

*People
of the
Nativity*

A Devotional Guide

prepared for
Friendship United Methodist Church
Sherman, Texas
2025

Introduction

Advent is a time of great joy and celebration, a time when we live in anticipation of the impending birth of Jesus and the new birth that God brings to our own lives. Unfortunately, many people approach the Christmas season with a sense of dread: there is always so much to be done, so many gifts to be bought and wrapped, so many activities to attend. By the time Christmas finally arrives we are exhausted and ready to put the season behind us. When this happens, we miss the real meaning of the nativity. Wouldn't it be nice to feel different?

The purpose of this devotional guide is to make a difference in your Advent by providing the opportunity for you to slow down and take a look at yourself, your relationship with God, and your relationship with others. The Christmas story is about people: people who struggle with life, who look for hope, who are called for special purposes, and who celebrate new life. In their stories we see our own stories and in their faith we see a reflection of our own faith.

My invitation to you is to take the time to hear the stories of *The People of the Nativity* and to discover your own story. Then, as you discover your own story, I invite you to begin to write the story of your future as you enter into new relationships with the people around you. When Christmas comes, you will find a new sense of joy and comfort, for the story of the nativity will have become your story.

So, slow down a bit this Advent and prepare your heart as well as your home for the new birth that is coming.

About This Guide

You will note that this guide is arranged in daily devotionals that consist of reading, reflection, prayer, and action, all centered around relationships. It is my hope that you will devote some time each day to this study, preferably in the morning. Here are some suggestions on how you might make the most of this study as you go about the daily devotions.

- If you live alone, find someone that will engage in this study with you and meet together once a week to support one another in your prayer, meditation and action. Take the time to share your insights and experiences in the study with one another.
- If you are meeting in a study group, you may want to make this devotion guide your focus for the month of December. Use your time together to discuss the readings and your personal experiences in prayer and action. If you are not already in a group, this is a great opportunity to begin one.
- If you live with your family, set aside some time each day for your family to share, reflect and pray together as a common devotion. A time around the Yule Log or Advent Wreath would be most fitting. A good time for this family devotion would be in the morning before you scatter to begin the new day, or in the evening before you retire.

Most importantly, use this time honestly and sincerely. The benefit you receive from this study will depend upon your sense of commitment to your preparation and the seriousness of your devotion. The end product is a celebration of Christmas that you will long remember.

Sunday, November 30
God

Read: John 3:16-17

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him

Reflect:

Remember the first words of the Bible? *"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth..."* Our journey with the people of the nativity, like everything else, begins with God. We must clearly understand that the season of Advent has no meaning outside of John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world..."*, because the gift of Christmas is truly a gift of God's love and grace. Yet we mustn't forget verse 17 either. The action of God in sending his son into the world wasn't to condemn the world, but to bring salvation to the people of the world. So it is that our season of Advent is not a season of judgment, but a season of hope -- a season when we look forward to the salvation of God that comes to us once again -- a season when we look forward to rejoicing with Jesus and with the saints -- a season when we find ourselves filled with that spirit of God that teaches us of love and of understanding. So in this Advent season, as we begin to discover the different people of the nativity and the roles that they played in God's act of salvation, we find our beginnings in the very simple truth that God is the one who sets it all in motion, and without God's love, it has no meaning at all. Therefore, our journey begins in our relationship with God.

Pray:

O Holy and Loving God, as I begin this season of Advent, I think of you, without whom there would be no Christmas. As you came to your people long ago, come to me, to fill my heart with your love and my mind with the images of salvation as it comes to us in the child, your son. Amen.

Relate:

Find some time today to strengthen your relationship with God through a special time of prayer.

Monday, December 1
The People Walking in Darkness

Read: Isaiah 9:2-3

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
You have multiplied exultation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

Reflect:

I love the morning. My routine is to sit on my patio in the darkness of the waning night, drinking my coffee, waiting for the first glimmer of light to come over the horizon. Little by little the world comes into focus as indistinct apparitions begin to appear out of the emptiness, only to take shape and become recognizable forms. My mood is that of anticipation, for I know that in a very short time sunlight will bathe my surroundings and the unseen will come into view as shadows become shapes and darkness becomes light. And each time it happens, I say a prayer, giving God thanks for a new day, for God has brought to me new life. Yes, there will be challenges in the new day, but there will also be opportunities, there will be people with whom to share joy, and there will be wonderful moments of grace. All of this comes as God's gift to us.

In this image is Isaiah's message. From the darkness will come a new light. No more stumbling around trying to find your way. The mysteries hiding in the night will be revealed. Isaiah envisioned this new light as one whom God would send into the world to be the chosen one, the one who would deliver God's people. In this season of Advent we sit in darkness, knowing that the light will come. We call the light Jesus.

Pray:

As I sit in the darkness of my life, O Lord, I await the coming of your light. You are the source of my hope; I know that the dawn will come soon, bringing a new day. Thank you for the coming day that awaits me in this season. Amen

Relate:

If possible, watch the rising of the sun today and say a prayer of thanks!

Tuesday, December 2
The People in Exile

Read: Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her

that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the Lord's hand

double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,

make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

and all people shall see it together,

for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Reflect:

The exile was the greatest tragedy faced by the Hebrew people. Having had a taste of a life of glory under the reign of King David, now they were humiliated, taken to a foreign country, stripped of everything that they valued, cut off from the very land that was a part of God's covenant. There could be nothing worse for them. Yet into the land of the exile came a voice; the voice of a prophet, crying, in their wilderness, "*make straight the pathway the Lord.*" It is in these words of the prophet Isaiah that the people of exile found their hope. It is here that we find our hope as well, for the words remind us that in the darkest hour of our lives, when all hope seems to be cut off, God is, nevertheless, there with us. Although we may not see the solution to our problem, God promises us that the end will be a time of glory, and all of the difficult roads that lie before us will be smoothed out. It is indeed the spirit of God that leads us through the wilderness and into new life. In this season of Advent, we look forward to God taking us over the rough spots and allowing us to see the new glory of salvation that waits for us. Like the people of exile, we find our hope in God's promise.

Pray:

Lord, sometimes the path seems too rocky for me to bear; I find myself stumbling through life, unable to stand on my own. Give me strength to traverse the stumbling blocks of my life that I may stand in the glory of your salvation, through Christ my savior. Amen

Relate:

Think of someone you know who is having a particularly difficult time with life. Give to him or her a word of encouragement today -- a word in which God's hope may be found.

Wednesday, December 3
Isaiah

Read: Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Reflect:

Isaiah was a simple priest, like many who ministered in the temple. It was Isaiah's turn to tend the high altar. When he entered the Holy of Holies, he expected to take care of business, yet once there he encountered a new reality: the reality of a living God; a God who stood before him and made God's presence known. An ordinary event in Isaiah's life became an extraordinary event in God's presence.

In this season of Advent, we look to those things that are very ordinary: the buying of presents, the wrapping of packages, the decorating of our homes, the feasts that we prepare for our guests. Yet in all of the ordinary we await the very extraordinary; we await the presence of God, which sometimes comes at the most unexpected moment in our preparations. As you go through this season of Advent, look for the presence of God in the unexpected, for you will find God in the most unexpected moment and in the most unlikely places.

Pray:

In this holy season, O Lord, lead me beyond the routines and obligations that occupy my attention; open my eyes, to see you in all things, that my heart may be in tune with you. Amen

Relate:

Perform an extraordinary act of kindness for a member of your family.

Thursday, December 4

Jesse

Read: I Samuel 16:1-5

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the Lord said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

Reflect:

Jesse was a simple man, leading the simple life of a shepherd. Who would have ever thought that from Jesse would come the new king of Israel? And who would have thought that from all of his sons, David would be the one chosen? We do not see Jesse as a man of earth-shaking importance, yet it was his raising of the child David that enabled the youngest of the sons to rise to the kingship. Jesse would never become great, but the one he raised, whose life he shaped, would be the greatest of all.

So, too, with us it is very often not what we do for ourselves that matters, but what we do for others: sometimes it is the simplest act we do for a child, sometimes done for the simplest of children. Who knows what our actions may do in the lives of others, even those whom we least expect to rise to greatness? In this season of Advent, we remember "the little ones," those who are often forgotten and neglected, but those for whom we have the ability to care. We seek to extend our love to those little ones knowing that even they can rise to greatness.

Pray:

Lord, I do not seek greatness, but let the simple love I give to others do great things, that in the expectation of your son great love may be known. Amen

Relate:

Do something special for one of the little ones in your life.

Friday, December 5
David

Read: I Samuel 16:14-23

Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. And Saul's servants said to him, "See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord now command the servants who attend you to look for someone who is skillful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will feel better." So Saul said to his servants, "Provide for me someone who can play well, and bring him to me." One of the young men answered, "I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the Lord is with him." So Saul sent messengers to Jesse, and said, "Send me your son David who is with the sheep." Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine, and a kid, and sent them by his son David to Saul. And David came to Saul, and entered his service. Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. Saul sent to Jesse, saying, "Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight." And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him.

Reflect:

David was to rise to greatness, to become the greatest king Israel would ever know. Yet David's service began in simple fashion. Presumably, as a young boy, David's first act of service was to soothe the troubled spirit of King Saul. By simply being present, by playing his music and singing his song, David brought comfort to Saul.

So it is that in this Advent we realize that, while we want to do great things in our ministry to others, it is very often in the simplest of acts that the most profound service begins. Like David ministering to King Saul by the very presence of his life, so too we have the opportunity to minister to others by our presence. In this season of the year we often think of the elderly and aged, who are left alone, who are cut off from those things that they enjoy, who often live in a daily world of pain. We have the opportunity to reach out to them, to bring something soothing into their lives and, at least for the moment, to make their lives worth living. In this season of hope, we remember the elderly.

Pray:

Lord, it is so easy for me to focus on myself, forgetting that I am who I am because I have been loved and cared for by others. Today, help me to see and honor the lives of your servants who have been my inspiration, to learn from them how to love and serve. Amen

Relate:

Take a few moments today to visit a shut-in or someone who is in a nursing home.

Saturday, December 6
Messiah

Read: Isaiah 40:9-11

*Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God!”*

*See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.*

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Reflect:

Following the death of David, the Kingdom of Israel fell apart. The people fell on hard times, the leadership of the nation and the Temple became self-seeking, and eventually the Israelites wound up being carried off into exile by the Babylonians. In this time of despair and hopelessness, a new idea arose, the idea that God would raise up a new David to deliver the people back to the land and restore the lost kingdom. They called this hoped for leader "Messiah," the “anointed one,” the one who would deliver them. Isaiah spoke clearly of the Messiah, yet the image that Isaiah presents, a vision created by God, is not of a new King David who would conquer and destroy the enemy, but that of a shepherd who gently gathers his sheep, who lovingly holds the lamb in his arms, who leads them into green pastures.

It is in this vision of hope that we find our meaning as well. God comes to us in the form of Messiah, not to destroy and tear down, but as a shepherd to love and to lead us. We live in anticipation of this kind of deliverance, not as victory over our enemies, but the welcome embrace of one who loves us.

Pray:

Lord, I love hugs, the embrace of others that lets me know that I am loved and accepted. As I await the coming of your Son, help me find your love in the embrace of others. Amen.

Relate:

Give someone an unexpected hug today and tell them that you love them.

Sunday, December 7
The Son of Man

Read: Daniel 7:13-14

*As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a human being
coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One
and was presented before him.*

*To him was given dominion
and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one
that shall never be destroyed.*

Reflect:

The apocalyptic vision of the prophet Daniel sees "The Son of Man" coming to redeem Israel. This was not the Jewish Messiah of Isaiah who would change the history of the world, but an agent of God sent from heaven to recreate the heavenly Kingdom on earth. In Daniel's vision, the Son of Man was not a human, born of woman, but a supernatural being who was born of God. The Apostles saw in Jesus both the "Messiah," a man of history born of an earthly mother, and the "Son of Man," the heavenly being sent from God to redeem the world and usher in the new Kingdom of Heaven. The life and ministry of Jesus was not just to restore Israel, but to redeem the entire human race and establish God's reign on earth.

We look forward to the birth of Jesus at Christmas as the advent of God, yet the true hope of Christmas is that God comes not to restore the old, but to make new. The birth of Jesus is the beginning of the new Kingdom. Our celebration of Christmas is not just a birthday party for Jesus, but the rebirth of the world in the new hope of God's presence.

Pray:

Lord, I love the traditions of Christmas and the joy of remembering the good times of the past. Yet I also know that each Christmas is a time of new birth, and I long for that newness even now. Come anew to me this year, that your Kingdom may reign in my heart and life. Amen.

Relate:

Write a note of encouragement to a young Christian whom you know.

Monday, December 8
Zechariah

Read: Luke 1:5-19

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

Reflect:

Zechariah is a model of faithfulness. Following in the footsteps of the prophet Isaiah, he served the Lord as a Temple priest, faithfully executing his duties when his turn came around. Yet, on that day when he entered the Temple, something special happened. He came face to face with the angel Gabriel, and Gabriel confirmed to him that the Lord had heard his earnest prayers and would indeed give to him and his wife, Elizabeth, a son, for whom Zechariah had prayed for many years. It was a truly extraordinary revelation, for by this time Zechariah and Elizabeth were both quite old. In fact, the revelation was so extraordinary that Zechariah couldn't believe that it was true. Yet, it was true, and Zechariah came to know its truth in the months ahead.

Often, we, like Zechariah, pray for the desires of our hearts, yet wonder if our prayers are ever heard--wonder if God will ever answer our prayers. And, yes, it is true that sometimes God answers our prayers with a "no," but sometimes it is our own lack of faith that refuses to see the answer to our prayers when it presents itself before us. In this season of Advent, we look forward to God hearing and answering our prayers.

Pray:

Lord, I know prayer is good and believe that you answer my prayers, but sometimes those answers are elusive, and things don't turn out the way I want. In this Advent season, restore my hope and help me to believe, even in the things I cannot see. Amen.

Relate:

Spend some time in prayer today, with your family or someone you love.

Tuesday, December 9
Elizabeth

Read: Luke 1:24-25

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Reflect:

Elizabeth's life was fulfilled: she had longed for, even prayed for, a child, but it seemed to no avail. Then, long past the time of having children, a miracle occurred, and she found herself pregnant! The truth of what was happening did not escape her. This was not an ordinary pregnancy, and her son would not be an ordinary child: this was God's doing and the child she would bear would be a holy instrument of God's love. For Elizabeth, her disgrace of childlessness was removed, replaced with the joy of being a means by which God's work would be done.

How often have we prayed and felt like our prayers have not been heard? How often have we longed for something that has never come? Yet, how often have we been surprised by the timing of God's grace, coming in the moment we least expect it? In this holy season we are reminded that the true gift of Christmas is not about us and what we want, but about God and about God giving us what we need the most: the gift of a child who brings us salvation!

Pray:

Lord, help me to remember that the true gifts of Christmas come from you and are not what we want, but what you want for us. Focus my eyes on your holy child, that my joy may be complete. Amen.

Relate:

Give God a special gift today.

Wednesday, December 10
Mary

Read: Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Reflect:

We like to think of Mary as a young beauty, attractive in her appearance, lean in her figure, with a joyous smile on her face. Yet the truth is, Mary was probably a very common girl, with hands used to hard work, a body hardened from laboring in the fields. In other words, Mary was probably a lot like you and me. Yet, it was this common, ordinary girl whom God chose to bear the Son.

As we approach the time of Christmas, we are made aware of the fact that God can use even the very ordinary things of life to bring about something that is extraordinary, just as He can use the very ordinary people - people like you and me - to do extraordinary things. We come to realize that God doesn't need for us to be a beauty queen or a super athlete in order for us to be used. All God asks is for a relationship; a relationship based on honesty, concern, and love. All that is really expected is for us to have a relationship with God.

Pray:

Lord, I often find myself being jealous of others, those who are better or prettier or more popular. I often want to be more so that you will love me more. But I also know that you love me as I am. Instead of wishing for what I am not, Lord, help me to accept what I am: a precious child loved by you! Amen.

Relate:

Help somebody to feel like a special person this day.

Thursday, December 11
Elizabeth & Mary

Read: Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Reflect:

What a special moment it must have been! Elizabeth, who was to be the mother of John the Baptist, and her cousin, Mary, who was to be the mother of Jesus, coming together to rejoice in the good news that both of them carried. And, when Mary walked through the door, she didn't have to be told. Elizabeth knew! She knew of the blessed son Mary carried in her womb, and with that insight, she rejoiced at what was about to happen in her life, in Mary's life, indeed, in the life of the world.

As we look forward to Christmas this year, certainly, we anticipate the season of rejoicing that will be ours. But we also find great meaning in looking forward to the rejoicing that will take place in the lives of others; for indeed, they, too, will celebrate with us in the coming of the Savior.

Pray:

Lord, I always find Christmas to be a joyous season, but the greatest joy of all is sharing it with others. Guide me today to share my joy with all that I meet, so that your joy may spread to them. Amen.

Relate:

Take a special moment to share your joy with someone in your life.

Friday, December 12
John the Baptist

Read: Matthew 3:1-4

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'"*

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

Reflect:

His ragged clothes and strange diet cause us to regard John the Baptist as just a little bit odd. Yet, the people of Jerusalem would have seen John the Baptist for what he was - a prophet - a prophet who came with a special message. And the message he brought was, *"Now is the time...now is the time to change...now is the time to repent...now is the time to get rid of the old and embrace the new."* For all his strangeness, it was the message of John the Baptist that truly heralded the coming of the Messiah and opened the door for Jesus to come into the lives of others.

So it is for us in this Advent season, that we have the opportunity to change...to repent...to turn our lives around. We have the opportunity to prepare ourselves to receive the Messiah by clearing out the "junk" in our lives and making room for a new hope. It is time to hear the message of John and know that a large part of our preparation for Christmas comes from our own hearts as we prepare to embrace the newness that God brings.

Pray:

As I journey through this holy season, O Lord, I hear the cry of John the Baptist again and confess that I have not always been faithful to you, nor have I always treated those around me with respect. Guide me today to change my habits that love may be my way of life in all things. Amen

Relate:

Apologize for some wrong that you have done to another.

Saturday, December 13
The People of Jerusalem

Read: Matthew 3:5-6

Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Reflect:

The people of Jerusalem felt like exiles in their own land as they lived under the occupation of the Roman Empire. They lived in the land, but it was not their own and neither were they free to do as they chose: they always had the threat of the emperor hanging over them. So, when John the Baptist came with a new message, when he came heralding the Messiah, all the people of Jerusalem came out to hear him; for all needed that sense of hope that let them know that God had not forgotten.

We, too, often feel like exiles in our own land. We often feel as if we have been cut off from our dreams and our hopes, as if a wall has been built around us, separating us from where we are and where we hope to be. Yet, the word that comes to us is the word that God has not forgotten, that God is still there, and that God is the one who seeks to tear down the walls between us and our hope. In this season of Advent, we look forward to being reunited with the of hope God brings us.

Pray:

Lord, I confess that I sometimes find myself in despair, not knowing what the future might bring and wondering if my dreams will ever come true. Yet I know that you are still here with me and that wherever you are there is hope; send me a new hope today. Amen.

Relate:

Share the good news of God's hope with someone who is lost.

Sunday, December 14
The Pharisees

Read: Matthew 3:7-10

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Reflect:

When the Pharisees came out to be baptized, John let them know exactly what he thought about them: he regarded them as hypocrites, people who claimed to be righteous, but who lived lives of selfish indulgence. The word John spoke to them was a word of repentance, calling them to change their ways. Yet, we must realize that, in spite of how John the Baptist reacted to them, the Pharisees came. They came out in search of that sense of hope that even they needed in their lives.

In this season of Advent, we all need hope. We look around us and we see those who are different from us, even those that we may not care for very much, in that same need of hope; and we realize that we have a message for them, as well. God loves them just as much as God loves us.

Pray:

Lord, I often look at those who are different and think less of them because they are not like me. Yet I know that you came for all and that they need you every bit as much as I need you. Help me to truly love my enemies and pray for those who persecute me. Amen.

Relate:

Find the opportunity to share hope with someone who is different from you.

Monday, December 15
Caesar Augustus

Read: Luke 2:1-5

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Reflect:

How could Caesar have known what he was doing? Is there any way he could have foreseen the events that would take place because of his decree? Of course not. He became the unwitting agent of God's deliverance. For, without the decree, Mary and Joseph would never have gone to Bethlehem. And if Mary and Joseph had never gone to Bethlehem, Jesus would have been born somewhere else, and the words of the prophets would not have been fulfilled. So even though he was not a part of the events of the birth itself, even though he was far removed from Bethlehem and from Mary and Joseph, even though he was different from them in his faith and in his upbringing, Caesar Augustus became the agent of God's salvation, showing us how God can use anyone to bring about deliverance, for we are all children of God, and God has a purpose for each and every one of us.

In this season of Advent, we look around and see the most unlikely people doing the most extraordinary things, and we wonder how. Often people far removed from us bring unexpected blessings. And some of those people may even stand opposed to Christmas and our understanding of what this season is about! But, somehow, we know that it is God's spirit working within them, just as God's spirit works within us.

Pray:

Lord, I often look at those who are different and wonder how you could love them; I look at those who do not believe the way I believe and think they have nothing to teach me. Yet they, too, are your children and I know that you can use them just as you can use me. Open my eyes and ears in this holy season to be ready to see your love and grace wherever they may appear. Amen

Relate:

Be generous with your words of gratitude today, especially with those who least expect it.

Tuesday, December 16
Joseph

Read: Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

*'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',
which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

Reflect:

What a special man Joseph must have been: a man caught in an embarrassing situation - a fiancé who becomes pregnant and he is not the father! Here is a man who cares so much for Mary that he doesn't want to embarrass her; a man who only wants to do the right thing. Joseph was a man, who out of his love for his fiancé, receives a revelation from the angel, and becomes a partner in the greatest event on the earth. In Joseph, we find a man whose faith leads him through the tragedy of humility to the joy and celebration of the salvation of the world.

Like Joseph, we often find ourselves in embarrassing situations. We would often like to run and hide our faces for fear of what will happen to our reputation. Yet, somehow, in our faith in God, we come to trust that even the most embarrassing of situations can turn out to be good; and out of those situations God can raise us up to new understandings, to new promises. For out of the embarrassments of life, God can teach us about faith.

Pray:

In my vanity, Lord, I hate to be embarrassed, fearing that others will reject me and I will suffer because of it; yet I know that you can overcome all obstacles and that the fulfillment of your purpose is more important than my vanity. Today, Lord, help me to trust you that all things will turn out right. Amen.

Relate:

When you come upon an embarrassing moment today, help those involved to find some good in that situation

Wednesday, December 17
The Donkey

Read: Luke 2:4-6; and 19:28-30, 35-36

Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road and shouting "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Reflect:

While the donkey is not mentioned as a part of the Christmas story, nevertheless, its participation in the events is legendary and is a tradition for our celebration of Christmas. We see in the entry into Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus a parallel of the entry into Jerusalem for his death. Throughout all, we see the donkey, faithful but almost unrecognized, in the unfolding story of salvation.

We must admit that there are persons in our lives that very often go unnoticed; these are the "invisible" people of our world. They always seem to be there for us; they are always ready to bear our burdens; they are there when we need them - people who pick us up when we fall, cheer us up when we are sad; lift us up. It is these people who make life bearable for us. It is these people we must remember in this season of Advent.

Pray:

Thank you, Lord, for those who help me, those who encourage me, those who are always there for me. I could not go through life without them, yet I confess that I often take them for granted. Today, I take the opportunity to thank you for bringing them into my life and ask you to bless them as they have been a blessing to me. Amen.

Relate:

Take a few minutes today to drop a note to someone who has helped you through life.

Thursday, December 18
The Innkeeper

Read: Luke 2:7

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Reflect:

Like the donkey, there is no direct mention of the innkeeper in the story of the birth of Jesus. But we know when Mary and Joseph knocked on the door of the place they intended to stay, someone came. Someone saw them. Someone understood their need. Someone responded to that need. That someone was the keeper of the inn. Once again, we find a character in the story who doesn't even get mentioned, yet whose hospitality opens the door for the miraculous event. He did what he could; perhaps it wasn't much. Nevertheless, he gave of himself in a time of need and set the stage for the most wonderful event of all time.

As we look forward to Christmas, we realize that there are many who simply do what they can; it may not be much, but it is something. We, ourselves, are called upon to do our part; for, as small as it seems, it is our part, combined with those small parts of others, that makes Christmas a very special time for others. Mother Teresa once said, "*We cannot all do great things; but we can all do small things with great love.*" God did the great part; now it's up to us to do the little things with all the love we can muster!

Pray:

God, sometimes I feel weak and powerless, like the little I do doesn't really make a difference. Help me to remember today that all I have to do is love, and let you do the rest; through Jesus our Christ. Amen.

Relate:

Do something kind for someone else today.

Friday, December 19
The Wisemen

Read: Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

...
When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Reflect:

What a journey it must have been - the wisemen setting out from a distant land, guided only by a star, yet knowing, somehow, that beneath that star they would find the greatest event of all time-- knowing that that star would lead them somewhere, someplace, to share in that great moment of triumph for humanity.

It is in that simple, trusting faith of the wisemen that led them on their journey that we find the true meaning of faith - a faith that leads us into the unknown, guided only by a hope and a promise. Even as the wisemen followed their star to find the baby Jesus lying in a manger, so we follow our hopes and our dreams, knowing that God will lead us to that which gives our life special meaning.

Pray:

Lord, I often find myself living in the fear of things to come, so I turn inward and get lost in the concerns of today. Help me to learn a lesson from the Wisemen and search for my star; then grant me the courage to follow that star. Amen.

Relate:

Take a moment to share your hopes and your dreams with someone who is close to you.

Saturday, December 20
Herod

Read: Matthew 2:3-8

When King Herod heard [the Wisemen], he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

Reflect:

Herod is a man caught in the middle. He is, first of all, a Jew living in anticipation of the Messiah and the deliverance that will come; but he is also a ruler, with the power of life and death over others, and he enjoyed having that power. He is caught in a difficult predicament - to exercise his faith or to exercise his power. Unfortunately, Herod decides to exercise his power and ignores his faith in the desire to become even more powerful by destroying the one who threatens him.

We, like Herod, very often struggle within ourselves. We want to satisfy the needs of our faith, but we also want to satisfy the desires of our lives; yet sometimes those two are inconsistent, and we struggle to make the right choice. Somehow, we know that to choose our own power, to choose our self-gratification or ideas of self-fulfillment, threatens our faith and seeks to destroy our relationship with God. It is not in our own power that we find our strength; it is, rather, in the power of the love and grace of God. To gain power means to have faith that God is the one who is all powerful. Faith leads us to understand that pleasing God, ultimately, brings pleasure into our lives.

Pray:

Lord, it is so easy for me to get so caught up in pleasing myself that I forget about pleasing you; it is easy for me to seek to fulfill my own desires rather than yours. In this Advent season, turn my eyes away from what I want so that I might see what you want for me; turn my heart away from self-fulfillment, that I may live a life pleasing to you as I await the birth of your son. Amen.

Relate:

Think of someone that you know is struggling with his or her faith and write that person a note of encouragement.

Sunday, December 21
Jesus

Read: John 1:14-18

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Reflect:

It is, of course, the birth of Jesus that we celebrate at Christmas and our image is that of the baby Jesus lying in a manger. As we imagine that holy child, we find our hearts warmed and smiles coming to our faces. But we must look beyond the child to realize that it is in this one who came that we see the face of God, for it is in Jesus that God is revealed to us. In his love and in his actions, in the very life that he lived, we see the compassion of God extended to others. And, so, while Christmas is certainly a time of sentimentality for us, it is also a time of great revelation, as we come to understand that this baby Jesus is God, come to earth to teach us and to lead us to new life. Beyond the trees and lights and presents is the tiny baby, come again to give us a glimpse of the God, who loves us and comes to us anew.

Pray:

Lord, I love Christmas: the bright lights, the smiling faces, the joyous singing and the family reunions. Yet beyond these things, I love you, and am glad that you have come again to show me your face. Open my eyes to see beyond the images of Christmas and behold your glory.

Relate:

Seek to lead your life in a manner that allows others to see Jesus in you.

Monday, December 22
The Shepherds

Read: Luke 2:8-11

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Reflect:

There was nothing special about shepherds. Indeed, the shepherds represented some of the lowliest of people around Jerusalem and in all Judea. These people were hired to tend the sheep because they could do nothing else. The shepherds were very often the lowest of the low, the poor, those whom nobody else wanted, those relegated to the fields to remove them from the rest of society. Yet, it was to the shepherds that the angels came to announce the birth of the baby Jesus. It was to the shepherds that they sang their song of glory. It was the shepherds that they invited to come and to see, so that they, too, could share in the blessed event of the birth of Jesus.

As we look forward to Christmas, we realize that, while Christmas is surely for us, Christmas is for everybody - for the very rich and the very poor, for those who are included and for those who are excluded. Christmas is a time for us to stand together, with our brothers and sisters across the globe, in a great moment of rejoicing and triumph, for unto us a Savior is born, unto us a Son is given.

Pray:

As Christmas comes nearer, Lord, help me to think of others. Help me to see the joy of reunions and the pain of separation; the comfort of having and the despair of being without; the warmth of being loved and the loneliness of having no-one to love you. Help me to remember that Christmas is for everyone, for Jesus came for all your children. Amen.

Relate:

Do something special for the poor.

Tuesday, December 23
The Angels

Read: Luke 2:9-14

Then an angel of the Lord stood before [the shepherds], and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”*

Reflect:

What would Christmas be without angels? It is the angels who sing the praise of God, announcing the birth of the baby Jesus and it is in their song that we come to realize that Jesus was not one born just to Mary and Joseph, but both to all humanity and for all time. It is in the song of the angels that we come to realize that Jesus was born for us as well as for those people 2,000 years ago. It is in the song of the angels that we find our own song of rejoicing, for God has come to us in the baby Jesus.

It is in the song of the Angels that we find the joy of Christmas. What would this season be without the carols we hear and sing? Whether old familiar songs that raise the emotions of warm memories or new songs that suddenly create in us new images, it is through the songs of Christmas that we connect once again to the beloved story of the birth of God’s son.

Pray:

Thank you, Lord, for joyous music and the warmth it brings to my heart! In my joy, turn my attention to your son, whose praises I gladly sing! Amen.

Relate:

Take the opportunity to sing Christmas carols with some of your family or close friends today and share in the warmth of Christmas.

Wednesday, December 24
Those at the Stable

Read: Luke 2:16 and Matthew 2:10-11

So [the shepherds] went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

When [the Wisemen] saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Reflect:

Each year we reflect on the scene at the stable: the baby Jesus lying in the manger with Mary and Joseph watching over him; the shepherds joyfully gazing upon the holy child while the sheep graze nearby; the Wisemen kneeling to honor the new king as they open their gifts; the angel hovering over it all as a sign of God's presence. To be honest, however, the timelines in the separate stories force us to realize that likely there was never a time when the shepherds and wisemen were together and closer analysis of the language of the stories makes us wonder if it was really a stable or just the lower portion of a house. Yet the image of all the people of the story being together is incredibly important to us, for it brings out the meaning of the holy birth: Jesus came to bring all humanity together and to heal the wounds caused by differences, replacing them with the shared blessings of being God's children.

As we anticipate the coming of the Christ Child, we do so with hope and promise. In a world torn apart by racial and ethnic tensions and in the midst of class and economic discrimination, in a time of political warring and selfish longing, we must remember the truth of the story: in coming to us as Jesus, God has shown us that the best life has to offer will not be found in divisions and separation, but in a world without the walls that we erect to isolate us from others. More than any other time of the year, Christmas invites us to reach out our arms to others, those like us and those different from us, to embrace them as our brothers and sisters under God.

Pray:

How wonderful it is, O Lord, to be embraced by your love once again; but it is also wonderful to reach out to embrace others and to feel the personal warmth of your love. Help me today to give and receive your love with joy that the holiness of this day may be an expression of the peace that brings us together. Amen.

Relate:

Be generous with your hugs today and feel the warmth of God's love.

Thursday, December 25
You

Read: Luke 2:10-11

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Reflect:

The promise of God is fulfilled. The words of John 3:16 find special meaning in the song of the angels, *"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior that is Christ the Lord. Don't be afraid."* The birth of the baby Jesus surely is for all humanity and breaks down the walls that separate us, but it is for you, as well - for **you** and for **me**. It is only when we accept the personal gift that God has given in the baby Jesus that we are able to truly understand the meaning of Christmas. For it is a child given to **us**, as individuals, that expresses God's love for us. Just as He came for the shepherds and the wisemen, just as He came for the whole world, Jesus came for **you**. Rejoice in the gift that God has given to you!

Pray:

Great God of grace. as I open the gifts from others on this Christmas day, help me to also receive the greatest gift of all: your love in Christ Jesus that brings hope, love, joy and peace and through which I am saved. Thank you, O God, for the gift of your son, Christ Jesus my Lord. Amen.

Relate:

Join with your friends and your family in making today a very joyous celebration.