# CHRISTMAS Stories

### ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2022

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night . . . "

To the refugees, the wanderers, the ones without a home – but never without *hope*.

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For centuries the Christian Church has been celebrating Advent, a season of preparation for Christmas. This year OneChurch.to is joining in this historic tradition by participating in a four-week Advent Devotional, called Abraham's Advent. This devotional was written by a former staff member of our church, Lindsey Gallant (now residing in Prince Edward Island).

The Advent Devotional will dovetail with our weekend teaching series, Christmas Stories. We will journey with Abraham as his story intersects with the promise of Jesus. The theme of this journey is one of true hope and joy in following God's plan for our lives, even when it doesn't always seem like it's God's plan.

Each day there will be a daily reading and questions to help you and your families prepare your hearts for Christmas.

Joy to the World, the Lord is come!

#### **Jonathan Smith**

Lead Pastor

#### About the Author:

**Lindsey Gallant** is a mother, writer, and bearer of beautiful news. She loves to share glimpses of a God who lights up our ordinary lives with holy wonder. She grew up in Canada's Northwest Territories, and now makes her home with her family in Prince Edward Island. Lindsey writes at lindseygallant.com.



#### Scan here for a video interview with the author.

#### How to use this devotional?

#### **Daily Readings & Questions**

Each week you will find daily readings and reflective questions to help prepare us for the upcoming Christmas Season. Each daily reading includes a family discussion, question, and prayer time that will help you engage the hearts of your children.

[This is the December achievable for NextGen Follow]

#### Weekly Family Activity

At the end of each week there is a family activity that you and your family can enjoy! If you are particapating as a family, we highly encouge you to lean into these family activities. Make them a fun and motivating part of your week.

#### Weekly Chapter - Abraham's Advent

On Sundays, your daily reading is a chapter from the beautiful, narrative story that Lindsey has written. This story imagines what it would have been like for Abraham to witness the events of that first Christmas Eve when the promised Messiah arrived in Bethlehem.

#### **December Gatherings at OneChurch.to:**

November 27<sup>th</sup> – A Story for the World December 4<sup>th</sup> – A Story for the Hurting December 11<sup>th</sup> – A Story for the Uncertain December 18<sup>th</sup> – A Story for the Doubting December 24<sup>th</sup> – Christmas Eve Gathering *at 6pm* December 25<sup>th</sup> – Christmas Day Gathering December 31<sup>st</sup> – New Years Eve Gathering *at 10:30 pm* January 1<sup>st</sup> – New Years Day Gathering

Follow us on Social Media during as we embark on this advent journey. @OneChurch.to

### Sunday November 27<sup>th</sup>

### Strangers & Sojourners

How strange to find yourself in this place tonight. Round the fire, the men warm their hands and faces, pulling their coats tightly to their bodies to keep in the heat. They speak of the earth and the sky and the sheep sleeping nearby. They smell of sheep and of wandering. You are a wanderer too, a stranger in this land, searching for —

The sound of footsteps catches your ear, and you turn your head quickly away from the fire, peering into the night. You see a robe rustling in the wind, in front of which floats a long stick, drawing the figure closer. Your eyes adjust and suddenly meet with those of an old man. He smiles and stretches out his hands to the fire. The shepherds nod in greeting; they have welcomed many weary travellers on nights such as these. You move over to let the man pass, but he settles onto the ground beside you, folding his limbs into his robe and laying the staff over his knees. He sighs and closes his eyes a moment. You steal a sideways glance at the man, not fully trusting his presence. He is bearded and wrinkled, his face showing the work and weather of many years. You wonder what brought him here, what purpose there could be for such an old man on such a cold night.

"Good evening, stranger," he replies, meeting your sheepish gaze. "What hope was mine when I saw the light on the horizon. I have been travelling many, many hours and am not from these parts — though I have visited this countryside in years past. But that could have been another lifetime for all the changes I observe now. Are you a stranger here too, then?" he asks, gesturing to your clothes and features.

"Yes," you stammer, for you had not expected conversation tonight. The fire crackles in the pause between you. "I left my hometown some time ago. I was told I would find what I was looking for if I left. But I don't really know where I'm going . . ." You let the silence finish the thought.

The old man begins to chuckle. "Neither did I, neither did I," he says with surprising lightness. "I know what it's like to follow a promise, and nothing else. People think you're crazy. You leave behind everything you know and trade it all in for a sackful of faith. I bundled all my hopes up on my back and went in search of the promise — an elusive thing to track down at times." He grips his staff in both hands. "But I had to go. *Had to*."

You nod earnestly, murmuring in agreement. As one of the shepherds adds brush to the fire, tiny sparks leap into the darkness and then disappear. "What happened to your hopes?" you ask.

"I never lost them, though bandits and kings tried to steal them. They can't take something that isn't meant for their country. While I carried them, I was different from those I dwelt among. My hopes kept me a stranger – a sojourner. But as long as I had them, I knew I would keep looking for the promise. I took them from tent to tent, knowing that one day I would trade them in for an inheritance."

You ponder his words, and though you don't know his story, something of his manner resonates within you. From deep in the blackness, a bird calls. Invisible, yet audible. Yes, that's what your call was like. There is no way to prove such a thing, but it grasps your being nonetheless, echoing in every footstep, every fear. It fills you with longing even now. It awakens the hopes that ache to rise up and fly.

The old man stirs beside you, as if with the same restlessness. Again you wonder what brings him to this hillside hollow. "Will you be staying here long?" you ask.

Stroking his beard, the stranger lifts his eyes to the sky. "Ah, I've learned I'm not the one to be answering that question."

### Family Activity #1: Gather

**Create a "Bethlehem fire" centrepiece** that your family will gather around this Advent season. It can be as simple or as elaborate as you like. Plan to light the candle(s) each day as you read the devotional together leading up till Christmas.

#### You will need:

- A candle or candles. Advent is traditionally a time for lighting candles. The candles remind us that Jesus came as the light into a dark world. The candles can also represent the Bethlehem fire of this Advent journey a place to gather and reflect as a family. Each evening, turn off the lights and read the devotional together by candlelight. This special atmosphere is a great way to further engage your children in this time. As you light the candle(s), thank God for His presence with you.
- You can use a single candle or arrange as many as you like; use traditional or battery powered candles.

#### Other (optional) suggestions:

- **Greenery**. Many people make Advent wreaths with evergreen branches or other seasonal greenery. These can be fresh or imitation. Instead of purchasing greenery, you could go on a nature walk and see what interesting natural items you can collect for your centrepiece. (Be sure to keep greenery at a safe distance from any flame.)
- Other decorations. Use your own style and imagination to decorate your centrepiece! Use Christmas ornaments, objects from nature, or handmade decorations.
- A base. You may want to set your centrepiece on a base, such as a plate or tray.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

~ John 1:1-5~

### Monday November 28<sup>th</sup>

Advent is a season of searching. You have heard of the promise of "God with us," and so you set out to find Him. He is coming and has asked you to meet with Him. This in itself is a strange request – *what would God have with you?* – one which comes in differing forms. At times He whispers in dreams, at times He writes His invitation in the sky. You have heard it, and have become a stranger on an unknown path, led by a call and a longing.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

Genesis 12:1-3
Hebrews 11:6
Jeremiah 29:11-13
Matthew 7:7-8

In what ways have you heard the voice of God inviting you to set out and follow Him, or felt compelled to search after Him?

#### **Family Discussion:**

If someone walked up to you and said, "Leave your house and belongings and everything you know, and follow me," would you go? Even if you didn't know the destination? Why or why not? Would it matter who had asked you to go? (For fun: Suggest favourite movie or book heroes or villains. "What if asked you?")

God called Abram to go on a physical journey, far from his home. God invites each of us on a journey, too. There may not be camels or deserts or bandits on our road, but He asks us to follow Him and get as close to Jesus as we can. Let's be open to where God leads us this Advent!

### Tuesday November 29<sup>th</sup>

The very thought of Christmas may fill your heart with high expectations. Or, afraid of disappointment, you may not even acknowledge the secret hopes of your soul. Some hopes were meant to be fulfilled at the manger, by the advent of salvation on this earth. Other hopes await the Saviour's second arrival, and the advent of our glorious perfection.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

- Genesis 12:4-9 Proverbs 13:12
- Psalm 39:7; 130:5-8 Romans 8:22-25

What hopes and longings do you carry with you on your journey in this season?

#### **Family Discussion:**

Many kids write a wish list filled with toys or other things they are hoping to get for Christmas. How are the gifts God gives different from the gifts we wish for at Christmas? If you could ask God for any gift, what would it be?

Note for parents: While family discussion questions are aimed at children, they are meant to promote sharing and connection among all members of the family. Encourage participation and vulnerability by being willing to share your own thoughts and experiences.

### Wednesday November 30<sup>th</sup>

You are bound to be fearful at times. Fear of the unknown is one of the greatest hindrances to your next step, especially if that step is in darkness.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

• Hebrews 11:8

- Genesis 15:1
- Genesis 12:10-13

• Isaiah 41:10

What are your greatest fears in your faith journey?

As you pass through this world on your search, a change comes over you. You no longer fit in. You look less and less like the citizens of earth, and begin to resemble that which you are looking for.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

- Genesis 23:1-4
- Philippians 3:20-21 • Hebrews 11:9-10 • 1 Peter 2:11-12

In what ways do you feel like a stranger in this world?

#### **Family Discussion:**

Think about a time you were scared. Was your heart pounding? Were your knees shaking? When are you most likely to feel afraid? In those times, you can come to God. Now, close your eyes and imagine God's presence like a giant, invincible shield between you and that fear. God was with Abram when he was afraid, and He promises to be with you too.

#### **Family Discussion:**

Because Abram followed and worshiped God when no one else around him did, there were times he must have felt like an alien from another world! Have you ever felt like you didn't "fit in?" What was that like? (Parents, encourage openness by sharing about a time you felt you didn't fit in.)

Thursday

December 1<sup>st</sup>

### Friday December 2<sup>nd</sup>

When you seem to lose sight of the goal of your travels, look for the signs that point to your destination. God graciously bestows moments of joy in your pilgrimage, to remind you of the eternal joy that will one day be yours. These gifts are not the goal. "For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited" (C. S. Lewis). Yet they are yours to embrace and enjoy as a promise of things to come.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

Hebrews 11:13-16
Peter 1:3-9
Romans 8:18-21 1
2 Corinthians 5:1-9

What are the reminders around you that point to an inheritance that will never be found on this earth?

#### **Family Discussion:**

What are some of the happiest moments you've ever had? When you watch a movie trailer, it gives you just a glimpse of the full movie to come. All the wonderful and happy things we experience in our lives are just a tiny taste of the great big joy God has for us when we finally get to meet Him face to face.

C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), 31.

## A SONG FOR THE JOURNEY: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free thine own from Satan's tyranny; From depths of hell Thy people save and give them victory o'er the grave. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by Thine advent here; And drive away the shades of night, and pierce the clouds and bring us light! Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, Thou Key of David, come, and open wide our heavenly home; Make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

#### **Family Time Prayer:**

Have each family member share a prayer request, and spend some time praying for each other. End your prayer time with thanks and praise to God.



Saturday December 3<sup>rd</sup>

### Sunday December<u>4<sup>th</sup></u>

### Star Gazers

Away from the lights of the town, the stars shine with more brilliance and depth. The longer you stare at them, the closer they become. Perhaps it's a trick of your eyes, but one star in particular seems to quiver and dance in the black velvet sky. The bleating of a sheep pulls you out of your stargazing and directs your focus back to the earth. The old man beside you is still staring up into the heavens, as if in a daze.

"It never works," he announces suddenly, and with a twinkle in his eye. You wonder if the night air is starting to take over his mind. "What never works?" "Just try and count them," he replies.

You return your gaze to the stars, if only to humour the poor traveller. One by one you pick the stars out, assigning them each a number. Yet the more you count, the more they pop out of the blackness, till there is hardly a pinpoint of velvet left. "Well?" the old man inquires.

"I lost count," you admit, and are rewarded with a crooked yet completely sane smile.

"They're too numerous," he says in triumph. "Yet there is always one you can pick out. You have to start somewhere, and all it takes is one. Take that bright one just there. One star, one promise, one son."

You wonder what he means. You also wonder about the star he pointed out, the same one you had noticed earlier. Even the shepherds around the fire are making mention of it. *It is most unusual for this time of year*, you hear one say. *It must be a sign*, says another. And then in a hushed tone -A sign from God.

"What do you think about signs from God?" you ask the traveller. Now he is tugging at his beard, as if to bring back events and experiences of the distant past. Finally he speaks. "God gave me a sign in the heavens once. By it He promised the impossible. He wouldn't be God if the impossible were out of His reach, after all. Could I prove it? No. Did I believe it? Yes. I believed it with the same faith I began my search with. Without faith all the signs in the world would do no good."

"So there is no way to prove it." you say with disappointment.

"Oh, there are many proofs. God likes to validate His word with His presence. He made more than a promise to me. He made a covenant, one that was irrevocable. At times I wonder why He did such a thing. I'm a human with miserable failings, full of fear, and many times I tried to take His promise into my own fumbling hands."

You look down at his hands, now thick as leather, rubbing over and against each other to generate warmth. You think of your own failings, staring now at your hands which have a journey's worth of dirt caked into them. "So He kept the agreement? Even when you didn't?"

"Yes." The air grows silent between you. You are surprised to see a tear moistening the creases in the old man's face. "When He made the covenant, I offered a sacrifice. It was a night much like this. I waited in the darkness, not knowing what was to happen. And then He came. I saw the smoke from a fire I had not lit. And He said He would become like those lifeless animals if ever He broke His promise. There was nothing I could ever do to change it. It was more than a sign. It changed my life."

His words stir up unnamable desire in you. There is something about this man that is wildly captivating. You can't help but wonder if your search holds a sign such as this.

"What did He promise?" you ask in anticipation.

He leans so close his whiskers almost touch your face. "A son in my barrenness. And so much more."

Suddenly a light flashes above. All those around the fire instantly throw their heads back in wonder. The unusual star has exploded into blazing light, and it is not burning up.

### Family Activity #2: Gaze

One evening this week, **go sky gazing together**. Step out onto your balcony, into your backyard, or down your street, and take a few minutes to look up together. What do you see? Are there any stars visible? How many can you count? If there are no stars out, how many lights can you see shining around you in the dark?

Take a few moments to look up in complete silence, imagining what it must have been like the night God told Abraham to try to count the stars.

#### Some possible prompts for discussion:

Have you ever experienced a sign from God? What are some ways God speaks to us today?

#### Other (optional) suggestions:

- Bundle up and take a blanket outside, finding a place to lay down, get cozy, and look straight up.
- Go on a walk around your neighbourhood, pausing to look up into the sky.

"[God] took him outside and said,
'Look up at the sky and count the stars

if indeed you can count them.'

Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'

Abram believed the Lord,
and he credited it to him as righteousness."

 $\sim$  Genesis 15:5-6 $\sim$ 

### Monday December 5<sup>th</sup>

Advent gives reason to reflect on the promises of the One who called you on this quest. They are meant to become a part of you, and to be remembered in every step. Some of His promises are granted in moments, others are stored up for the fullness of time. Yet they remain; that is their nature. That is His nature.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

- Genesis 12:2-3; 15:2-5 Matthew 1:21-23
- Micah 5:2-5a
- Luke 1:26-37

What promises from God are you holding on to?

### Tuesday December 6<sup>th</sup>

Your payment in exchange for a divine promise may not be what you expected. What did the father of many nations give? What did the mother of the nations' Saviour present? All who desire to enter this family must bring an offering in kind.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

• Romans 4:16-24

- Genesis 15:6
- Luke 1:38 Galatians 3:6-9, 29

What is the role and response of faith in pursuing God's promise?

### **Family Discussion:**

Have you ever made a promise which you later broke? Has someone ever broken a promise to you? How are God's promises different from the ones humans make?

### **Family Discussion:**

What do you give to the person who already has everything? What kind of gift do you think God loves to receive? (Hint: It's what Abraham and Mary gave God.) Faith is simply saying "yes" to God. Is there a situation in your life right now where you need to give God your "yes?"

### Wednesday December 7<sup>th</sup>

You wouldn't be here still if you had not some moment of thrill or even terrible awe to hold on to. You hold it with a fierce and holy joy, for you are certain. You cannot comprehend it fully, but you are certain. *He was there*.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

- Genesis 15:7-21
- *Matthew 2:1-9*
- Exodus 3:1-14

• Luke 2:25-33

How has God shown Himself tangibly to you?

### Thursday December 8<sup>th</sup>

Perhaps it was impatience, mistrust, or even despair. Whatever the reason, you thought you had a better way. God's way may seem higher, harder and completely unsafe, but it is always ultimately good.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

- Genesis 16; 17:18-22 Isaiah 55:6-9
- Proverbs 3:5-8
- Matthew 1:18-25

In what ways have you attempted to take God's promises into your own hands, and how has His grace been shown despite your lack of faith?

#### **Family Discussion:**

Was there ever a time when you were certain of God's presence with you or when He answered one of your prayers? Share your story.

### **Family Discussion:**

Have you ever tried to get something you wanted *your way* instead of God's way? What happened?

#### OR

Have you ever had to wait a really long time for something you wanted? What was that like? Did you start to lose hope you would ever get it? If you could have fast-forwarded the waiting time, would you?

### Friday December 9<sup>th</sup>

The change is becoming greater now. Through many dangers, toils and snares you have already come, and they have altered you. God's promise has altered you as well, as has your living by it. You notice the difference not only in your circumstances, but in your very identity. You are learning your new name, one that you did not choose, but which was given to you.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

Genesis 17:1-8, 15-17
Luke 1:5-25, 57-66
Isaiah 43:1
Revelation 2:17

In what ways has your journey changed who you are?

#### **Family Discussion:**

God changed Abram's name to Abraham. Abram means "exalted father" and Abraham means "father of many nations." God changed his name in order to show how He was changing Abraham's life. Imagine God gave you a name change that described who He wanted you to be. What might that new name be?.

### A SONG FOR THE JOURNEY: As With Gladness Men of Old

As with gladness men of old did the guiding star behold; As with joy they hailed its light, leading onward, beaming bright, So, most gracious Lord, may we evermore be led to Thee.

As with joyful steps they sped to that lowly manger bed, There to bend the knee before Him whom heav'n and earth adore, So, may we with willing feet ever seek the mercy seat.

As they offered gifts most rare at that manger rude and bare, So may we with holy joy, pure and free from sin's alloy, All our costliest treasures bring, Christ, to Thee our heav'nly King.

Holy Jesus, ev'ry day keep us in the narrow way; And when earthly things are past, bring our ransomed souls at last Where they need no star to guide, where no clouds Thy glory hide.

#### **Family Time Prayer:**

Have each family member share a prayer request, and spend some time praying for each other. End your prayer time with thanks and praise to God.

Saturday December 10<sup>th</sup>

### Sunday December 11<sup>th</sup>

### Songs for a Son

The night is ablaze, and for an instant every dark hollow is illuminated. Now a steady warmth proceeds from the sky, blanketing the sleeping sheep and eager herdsmen in silver light. You have never felt more alive. Your heart seems to have exploded within you. Could it be? Could this be the very thing you've been seeking all along?

You are startled by a touch on your arm. The old man grips your coat sleeve, his other hand pointing toward the light. His countenance is that of wonder. "It is *His* star."

At once your heart beats assent to this statement. "Whose star?" you ask, your mind still unsure of what it could mean.

"Why, the One who called me – and I suspect, the One who called you. The One who made a covenant with me. He is fulfilling His Word – no, more than that – I sense His Word is drawing near, becoming . . . becoming . . . well I don't know what it's becoming. In my case it became a son. A living being, flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone."

"This son, who is he? How did he fulfil the promise?" you ask, hoping to hear the fellow traveller's story at last.

He laughs, a chuckle at first. Then he laughs hard, slapping his bony knees and shaking his wooly beard.

You are rather taken aback at this response. "Tell me, what's so funny?"

"My son," he says with a grin. "We named him after his mother's laugh. A laugh that began in disbelief and ended in joy. I thought my days of fatherhood were long past. I even told the angel so. And here they were just beginning. Through him, I would have many sons and daughters. Through him, a blessing was birthed and would flow to every corner of the earth. And I was to be the father of it all. I can hardly conceive of His favour to me. When that boy was born, He loosed all the stars of heaven and let blessings fly – to me. I forgot even the idea of barrenness. My little prince, so peaceful in my arms, content with a lullaby. How great my joy. I still laugh to think of it."

The merriment on the patriarch's face gives him the appearance of an earlier age. For the first time this night you smile, and feel warmed by more than the watchmen's fire. It does seem peaceful here. The old man's words roll over in your head. *A blessing to every corner* . . . even yours? And through a son you have never seen? How is this possible?

You turn to your companion – you realize you don't even know his name – and begin to form the question, when all at once your eyes are blinded by a great flash and your body is thrown to the cold ground. You reach to help the old man who lies beside you, but his grip finds you first, and it is strong.

If the shepherds' fire had expanded a hundredfold it would not compare to the intense yet beauteous light now surrounding the entire gathering. The eyes of the fallen herdsmen are filled with fear. You can hear the sheep bleating and stamping about in confusion. If it were not for the steadying hand of your companion, you would surely tremble into the earth, though its rich fragrance reassures you of the reality of this moment. From the centre of the light a large figure appears. You can only stare dumbstruck at him, but the old man raises his head in recognition.

"Fear not!" Though the voice is thick as thunder, it is soft and brings a calm over the crowd of humans and animals. "I come not to frighten you, but to announce a great joy!"

You are amazed at this shining messenger, and his words seem to be directed to you. You open your arms to embrace them. "A son, the Saviour of promise, has been born today for *you*. He is the Chosen One of God. You will find Him in a manger."

Suddenly, a song bursts forth from every direction, accompanied by countless figures of light. Every particle of heaven and nature is singing. Within your very soul, hopes and fears dance and swirl about, converging upon this heavenly Word. You feel it, at last, the birth of joy. You want to run, and you are sure glory will meet you on the way. Yes, this is the way, *this* is the way to Him.

### Family Activity #3: Give Voice

**Compose your own Family Magnificat.** *Magnificat* (mag-NI-fi-cat) is a Latin word meaning "magnifies." In the Latin New Testament, it is the first word of Mary's song of praise in Luke 1:46-55 where she declares, "My soul magnifies the Lord." It has come to be known as the title of this glorious burst of worship, but it can apply to any expression of exuberant praise to God.

This week, create your own Magnificat as a family. What are the things you want to praise God for in your own individual lives and in the life of your family? Write or type them out on a piece of paper, and then read your "song" of praise out loud together. If possible, display it in a prominent place in your home this week.

#### Here are some suggestions for composing your Magnificat:

- Have each family member compose a phrase, or a line or two, expressing their own particular thanks to God.
- Brainstorm as a family all the things you are thankful for and want to praise God for, and create a list.
- Illustrate or add artwork and colour to personalize your Magnificat.
- Try putting your words to music!
- Don't worry about perfection, rhythm or rhyme. What matters is the honest expression of our hearts and voices to God.

#### Prompts to get you going:

- "We (I) praise you God for ..."
- "We (I) magnify you God because ..."
- "You have done these great things for us (me) ....

"And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.""

~ Luke 1:46-47~

### Monday December 12<sup>th</sup>

Advent celebrates the coming of light. After such a long trek and so many days of darkness, joy often arrives unexpectedly. There you stand, blinking in the light, and you cannot help but laugh at this wonderful turn in the road. Such joy seems almost impossible, but there it is to greet and strengthen you.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

- Genesis 18:1-15
- Isaiah 9:1-5
- Hebrews 11:11-12
- Luke 2:8-14

In what ways has joy taken you by surprise?

### Tuesday December 13<sup>th</sup>

These tidings do more than ring in your ears. They sink deep into the empty spaces of your heart and begin a transformation. Life begins where there was once only desolation and death. It is a miracle.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

- Genesis 21:1-5 IIsaiah 54:1-8
- Psalm 113

• Luke 1:24-25, 39-45

How has God filled areas of barrenness in your life?

#### **Family Discussion:**

Have you ever been surprised by something amazing? Tell your story. How might God be called a God of surprises?

#### **Family Discussion:**

Describe in detail one of the most satisfying meals you've ever had. How did it make you feel? The way that meal filled up your stomach is the way that God wants to fill up your life with His goodness. Is there a part of your life you are hungry for God to fill?

### Wednesday December 14<sup>th</sup>

Highly favoured. This greeting meets *all* those who embrace God's presence in the depths of their being. The Lord is with *you*. This is the promise, the purpose of Christmas. This is the reason for song.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

- Genesis 21:6-8
- Luke 2:15-20
- Luke 1:28-30, 46-55
- Matthew 2:10-11

What is your response to the news that you are a recipient of God's favour?

### Thursday December 15<sup>th</sup>

His glory has come, streaming in gold and lighting up the hills. It is like nothing you have ever seen. And what is most mysterious is that for the first time, the fullness of God's glory shines out of the face of an infant.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

- Isaiah 40:1-5; 60:1-3
- John 1:14-18

Hebrews 1:1-3a
2 Corinthians 4:6

How have you beheld His glory?

#### **Family Discussion:**

Imagine you received an envelope with the words BEST NEWS EVER on it, addressed to *you*. What would be written on the paper inside? How would you react after reading it? Why did people get so excited about the news of the birth of Jesus?



#### **Family Discussion:**

Close your eyes and think about a beautiful sunrise – Picture a blaze of golden light coming over the horizon, the sky turning from grey to brilliant blue, and pink, purple, and orange rays bouncing off the clouds. The sunlight suddenly makes everything visible and beautiful. Jesus' birth was more glorious than any sunrise. In what ways can we still see God's glory in our world today?

Friday December 16<sup>th</sup>

Seeds of glory have been planted within you. His Word is taking root and something new is taking form. This divine work develops a unique shape in your life.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

- Isaiah 55:10-13
- Philippians 1:6
- 2 Corinthians 3:18; 5:17

What divine work is being birthed in you this season?

### **Family Discussion:**

Have you ever seen something old or ugly transformed into something new and beautiful? God loves to do that kind of work in our lives. What is something new you are understanding about God or a new way you are growing as you follow Him?



### Saturday December 17<sup>th</sup>

### A SONG FOR THE JOURNEY: Break Forth O Beauteous Heavenly Light

A song for the journey: Break forth, O beauteous heav'nly light, And usher in the morning; Ye shepherds, shrink not with affright, But hear the angel's warning. This child, now weak in infancy, Our confidence and joy shall be; The power of Satan breaking, Our peace eternal making.

### **Family Time Prayer:**

Have each family member share a prayer request, and spend some time praying for each other. End your prayer time with thanks and praise to God.



### Sunday December <u>18<sup>th</sup></u>

### Sacrifice

The light is fading like the final notes of a symphony, but still the song lingers in the air. It is something that will forever resound in your being. You take a deep breath, your heart pounding furiously in your chest. The shepherds have regained their feet and are now talking excitedly, arms flailing and dancing from foot to foot, exclaiming over the wonderful news that has been announced to them.

Your friend is standing with his face turned toward the last shimmer of perfect light. His staff is on the ground, but it appears he has no need of it. He is standing tall, like a mighty tree with roots digging deep through time, and branches being drawn upward toward an inexpressible and glorious hope. In his face shines all the wisdom of a king and all the delight of a child.

"It is as I had hoped," he whispers to you, "and still beyond all my imagining."

"It's Him, isn't it?" you reply, breathless. You hear the shepherds jostling, planning to search every stable in town to find earth's newest son. "Shall we go to Him?" you ask, eying the shepherds pointing the way to Bethlehem, not wanting to be left out of the search.

At first he makes no sound, and you wonder if he has heard you. Finally, he turns around.

"Hand me my staff will you," he says with purpose in his eyes. You bend to obey, placing the wood in his hands. His wrinkled face looks down at you. "Permit an old man a bit of a slower pace. I'm not as young as I once was."

The shepherds are already running, down the path and past the sheep, coats streaming behind them. The last one calls out a word of beckoning to you both, and you can hardly restrain the burst of speed threatening to carry you with them.

"Don't worry," your friend says. "I think I know the way, and I have a feeling we'll get there in plenty of time."

Though slightly disappointed, you match your step to the patriarch's pace.

"Isn't it wonderful?" you say, barely able to contain your excitement. "I just know I'll find what I'm looking for. He's here, and everything I dreamed of will come true! But you must know what that's like. A son was the answer to your promise, too."

Your companion looks thoughtful. "Yes, he was. Though his birth wasn't the end of the story." His feet slow to a shuffle, and something like sadness softens his features. "Promises from heaven do not always follow the easy road. I had to lead my promise up a mountain, to an altar . . ." He stops and leans heavily on his staff. You offer your arm in support. "I had to give him up." His voice trembles. "You see, it wasn't just about the promise. I wasn't living for the promise anymore. I was living for *Him* – the One who made the promise."

You struggle to make sense of these words. "Did your son die?" you ask quietly. "No. But something in me died that day. Something that had to die in order for me to go on, in order for the promise to live."

"That seems cruel," you reply, and for an instant you are not sure you want to meet *Him* after all.

"It was the only way." The ancient traveller lays his bony hand on yours. "And when it was over, He gave me my son back. And more." The creases of his mouth form a smile and he straightens up, gazing down the path. "And I've anticipated this day ever since."

"What do you hope to find now?" "One of my descendants." "A grandson?" you ask. He laughs. "I am far older than you think. And though He is a baby, He is older than us all."

Truly, this has been a strange night. A *holy* night. Will there ever be another one like it? You wonder about this new son. You hope He lives, because somehow you know all your hopes will be fulfilled in Him. The path turns and you almost stumble over a lamb, left alone in the confusion of the night. It is caught in some branches and bleating pitifully.

"What about the sheep?" you gasp, realizing the whole flock has been abandoned by their keepers.

Your friend stoops to untangle the animal with experienced hands. Then with tenderness he speaks. "God will provide, even for them."

You take the lamb and heave it up over your shoulders. In the distance, the lights of the little town hold out a cheering welcome. You grasp your fellow traveller's arm and look at him with new regard. "Come on old father, let's go and meet Him."

### Family Activity #4: Go Out

What does love look like? Love must take on a shape, be embodied, or put into action. The perfect shape of love is Jesus. This is what the Incarnation means — God became a man so we could experience and receive His love and life.

This week, it's your turn to be the shape of love for someone around you. This is how God's glory continues to shine in the world! Because He loves us, we can love one another.

As a family, choose one way you can actively **go out and show God's love** to someone in your life. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to those most in need of experiencing His love this week.

#### Suggestions:

- Write and deliver Christmas cards to those who may be lonely or in need of encouragement.
- Make an encouraging phone call.
- Put together a care package or deliver a meal to someone.
- Invite someone into your home to share a meal with you.
- Volunteer as a family with a local ministry.
- Sing Christmas carols around the neighbourhood.
- Let the Holy Spirit guide you to show a unique shape of love.

"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

~ 1 John 4:9-11~

### Monday December 19<sup>th</sup>

Following the path to the Son is not always easy; it is often strewn with stones that prick your feet and pierce your heart. It requires the complete submission of your will. You may be asked to sacrifice the very thing you hold closest to your heart, in order that God may possess your heart completely.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

- Genesis 22:1-8 Luke 2:34-35
- Hebrews 11:17-19 2 Cor

• 2 Corinthians 5:7

Are you willing to trust God even when it seems His promises have disappeared?

### Tuesday December 20<sup>th</sup>

When you have laid down your very heart you discover that God will indeed provide. The provision comes unexpectedly, overwhelming you with grace. But this redemption comes at a price. These newborn hands are the same ones that will sacrifice themselves in death for your salvation.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

Genesis 22:9-19
 Luke 2:36-38
 Hebrews 10:19-23
 Luke 1:67-79

How do you need to experience God's redemption this season?

#### **Family Discussion:**

Is there something you are struggling to trust God with right now? Share with each other, and pray together for God to help you keep trusting Him in this area.

### **Family Discussion:**

Just like Abraham, we all mess up. Think about something you may need to ask God's forgiveness for. If you feel comfortable, share with each other. Then pray together, thanking God for his forgiveness and grace.

### Wednesday December 21<sup>st</sup>

He doesn't just offer a promise; He offers His very self. Who would have thought that all your searching would lead you to this tiny stable? This is not where you would have expected to find Him. But here He is on this holy night. This is Love incarnated, embodied in the manger. Love has a face. Love has a name – Jesus.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

- Isaiah 9:6-7 1 John 4:9-10
- Luke 2:1-7

• Ephesians 1:3-8

How have you experienced God's love in unexpected ways?

### **Family Discussion:**

Have you ever been surprised by a random act of kindness? Have you ever surprised someone else with kindness? Share these experiences, then talk about how you can show love or kindness in an unexpected way this week.



### Thursday December 22<sup>nd</sup>

The identity of this child is almost incomprehensible. He is a descendent of Abraham, yet He gave Abraham life. It is the wonder of the Incarnation, a divine-human mystery that enfolds you in the warmth of infinite Love. It welcomes you not only into the family of Abraham but into the family of God. You are no longer a stranger. You are His child.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

- Matthew 1:1-17 John 1:1-13
- John 8:56-58 1 John 3:1-2

How has the coming of Christ fulfilled God's promises to Abraham and to you?

### **Family Discussion:**

What is something that everyone in your family has in common? Maybe it's the colour of your eyes, the way you laugh, or a favourite food you enjoy together. Can you think of anything that you and Abraham have in common?

Scripture says that those who trust in Jesus are part of Abraham's family. God chose Abraham to be the fourteen-times-great-grandfather of Jesus. But best of all, God chose *you* to be part of His own family. *You* are invited to be His beloved child forever.

### Saturday December 24<sup>th</sup>

### Friday December 23<sup>rd</sup>

What began as a few tentative steps has led you to Bethlehem and beyond. You have received the promise of Love, the experience of Emmanuel. Your journey is far from over, but you are not alone, and never will be. You have many things to ponder as you leave the stable.

Take a rest on your journey to read these passages and ponder this question:

• Luke 2:19

What treasure will you now carry with you as a result of your journey to Bethlehem?

### **Family Discussion:**

What is one special thing you will remember from this Advent journey together?

Take a few moments simply to "come and worship Christ the newborn King."

# A SONG FOR THE JOURNEY: O Little Town of Bethlehem

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

For Christ is born of Mary; and gathered all above, While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wond'ring love. O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth, And praises sing to God the King, and peace to men on earth.

How silently, how silently the wondrous Gift is giv'n! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His Heav'n. No ear may hear His coming; but in this world of sin, Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell, O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.

### **Family Time Prayer:**

Have each family member share a prayer request, and spend some time praying for each other. End your prayer time with thanks and praise to God.

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