people and show them how to love and worship 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 Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. He would also be a Good Shepherd to God's people, and he would love God with all of his heart.

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

Samuel won't be the last person to travel to the town of Bethlehem looking for the king, but this time when they arrive, they won't go to a house or to a fancy palace. They will go to a stable because this tiny, baby King will be wrapped in swaddling clothes and sleeping nestled among the animals in a manger. It's not what they expected . . . it's **BETTER!**

PRAY: God, thank you for sending us your Son, who is the Good Shepherd and the perfect king. May we always follow him by loving you with all of our hearts. Amen.

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



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

Hiram was the king of Tyre...He heard that Solomon had become the next king after his father David. Hiram had always been David's friend. So Hiram sent his messengers to Solomon. Then Solomon sent a message back to Hiram. Solomon said, "As you know, my father David had to fight many battles. His enemies attacked him from every side. So he couldn't build a temple where the LORD his God would put his Name. That wouldn't be possible until the LORD had put his enemies under his control. But now the LORD my God has given me peace and rest on every side. We don't have any enemies. And we don't have any other major problems either. So I'm planning to build a temple. I want to build it for the Name of the LORD my God. That's what he told my father David he wanted me to do. He said, 'I will put your son on the throne in your place. He will build a temple. I will put my Name there.'"

A message came to Solomon from the LORD. The LORD said, "You are now building this temple. Follow my orders. Keep my rules. Obey all my commands. Then I will make the promise I gave your father David come true. I will do it through you. I will live among my people Israel. I will not desert them." So Solomon built the temple and finished it.

ENTER THE STORY:

God loved his people very much, and he wanted to live with them so they could be near him and worship him every single day, but there was one *HUGE* problem. God is holy, which means he is perfect. He has never done anything bad! His very presence is dangerous to people that have sinned, so in order for him to live with them, they had to build a special home with a very, very special room where *NOBODY* could go except when God allowed them to come inside. The first home they built for God was more like a tent that could be set up and taken down, but eventually, Solomon built God a permanent home called a temple. This temple was *BIG* and *BEAUTIFUL*., and the inside was covered in gold, so everything shimmered and sparkled. It was a perfect home for God!

When the temple was finished, a cloud filled with God's presence came down and filled up the special room they made for him, and everyone was speechless and in awe of God's glory. But, there was still only *ONE* person that could go inside God's special room *ONE* time a year on a special day. This went on for many, many years, but the people of Israel kept on sinning and making bad choices, and this made God sad, so God's presence rose up from the temple and left.

*God still loved his people very much and wanted to live with them, but he had a **BETTER** way!*

God would send a very special someone who would live among his people. This special someone wouldn't have to hide his glory in a cloud or keep it locked away in a special room. This person would live and walk among the people and show them God's glory face to face.

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

Through Jesus, God's presence would come live among his people again. After Jesus' work on this earth was finished, he would go back to his Father in heaven, but he wouldn't leave us alone; he would send another helper...the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not live inside a temple or *AMONG* God's people. The Holy Spirit dwells inside our hearts making God's people living temples (*I Corinthians 6:20*). With God's Spirit dwelling inside of us, we can be sure that God's presence will always be with us, and he will never leave us or forsake us.

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

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



READ: I Kings 18:17-26, 30-31, 36-39 (NIRV)

When [Ahab] saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you? You are always stirring up trouble in Israel." "I haven't made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have turned away from the LORD's commands. You have followed gods that are named Baal. Now send for people from all over Israel. Tell them to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the 450 prophets of the god named Baal. Also bring the 400 prophets of the female god named Asherah. All of them eat at Jezebel's table." So Ahab sent that message all through Israel. He gathered the prophets together on Mount Carmel.

Elijah went there and stood in front of the people. He said, "How long will it take you to make up your minds? If the LORD is the one and only God, worship him. But if Baal is the one and only God, worship him." The people didn't say anything. Then Elijah said to them, "I'm the only one of the LORD's prophets left. But Baal has 450 prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves. Let them cut it into pieces. Then let them put it on the wood. But don't let them set fire to it. I'll prepare the other bull. I'll put it on the wood. But I won't set fire to it. Then you pray to your god. And I'll pray to the Lord. The god who answers by sending fire down is the one and only God." Then all the people said, "What you are saying is good."

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls. There are many of you. So prepare your bull first. Pray to your god. But don't light the fire." So they prepared the bull they had been given. They prayed to Baal from morning until noon. "Baal! Answer us!" they shouted. But there wasn't any reply. No one answered.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." So they went to him. Elijah got 12 stones...one for each tribe in the family line of Jacob...Elijah used the stones to build an altar to honor the LORD...When it was time to offer the evening sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward. He prayed, "LORD, you are the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel. Today let everyone know that you are God in Israel. Let them know I'm your servant. Let them know I've done all these things because you commanded me to. Answer me. Lord, answer me. Then these people will know that you are the one and only God. They'll know that you are turning their hearts back to you again." The fire of the LORD came down. It burned up the sacrifice. It burned up the wood and the stones and the soil. It even dried up the water in the ditch. All the people saw it. Then they fell down flat with their faces toward the ground. They cried out, "The LORD is the one and only God! The LORD is the one and only God!"

ENTER THE STORY:

God has always wanted his people to love him MORE than anything else in the whole wide world, but there was just one problem. His people, the Israelites, were not very good at this. They were pulled away by lots of different things. If it sparkled and shimmered and offered something better, they chased after it and worshiped it with their whole heart.

Elijah was a messenger for God, and he had a very hard job. He had to tell the king of Israel that God would punish him if he didn't change his bad behavior. This made the king very upset. But you see, this king worshiped a bunch of pretend, imaginary gods, and he encouraged the people of Israel to do the same. This made God very angry.

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

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

Now it was Yahweh's turn, and boy were the people in for a special show!

• Elijah wanted to make sure there was NO doubt who the real god was, so he even had his helpers dump 12 buckets full
• of water on the wood and the altar. There was so much water that it made a little river that floated around the altar!
• *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* the water in the trench! When
• the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God."
• They believed that God was the only true God, at least for a little while. Sadly, their faithfulness wouldn't last forever. It
• wouldn't be long before Israel would turn away from Yahweh again, and look to other pretend gods to give them what
• they thought they needed most.
• *This story happened a long, long time ago, but it is still hard for us today to love God MORE than anything else. Our
• hearts still chase after many other things.*
• If we are not careful, we will be tricked into hoping the things of this world will make us happy. Instead, this Christmas
• season, let's remind ourselves of the only thing in life worth waiting for...Jesus. 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!

December

15

A Great Light



READ: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 (NIRV)

The people who are now living in darkness will see a great light. They are now living in a very dark land. But a light will shine on them.

A child will be born to us. A son will be given to us. He will rule over us. And he will be called Wonderful Adviser and Mighty God. He will also be called Father Who Lives Forever and Prince Who Brings Peace. There will be no limit to how great his authority is. The peace he brings will never end. He will rule on David's throne and over his kingdom. He will make the kingdom strong and secure. His rule will be based on what is fair and right. It will last forever. The LORD's great love will make sure that happens. He rules over all.

ENTER THE STORY:

A prophet is someone who brings a message from God and shares it with the people. God sent many prophets to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with many different messages, but one message was always the same – Love me more than you love anything else. As we've seen, Israel had a hard time doing that.

Isaiah was one of God's special messengers, and he served God during a time when the people living in the northern kingdom of Israel were in danger. Their enemies from the north, the Assyrians, were trying to conquer them and take over their kingdom. Isaiah warned all of God's people that it was going to be really bad. It was a sad and gloomy message, but tonight, we read a different message from Isaiah...a message of HOPE! Isaiah told them that even though they had been living in the dark, a great light was coming. God was sending someone to rescue them!

Have you ever looked up into the super bright sun and had to squint your eyes and quickly look away because it was SO bright? *Well, this great light won't be like the sun that we can't even bear to look at. It will be BETTER because it's a PERSON, a special someone who will lead God's people the right way, and help them love God with all of their heart. This special someone will come and shine his light on Israel and give them hope!*

Do you know who this special light is? It's Jesus!

Jesus IS the child that Isaiah said would 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, and 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 11:1-4b, 6-10 (NirV)

Jesse's family is like a tree that has been cut down. A new little tree will grow from its stump. From its roots a Branch will grow and produce fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on that Branch. The Spirit will help him to be wise and understanding. The Spirit will help him make wise plans and carry them out. The Spirit will help him know the LORD and have respect for him. The Branch will take delight in respecting the LORD.

He will not judge things only by the way they look. He won't make decisions based simply on what people say. He will always do what is right when he judges those who are in need. He'll be completely fair when he makes decisions about poor people...

Wolves will live with lambs. Leopards will lie down with goats. Calves and lions will eat together. And little children will lead them around. Cows will eat with bears. Their little ones will lie down together. And lions will eat straw like oxen. A baby will play near a hole where cobras live. A young child will put its hand into a nest where poisonous snakes live. None of those animals will harm or destroy anything or anyone on my holy mountain of Zion. The oceans are full of water. In the same way, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. At that time, here is what the man who is called the Root of Jesse will do. He will be like a banner that brings nations together. They will come to him. And the place where he rules will be glorious.

ENTER THE STORY:

On the very first night of our Jesse Tree Advent, we read from Isaiah 11 and learned that a shoot would grow out of the stump of Jesse's cut-down family tree. This would be a special person; he would be the perfect ruler, sit on David's throne, and be a banner of salvation to ALL of the world.

Do you remember who this special person was? It's Jesus!

Well, today, we learned something NEW! We got to take a peek into what Jesus' kingdom will be like when he is king, and if we're honest, it seemed a bit CRAZY!!

Wolves snuggling with lambs? Cows and bears munching on snacks together? Lions eating straw? Babies playing with snakes? **WOAH! Can you imagine a world like that? It's sounds pretty amazing, doesn't it?**

Jesus' kingdom won't be like any of the other kingdoms that came before him. His kingdom will be **FULL OF PEACE!** In fact, yesterday, we read that, *"The peace [Jesus] brings will never end."*

When Adam and Eve sinned **ALL THE WAY** back in the beginning when they were still in the garden, **EVERYTHING CHANGED...**but not in a good way. Adam and Eve had to leave the garden, the ground became super hard to work with, and the animals were different, too. Especially snakes! They had to crawl on their belly in the dust, but in Jesus' kingdom, all those sneaky, slithering snakes become nothing more than playful pets.

This is why God sent His Son Jesus...to make **ALL** things new. This included **ALL** of creation, even the animals! These verses give us hope and point us to a future where death and hurt and pain will be no more!

It is difficult to imagine a future like this, isn't it? Maybe even impossible?

There's that word again...*impossible*, but hasn't God shown us over and over again this season that **NOTHING** is impossible for him?

• 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 his creation made new again.
• *I saw "a new heaven and a new earth." The first heaven and the first earth were completely gone. There was no longer any
• sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem. It was coming down out of heaven from God. It was prepared like a bride
• beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne. It said, "Look! God now makes his home with
• the people. He will live with them. They will be his people. And God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will
• wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death.' And there will be no more sadness. There will be no
• more crying or pain. Things are no longer the way they used to be." He who was sitting on the throne said, "I am making
• everything new!" (Revelation 21:1-5 NIV)*

• *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, the things that seem crazy to us become normal. Isaiah's
• words are not make-believe or a fairy tale. They are REAL! This is what we have to look forward to!
• PRAISE GOD!!

■ **PRAY:** *Jesus, we are so excited about your kingdom. We want to see you make all the wrongs right, and bring an end
• all of the death and hurt that causes our hearts such pain. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.*

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



READ: Selections from Jonah 1-3 (NirV)

A message from the LORD came to Jonah... "Go to the great city of Nineveh. Preach against it. The sins of its people have come to my attention." But Jonah ran away from the Lord... he found a ship that was going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went on board... But the LORD sent a strong wind over the Mediterranean Sea. A wild storm came up. It was so wild that the ship was in danger of breaking apart. All the sailors were afraid. Each one cried out to his own god for help. They threw the ship's contents into the sea. They were trying to make the ship lighter. But Jonah had gone below deck. There he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went down to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call out to your god for help! Maybe he'll pay attention to what's happening to us. Then we won't die."

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down?" "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," [Jonah] replied. "Then it will become calm. I know it's my fault that this terrible storm has come on you."

Now the LORD sent a huge fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. The LORD gave the fish a command. And it spit Jonah up onto dry land.

A message from the LORD came to Jonah a second time... "Go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce to its people the message I give you." Jonah obeyed the LORD. He went to Nineveh... and announced, "In 40 days Nineveh will be destroyed." The people of Nineveh believed God's warning. So they decided not to eat any food for a while. And all of them put on the rough clothing people wear when they're sad. That's what everyone did, from the least important of them to the most important.

God saw what they did. He saw that they stopped doing what was evil. So he took pity on them. He didn't destroy them as he had said he would.

ENTER THE STORY:

Jonah did NOT want to do what God asked him to do, so he ran away from God, but you can't REALLY run away from God. He is everywhere, and after all was said and done, Jonah found himself in the belly of a HUGE fish.

Can you imagine being in a dark, stinky fish belly with gooey guts all around you for three whole days? EWWW!

Sometimes, God has to do something CRAZY to get our attention. Jonah needed to learn a lesson, so God used a big fish to teach him.

After three days, God spoke to the fish, and it spit Jonah out, and this time, when God asked Jonah to go to Nineveh, he obeyed. Jonah told the people exactly what God told him to say. Do you remember what his message was?

"In 40 days, Nineveh will be destroyed." It's might not have been the nicest message, but it WORKED!

The people of Nineveh listened to Jonah's message, and they felt very sad for all of the bad things they had done. They prayed to God and told him how sorry they were, and they STOPPED doing all of the bad things that they had done.

God heard their prayers, and he forgave them. He stopped being angry about their sins and he decided NOT to punish them. This made Jonah very angry because he did NOT think they deserved God's forgiveness, and he wanted God to punish them.

Jonah did NOT understand that God loves EVERYONE, and wants everyone to be sorry for their sin.

- Jonah thought God only loved his special people, the Israelites, but God's plan all along was to send a very special
- someone from Abraham's family to bless the whole entire world. This person is 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 he
- knew God was asking him to give up his life and die for the sins of God's people.
- *Do you know who this special someone is? It's Jesus, of course!*
- *Just like Jonah spent three days in a dark fish belly...Jesus spent three days in a dark tomb.*
- *And just like the big fish spit Jonah out after three days...the dark tomb couldn't hold Jesus either, so after three days,*
- *God raised him from the dead and that old stinky tomb had to spit Jesus out too!*
- This season, let's find joy in doing the things that make God happy, even if that means doing things we really don't want
- to do!
-
-

■ **PRAY:** *God, we are SO thankful that your love and mercy are for EVERYONE! Help us have soft hearts that are willing to admit when we are wrong. Amen.*

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



READ: Esther 4:10-17 (NirV)

Then Esther directed him to give an answer to Mordecai. She told him to say, "There is a certain law that everyone knows about. All the king's officials know about it. The people in the royal territories know about it. It applies to any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner courtyard without being sent for. It says they must be put to death. But there is a way out. Suppose the king reaches out his gold scepter toward them. Then their lives will be spared. But 30 days have gone by since the king sent for me." Esther's words were reported to Mordecai. Then he sent back an answer. He said, "You live in the king's palace. But don't think that just because you are there you will be the only Jew who will escape. What if you don't say anything at this time? Then help for the Jews will come from another place. But you and your family will die. Who knows? It's possible that you became queen for a time just like this." Then Esther sent a reply to Mordecai. She said, "Go. Gather together all the Jews who are in Susa. And fast for my benefit. Don't eat or drink anything for three days. Don't do it night or day. I and my attendants will fast just as you do. Then I'll go to the king. I'll do it even though it's against the law. And if I have to die, I'll die." So Mordecai went away. He carried out all Esther's directions.

ENTER THE STORY:

Many times in God's big story, the Israelites have faced scary enemies who wanted to hurt them! In our story today, the BIG, BAD enemy is a man named Haman. The king of Persia had given him a promotion, and ordered all the people to bow down to him in order to honor him, but Mordecai, one of the Jews, refused to bow down. Mordecai worshiped God and knew God didn't want his people bowing down to anyone other than him, but Haman didn't care WHO Mordecai worshiped. Mordecai had embarrassed him, and he wanted revenge, so he decided to kill ALL of the Jews.

Haman went straight to the king and told him that the Jews living in his kingdom were causing trouble, and needed to be dealt with, and the king gave him permission to destroy the Jews.

What Haman didn't know was that the NEW queen of Persia was Mordecai's cousin, and a Jew. Her name was Esther, and when the king searched throughout the land for a new queen, he fell in love with Esther and chose her. Mordecai commanded Esther NOT to tell the king she was a Jew because he was afraid the king wouldn't choose Esther if he knew this.

But now, ALL of the Jews were in terrible danger, and they needed Esther to tell the king the TRUTH and try to save their lives. There was ONE problem! NOBODY was allowed to go to the king without being asked. The punishment was DEATH unless the king extended his golden scepter to you.

Esther was afraid, but she 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. When the king realized that Haman was trying to destroy his NEW QUEEN, he switched the law and saved Esther and her people! This made the Jews SO HAPPY, but their happiness would not last very long, because, in a short time, they would have to face another scary enemy that hated them.

They needed a BETTER RESCUER...someone who would save them and protect them from ALL of their enemies.

Do you know WHO could do this for them? Jesus!

This is what we celebrate at Christmas...Jesus came to earth as a baby to rescue us and save us from the BIGGEST, BADDEST enemy ever, sin and death. 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 Jesus!
- So many people waited SO long for him to come because they KNEW how special he would be, and boy was he worth
- the wait. On Christmas Day, we celebrate along with those who waited for Jesus' arrival the first time, but we are also in a
- season of waiting, because Jesus has promised that he will come again a second time to rescue those whose hearts stay
- true to him!
-
-

■ **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 5:2-5a (NIRV)

The Lord says, "Bethlehem Ephrathah, you might not be an important town in the nation of Judah. But out of you will come for me a ruler over Israel. His family line goes back to the early years of your nation. It goes all the way back to days of long ago." The LORD will hand over his people to their enemies. That will last until the pregnant woman bears her promised son. Then the rest of his relatives in Judah will return to their land. That promised son will stand firm and be a shepherd for his flock. The LORD will give him the strength to do it. The LORD his God will give him the authority to rule. His people will live safely. His greatness will reach from one end of the earth to the other. And he will be our peace.

ENTER THE STORY:

From the outside, there was nothing special about this little town called Bethlehem. Out of all the mighty places in Judah, Bethlehem was the smallest, which usually meant it wasn't very important either. Yet it is in the middle of the Christmas story, just as it has been in many of the other stories we've read along the way.

It was the town Naomi and Ruth returned to when they had no where else to go, and the place where Ruth met her family rescuer, Boaz.

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

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

Isn't it just like God to use this tiny, nothing-special-about-it town to bring his own Son into this world? God doesn't determine WORTH or VALUE by what the world thinks, and he isn't tempted by the biggest, brightest and shiniest cities. God LOVES taking the weakest, the poorest, and the least important things and using them to show his glory to the world.

So out of Bethlehem, whose name means "House of Bread," will come Jesus, the "Bread of Life" himself. The tiny baby boy who will grow up and give so much more than just food to those who believe in him. He will give up his life in order to save them!

From the outside, there was nothing special about this little town called Bethlehem, and THAT was the point. God does extraordinary things with the ordinary!

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

Oh little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by

Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

PRAY: God, thank you for helping us see worth in the things this world despises as weak and useless. Help us to see more of your glory today. Amen.

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



READ: Luke 1:5-20 (NIV)

During the time [Herod] was ruling, there was a priest named Zechariah. He belonged to a group of priests named after Abijah. His wife Elizabeth also came from the family line of Aaron. Both of them did what was right in the sight of God. They obeyed all the LORD's commands and rules faithfully. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was not able to have any. And they were both very old. One day Zechariah's group was on duty. He was serving as a priest in God's temple. He happened to be chosen, in the usual way, to go into the temple of the LORD. There he was supposed to burn incense. The time came for this to be done. All who had gathered to worship were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah. The angel was standing at the right side of the incense altar. When Zechariah saw him, he was amazed and terrified. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will have a child. It will be a boy, and you must call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you. His birth will make many people very glad. He will be important in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or other such drinks. 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 prepare the way for the Lord. He will have the same spirit and power that Elijah had. He will bring peace between parents and their children. He will teach people who don't obey to be wise and do what is right. In this way, he will prepare a people who are ready for the Lord."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is old too." The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I serve God. I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will have to be silent. You will not be able to speak until after John is born. That's because you did not believe my words. They will come true at the time God has chosen."

ENTER THE STORY:

For 400 years, God had been silent with his people. No dreams, no visions, no messages, and no visits from angels or prophets. This made his people very sad, but everything was about to change. It was FINALLY time for God's promises to become a real, and it all started when an angel showed up in the temple to give Zechariah a message from God.

Have you ever had to rub your eyes to see something better? I wonder if Zechariah had to do that when he first saw the angel. He must have been surprised! Remember - nobody had seen or heard from God in a really long time.

God sent Gabriel to tell Zechariah that his prayers had been heard and that he and Elizabeth were going to have a baby! Just like Abraham and Sarah, this baby would be born to Zechariah and Elizabeth in their old age and would be a blessing to many people.

Their son would pave the way for God's promise to Abraham to come true...that one of his future, great, great, great-grandsons would bless the whole world.

BUT WAIT! There was more! Gabriel also told Zechariah that his son would be like the prophet Elijah and would help the people get their hearts ready for Jesus!

It was all starting to happen. The promises from the Old Testament were unfolding right before his eyes, but sadly, Zechariah did not believe it would really happen. As a result, Gabriel told him that he would not be able to speak until after his new baby arrived.

This all came true! When Zechariah's promised child finally arrived, he made sure to do just as Gabriel told him. He named the baby John, which means "Yahweh gives good gifts."

- Zechariah and Elizabeth were so happy when their baby arrived, but there was another promised child coming soon.
- This child was promised to Eve, and to Abraham, and to David many years earlier. They had been waiting a LONG time for this child, but they would not have to wait much longer.

• *Do you remember who the promised child of Abraham was? It's Jesus! It's always been about Jesus!*

- This is EXACTLY what we celebrate at Christmas! The wonderful gift of God. He loves his children so much that he is willing to do *ANYTHING* to rescue them, even if it means sending his own Son into our story to meet us where we are.
- Presents and toys are nice, and they might give us happiness for a few moments, but the best gift we could ever receive is Jesus!

■ **PRAY:** *God, thank you for giving us the best gift we could ever receive this Christmas. Help us believe in him and love him with all of our hearts. Amen.*

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



READ: Matthew 3:1-6 (NIRV)

In those days John the Baptist came and preached in the Desert of Judea. He said, "Turn away from your sins! The kingdom of heaven has come near." John is the one Isaiah the prophet had spoken about. He had said, "A messenger is calling out in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight paths for him.'" (Isaiah 40:3) John's clothes were made out of camel's hair. 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. They also came from the whole area around the Jordan River. When they confessed their sins, John baptized them in the Jordan.

ENTER THE STORY:

Throughout the Old Testament, God's prophets, or messengers, did some things that other people thought were "crazy." The prophet Ezekiel laid on his right side for 390 days while eating bread made out of wheat and beans. The prophet Isaiah walked around naked for three years! Can you believe that? They did these things to get the attention of the people, and it usually worked well!

Camel hair clothes and a weird diet? Maybe John wasn't that crazy after all? That was pretty mild compared to the messengers that came before him, and it WORKED! God's people had not seen a prophet for a VERY long time, so everyone was excited to hear what he had to say.

John's message was simple, and he said it over and over again: Turn away from your sins! God's kingdom is HERE!

This was the ONE JOB God gave to John. 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 turning away from their sin and being sorry for hurting God.

It was the same message as Jonah, who warned the people of Nineveh that bad things were coming, and it was the same message as the prophets in the Old Testament.

Many years earlier, after the people of Israel had broken their promises to 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 turning away from sin 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, asking for mercy just like the Ninevites did, and when God sees how sorry our hearts are, he grants us the gift of his presence. This Christmas, let's all turn away from the bad things we have done and ask God to clean our hearts so that we, too, will be ready for his arrival!

PRAY: *God, you are everything we need and more, so we humble our hearts and ask for your mercy. Help us feel sorry when we hurt you, and turn away from our sins so our hearts are always clean and ready for more of you. Amen.*

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



READ: Luke 1:26-38 (NirV)

In the sixth month after Elizabeth had become pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. He was sent to a virgin. The girl was engaged to a man named Joseph. He came from the family line of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel greeted her and said, "The Lord has blessed you in a special way. He is with you." Mary was very upset because of his words. She wondered what kind of greeting this could be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary. God is very pleased with you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son. You must call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king like his father David of long ago. The Son of the Most High God will rule forever over his people. They are from the family line of Jacob. That kingdom will never end."

"How can this happen?" Mary asked the angel. "I am a virgin." The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come to you. The power of the Most High God will cover you. So the holy one that is born will be called the Son of God. Your relative Elizabeth will have a child even though she is old. People thought she could not have children. But she has been pregnant for six months now. That's because what God says will always come true." "I serve the Lord," Mary answered. "May it happen to me just as you said it would." 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 an accident 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, comes from the Hebrew word for "branch" or "shoot."

Do you remember talking about a special branch or shoot in this Advent? Hopefully, you do!

We've seen this a few times in our Advent. It comes from a prophecy in Isaiah chapter 11 that speaks of a "shoot that will come forth from the stump of Jesse's tree." It was *NOT* an accident that God sent Gabriel to the city of Nazareth or the "City of the Branch!" This was a part of God's plan!

Gabriel told Mary that the baby she would have is the One everyone has been waiting for – the promised Messiah. He is the royal descendant of David and the branch from Jesse's tree. 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? What was special about Mary?

From the outside nothing seemed special about Mary. Her family wasn't wealthy or famous, and nobody important had ever come from Nazareth so it wasn't about the town either, but God looks at what is on the inside. Just like Mary's long-ago relative David, she had a heart that loved God. She was happy about the message Gabriel gave her because she knew it was a blessing to be chosen! She knew how long her people had waited, so she gladly offered up her body to safely carry the Living God into this world, bringing Abraham's promised descendant just as he said he would.

May God's perfect plan always cause us to be amazed. This is, truly, the most incredible story ever told.

■ **PRAY:** *God, you are worthy of all of our praise and worship. Please help us have servant hearts like Mary and help us
: make space in our hearts for you. Amen.*
:

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



READ: Matthew 1:18-25 (NirV)

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. His mother Mary and Joseph had promised to get married. But before they started to live together, it became clear that she was going to have a baby. She became pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph was faithful to the law. But he did not want to put her to shame in public. So he planned to divorce her quietly. But as Joseph was thinking about this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. The angel said, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. The baby inside her is from the Holy Spirit. She is going to have a son. You must give him the name Jesus. That's because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to bring about what the Lord had said would happen. He had said through the prophet, "The virgin is going to have a baby. She will give birth to a son. And he will be called Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14) The name Immanuel means "God with us." Joseph woke up. He did what the angel of the Lord commanded him to do. He took Mary home as his wife. But he did not sleep with her until she gave birth to a son. And Joseph gave him the name Jesus.

ENTER THE STORY:

Have you ever had a hard time falling asleep at night?

I wonder if Joseph had a hard time sleeping after he found out that Mary, his soon-to-be wife, was pregnant. Maybe he tossed and turned for a long time before he finally drifted off to sleep, but this night would be special because Joseph had a dream, and in the dream, an angel gave him an important message from God.

God wanted Joseph to take Mary as his wife and raise the baby as his own son. What a special honor! Even though this baby was God's own Son, Joseph would be his earthly father and would be able to teach him many things. Joseph was a carpenter, which meant he was good at building and fixing things. Over time as he raised this child, he would be able to teach him how to do all of that, too.

The angel told Mary and Joseph to name the baby Jesus, which means "God saves" because that is exactly what God sent Jesus to do...to seek and to save the lost. He would do this by giving up his own life as a sacrifice to pay the price for the sins of the world. God has always wanted to live with his people, but he is perfect and holy, and we are not. The reason we could not be in God's presence is because of our sin, so Jesus took care of that problem. When we put our trust in Jesus' death and resurrection, we are forgiven and invited back into God's presence, but we must go THROUGH Jesus! ***That is why Jesus is called Immanuel - God with us.***

This is what we celebrate at Christmas. God sent his Son Jesus to save us so that he could be with us forever.

PRAY: *God, remind us this Christmas season that your presence is always with us through your Son, Jesus - who is our Immanuel. Help us to look to him and trust in him and him alone to save us.*

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



READ: Luke 2:1-5 (NIRV)

In those days, Caesar Augustus made a law. It required that a list be made of everyone in the whole Roman world. It was the first time a list was made of the people while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone went to their own town to be listed. So Joseph went also. He went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea. That is where Bethlehem, the town of David, was. Joseph went there because he belonged to the family line of David. He went there with Mary to be listed. Mary was engaged to him. She was expecting a baby.

ENTER THE STORY:

Have you ever stopped to wonder what God is like? We hear all kinds of stories about God, but we don't always focus on what he is like.

For example, God isn't even mentioned in this story, but he is there if we look closely. How do we know?

Well, it was *NOT* an accident that this Roman ruler wanted to know how many people were living in his area at that very moment in time. NO! This was God's plan. If God wants something to happen, it WILL HAPPEN, no matter what!

Many years earlier, Micah, one of God's messengers, told God's people that the promised Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. When Caesar Augustus called for the census, Mary and Joseph were still living in Nazareth, and Mary was REALLY, REALLY pregnant. She was about to give birth to this special baby, God's own Son. The census meant that Mary and Joseph would have to travel to Bethlehem, the very place God wanted them to be!

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 pictures pointing forward to Jesus' arrival as a baby. 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 that he will keep his promises.

Who knew there was so much to learn from a Roman ruler wanting to count all of his people?

PRAY: *God, once again, we find ourselves in awe of your power and control over every detail of our lives. May the knowledge of this bring us so much comfort and joy, and may we sleep good 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 (NirV)

While Joseph and Mary were there, the time came for the child to be born. She gave birth to her first baby. It was a boy. She wrapped him in large strips of cloth. Then she placed him in a manger. That's because there was no guest room where they could stay. There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby. It was night, and they were taking care of their sheep. An angel of the Lord appeared to them. And the glory of the Lord shone around them. They were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news. It will bring 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. Here is how you will know I am telling you the truth. You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger." Suddenly a large group of angels from heaven also appeared. They were praising God. They said, "May glory be given to God in the highest heaven! And may peace be given to those he is pleased with on earth!" The angels left and went into heaven. Then the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem. Let's 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. The baby was lying in the manger. After the shepherds had seen him, they told everyone. They reported what the angel had said about this child. All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary kept all these things like a secret treasure in her heart. She thought about them over and over. The shepherds returned. They gave glory and praise to God. Everything they had seen and heard was just as they had been told.

ENTER THE STORY:

IT'S TIME! We are finally ready to celebrate the arrival of the promised Messiah. Isn't it interesting that the title for this section of the devotions is "Enter the story," when that is *EXACTLY* what we are talking about today? It's what Christmas is all about!

On the night of Jesus' birth, God himself entered the story he had been writing for a very long time.

We have been on quite a journey the past few weeks, and we have learned a lot, but there is *ONE* thing in all of the stories that stands out... God is *NOT* like us, and he does things very differently than we do!

A King born in a stable outside with the animals? Who would have chosen that for their grand entrance? Not me! Surely, God announced the birth of his Son to the most important people, right? Nope! God sent his angels to shepherds outside in a field.

Have you ever stopped to wonder why God announced the birth of his Son to shepherds? It is because Jesus was no ordinary baby. He was the perfect, spotless Lamb of God, sent in the most humble way, *not to make others serve him, but to serve others and to give up his life to buy our freedom!* (Matthew 20:28 paraphrased).

THIS is why God sent his angels to shepherds to announce the birth of his Son!

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

This is what we celebrate at Christmas! Jesus came to save us from our sins and bring us back to God, who loves us with a never-ending, unstoppable love.

Today, as we celebrate Christmas in all sorts of fun ways, let's remind ourselves that Jesus makes everything better!

- 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 sins so that we could enter the presence of God!

■ **PRAY:** *God, we are always in awe of how loving you are. You are worthy of all our praise and glory. As we enjoy all of the wonderful celebrations of Christmas today with our 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



November 29



November 30



December 1



December 2



December 3



December 4



December 5



December 6



December 7



December 8



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!

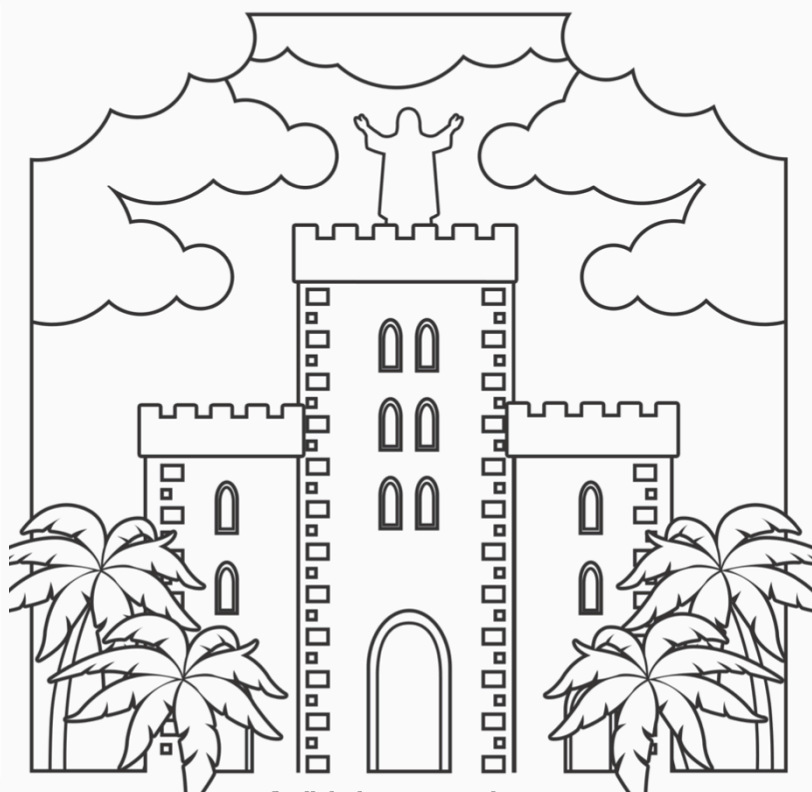
November 28th

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



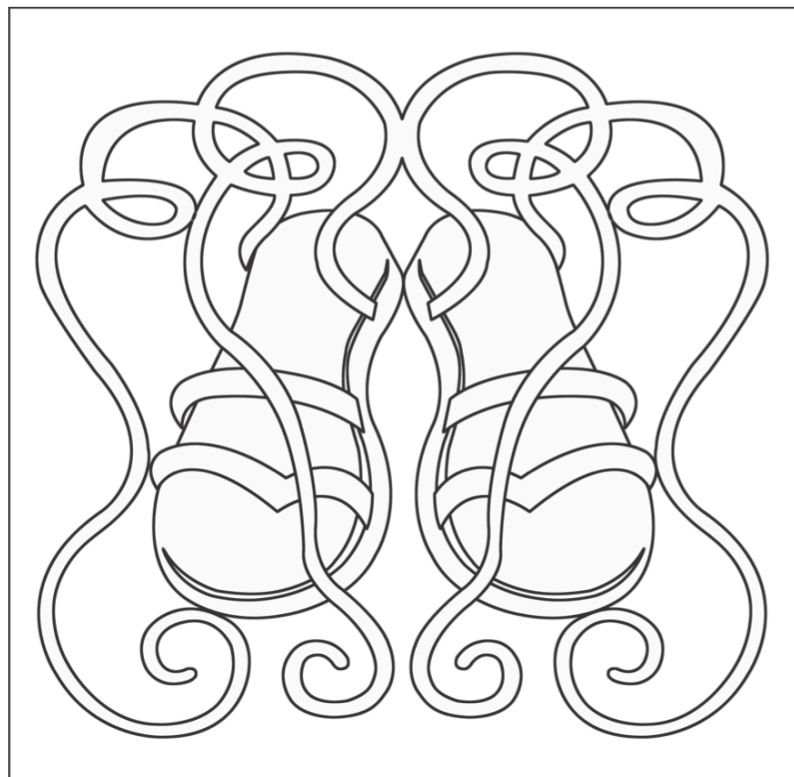
December 4th

God's Covenant with Abram



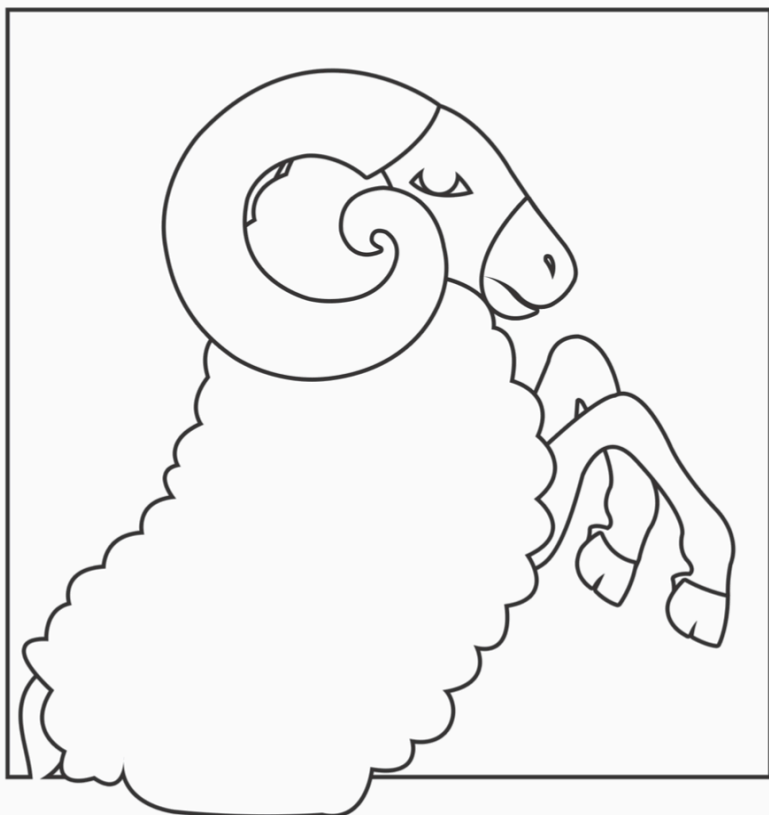
December 5th

Son of Laughter



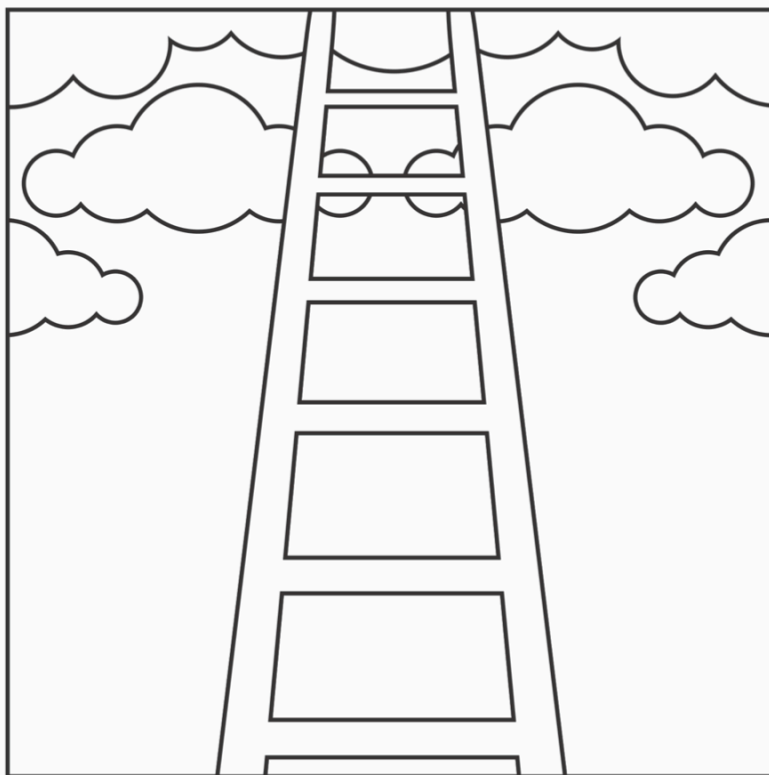
December 6th

God Provides a Substitute



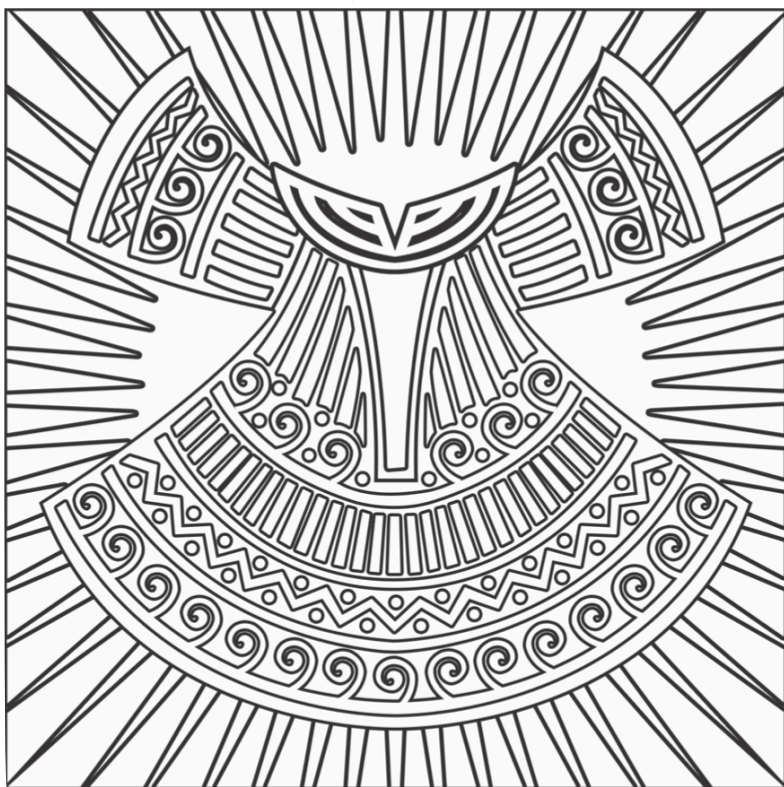
December 7th

Jacob's Ladder



December 8th

Coat of Many Colors



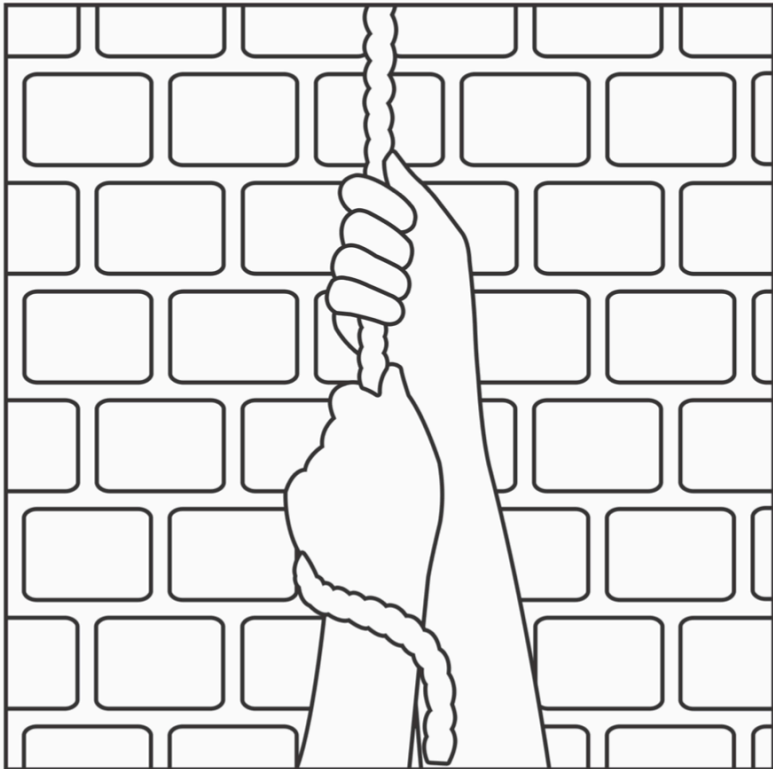
December 9th

Engraved on His Hands



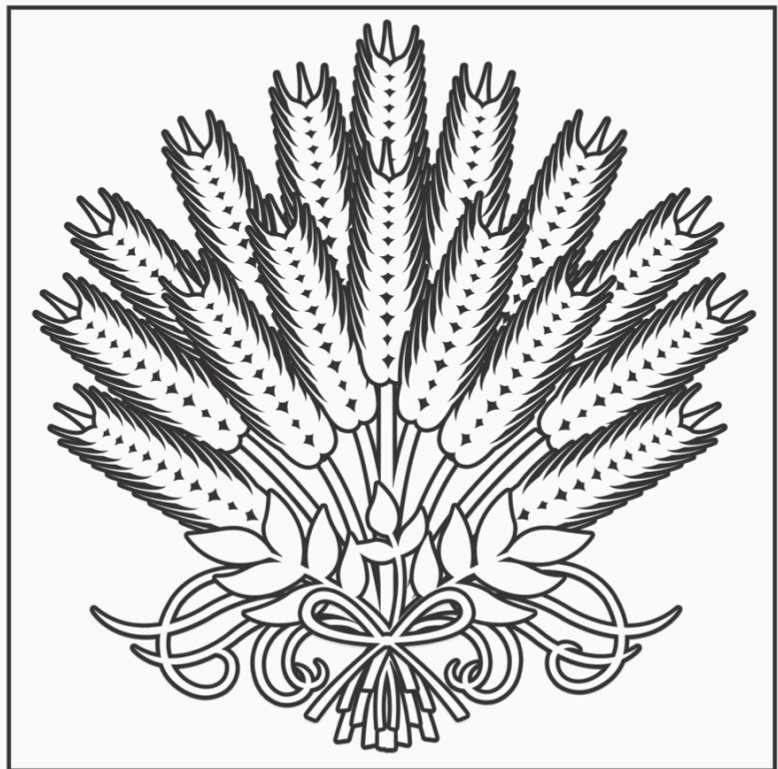
December 10th

Scarlet Cord



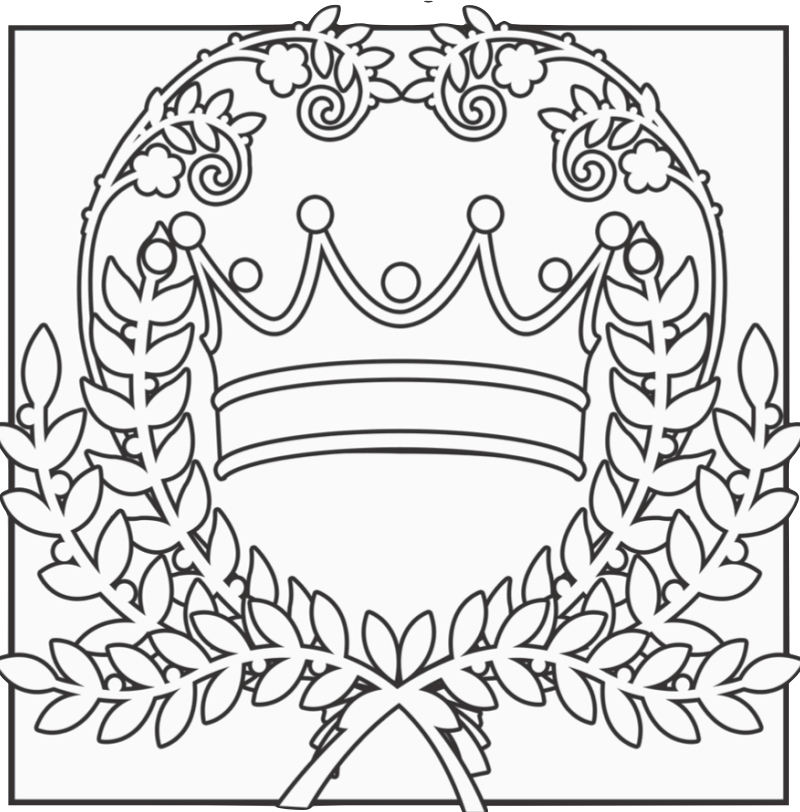
December 11th

Kinsman Redeemer



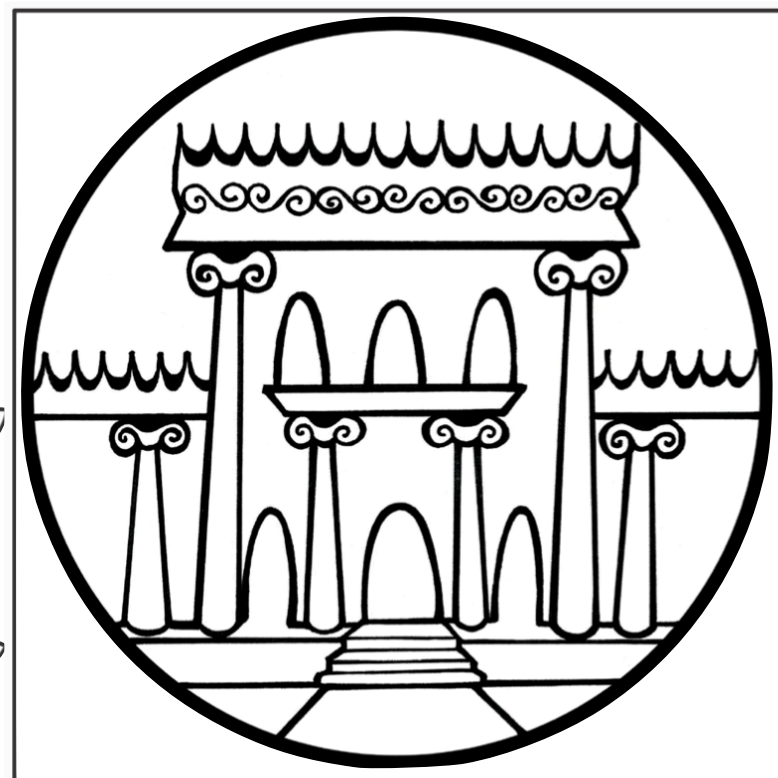
December 12th

Shepherd King



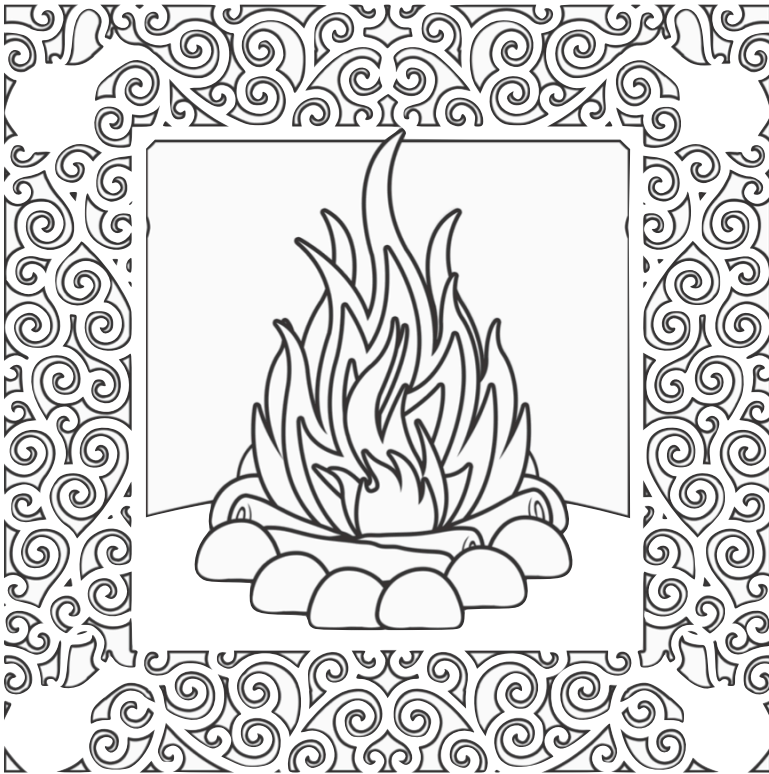
December 13th

Living Temple



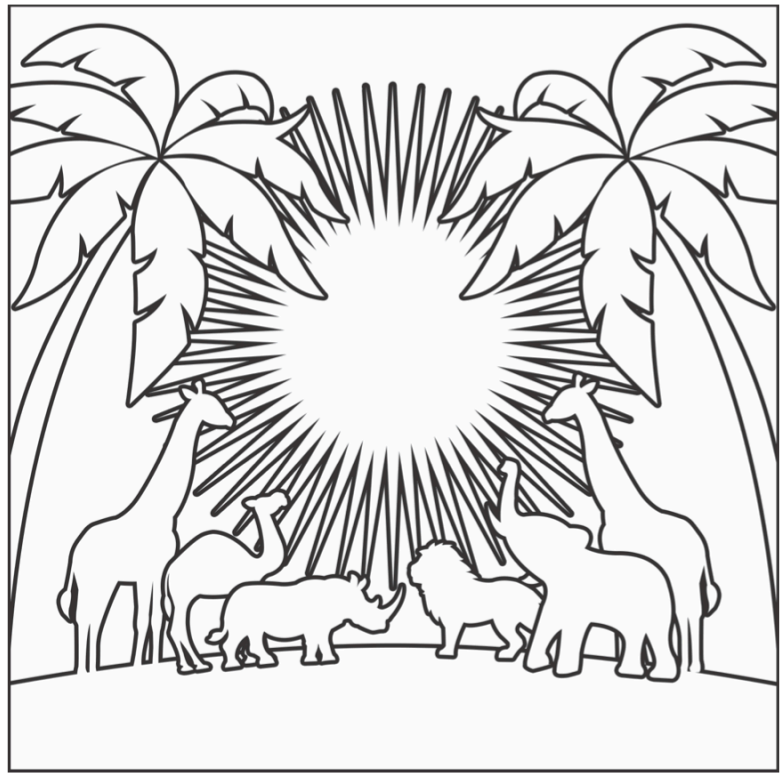
December 14th

Elijah's Contest



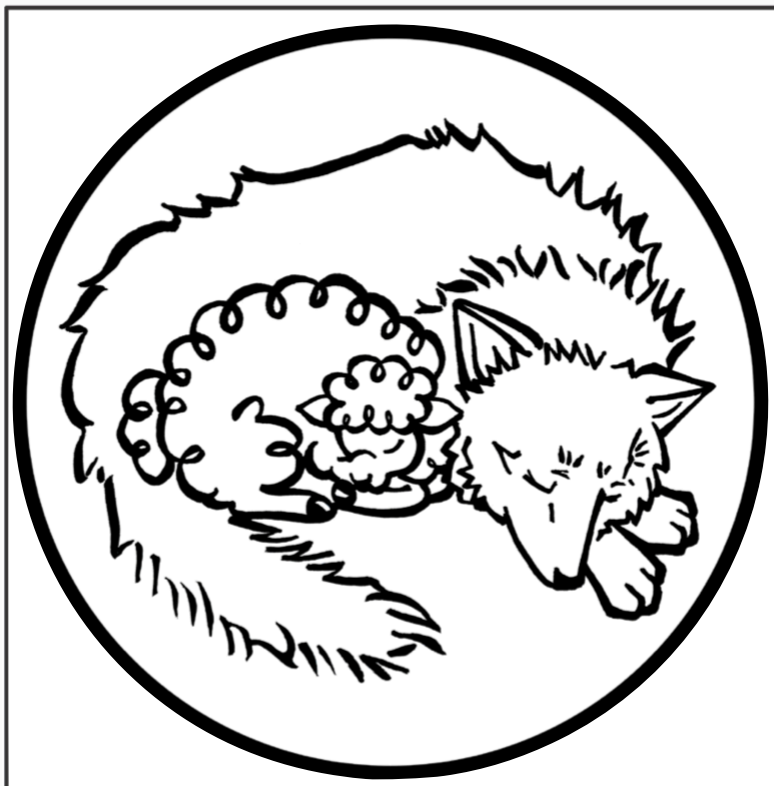
December 15th

A Great Light



December 16th

A New Kingdom



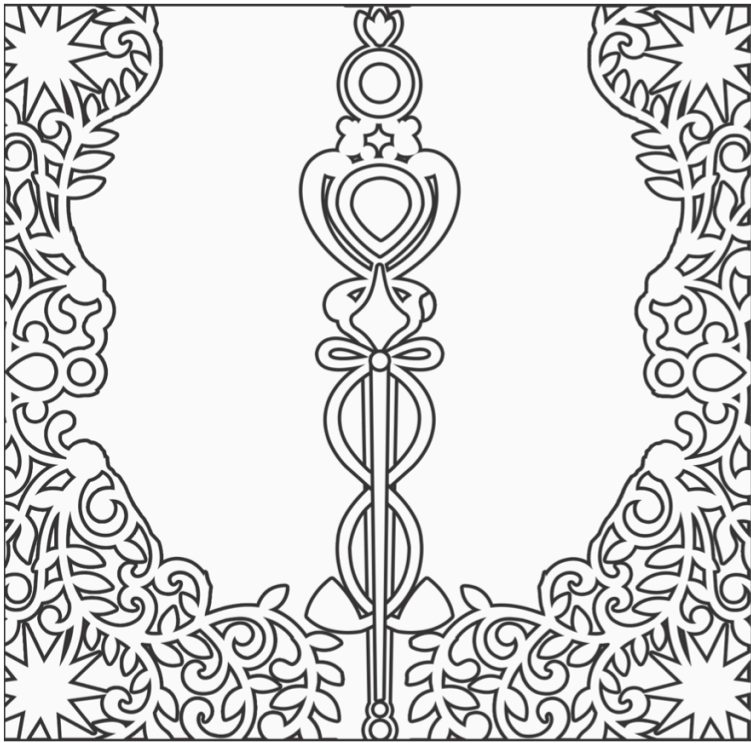
December 17th

Jonah & the Whale



December 18th

The Golden Scepter



December 19th

House of Bread



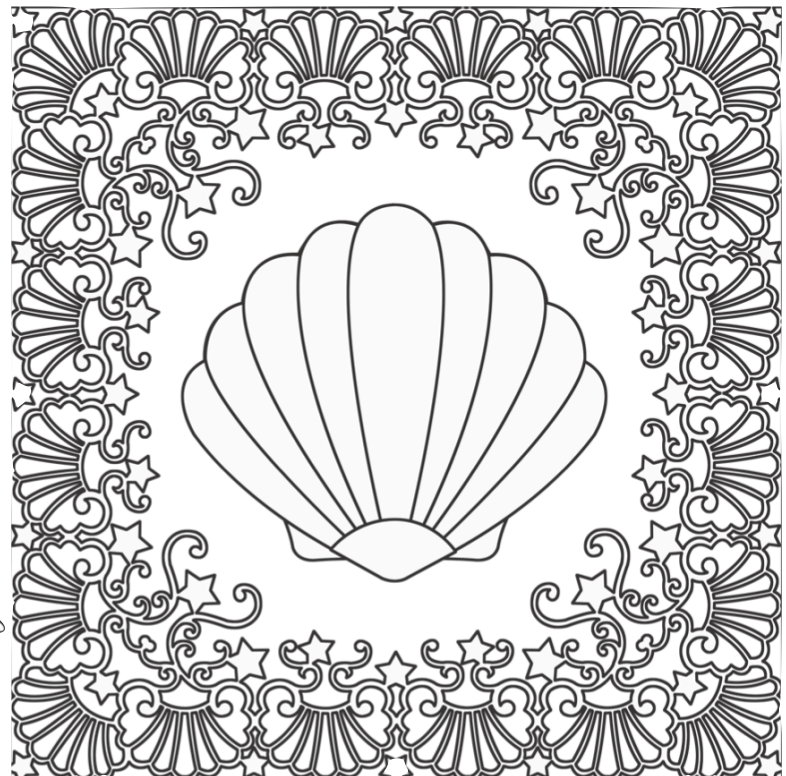
December 20th

Zechariah & Elizabeth



December 21st

John the Baptist



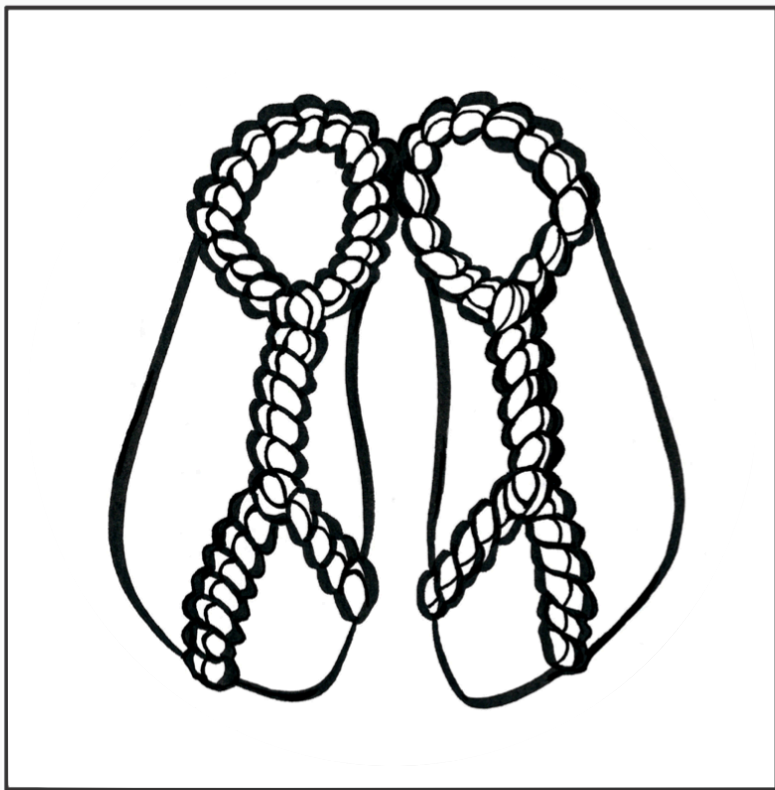
December 22nd
Gabriel Visits Mary



December 23rd
Joseph's Dream



December 24th
Census in Bethlehem



December 25th
Our Savior Arrives!

