

Advent-- A Season of Waiting & A Promise Kept

Have you ever been to an amusement park? What are some of your favorite things to do in an amusement park? Ride the fastest ride? Eat your favorite snack? Wait in a super long line? I don't know anyone who likes to wait. Do you?

But the season of Advent is a time of waiting. It is a time for those of us who look forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus each year to prepare ourselves for a more meaningful Christmas experience. It is a time of anticipation and expectancy—a time of looking forward. Throughout Advent, we consider once more how important the birth of the Savior of the World really was. If given the chance, most of us might just prefer to skip the time of waiting and get to the fun part. We want to hurry and unwrap those beautiful packages under the Christmas tree now! But not yet. For the four weeks leading up to Christmas, we wait.

But the waiting is important. The waiting changes everything. When we wait in line at an amusement park, it gives us more time to get excited about actually riding the ride. It gives us time to prepare ourselves for a ride that just might make us a bit nervous. It also gives us time to consider whether or not this is even a ride we really want to ride! And sometimes, waiting in that line fills us with the courage to actually take our seat when the time comes.

Advent is kind of like that. Through the weeks of waiting, our excitement builds, our anticipation grows, and we spend many, many moments thinking about what Christmas will be like this year. And the closer we get to the big day, the more excited we get along the way! When it is finally time to get up early on December 25, we will know that we have been looking forward to this day for a long time. Each year will mean so much more than the year before and we will know it was worth the wait.

Week One: Hope December 3

1. Listen

The Announcement

(from *The Jesus Storybook Bible* by Sally Lloyd-Jones based on Luke 1.26-38)

There was a young girl who was engaged to a man named Joseph. (Joseph was the great-great- great- great-great grandson of King David.)

One morning, this girl was minding her own business when, suddenly, a great warrior of light appeared—right there, in her bedroom. He was Gabriel and he was an angel, a special messenger from heaven.

When she saw the tall shining man standing there, Mary was frightened.

“You don't need to be afraid,” Gabriel said. “God is very happy with you!”

Mary looked around to see if perhaps he was talking to someone else.

“Mary,” Gabriel said, and he laughed with such gladness that Mary's eyes filled with sudden tears.

“Mary, you're going to have a baby. A little boy. You will call him Jesus. He is God's own Son. He's the One! He's the Rescuer!”

The God who flung the planets into space and kept them whirling around and around, the God who made the universe with just a word, the one who could do anything at all—was making himself small. And coming down... as a baby.

Wait. God was sending a baby to rescue the world?

“But it’s too wonderful!” Mary said and felt her heart beating hard. “How can it be true?”

“Is anything too wonderful for God?” Gabriel asked.

So Mary trusted God more than what her eyes could see. And she believed. “I am God’s servant,” she said. “Whatever God says, I will do.”

2. Talk

What is something you’ve been asked to do for Jesus? Maybe your Sunday School teacher asked you to help with something or your mom or dad suggested a way you could help someone else? Did you do it? How did you feel about what you felt you were asked to do?

Have you ever stood with a group of kids on a sideline waiting to be chosen to play on a team? Maybe it was for a basketball game or a game of Red Rover or another kind of game you like to play. But you wait and wait and wait—hoping you’ll be picked next and then it starts to feel like you’re never going to be chosen at all? There are times when others don’t recognize all we are capable of doing. There are even times when we don’t know all that we are capable of doing! Sometimes, adults act like children don’t have much to give to help the cause of Christ in this world—but we know better! Mary herself was just a young girl and look what she did! Mary told the angel Gabriel, “Whatever God says, I will do.” And she did!

When Jesus was a grown up himself, he used the lunch of a young boy—five fish and two loaves of bread—to feed thousands of people! Not just a few—THOUSANDS! And whatever God asks you to do—God will help you do it. Whether God asks you to do something as grand as bring his son Jesus into the world in a whole new way or something as simple as share your lunch with someone who is hungry—God will make a way for that to happen! We just have to be willing to let God use us. And when we are, we, too are bringing God’s hope to the world.

What new thing might God want you to do in this Advent season?

3. Pray

Dear God,

We love this time of year, but Christmas is still several weeks away. As we begin this time of Advent, on our journey to Christmas, help us to keep our eyes open for the places you want to use us. Help us to have a hopeful courage like Mary. Help us to have a generous spirit like the young boy who shared his lunch. In this season, help us to remember that each of us has something to give. And in a world that can sometimes feel confusing, or crazy, or even scary, may we live each day in the great hope that we have in you and know we are never alone. Amen.

4. Go

The Advent adventure has begun! Go... go to school, go to friends, go to church... go where God calls you and listen for what God is calling for you to do in these days that you might share God’s hope with others. (Parents may want to help kids brainstorm what this might look like.)

Week Two: Peace

December 10

1. Listen

Mary's Song

(from the *Celebrate Wonder Bible Storybook* by Abingdon Press based on Luke 1.46-66)

Mary was so joyful that she began to sing a song to God.

"With all of my heart, I praise God!" sang Mary. "God has shown amazing kindness to me.

"From now on, everyone will know God has blessed me.

"God has done great things for me! God's name is holy!

"God shows love to everyone for all of time.

"God is so strong! God stands on the side of people who have been left out, hurt, or treated unfairly.

"God will take care of God's people. We will remember God's love."

2. Talk

How do you like to praise God? Do you clap your hands? Do you paint pictures? Do you dance? Do you sit under a beautiful blue sky and offer words of praise to God? Do you sing to praise God? That's what Mary did. Mary sang a song about God's mercy. The word mercy, in Jesus' day, came from a word that meant "olive oil". Olive oil was what many people used to treat different kinds of wounds and sore places. It was soothing, comforting, and healing. Mercy is when we offer comfort, forgiveness, and kindness to someone who may not really deserve it. In the Old Testament, the part of the Bible where we first read about God's promises to us, the word used for mercy is a word that means steadfast love. All of these same words can be used describe our God. God love heals our sore and broken places and God's love never ends.*

Mary's song was also a celebration of Jesus' birth as the fulfillment of God's promises. Mary, and her great big family, had been waiting for many, many years! And finally, he was really on his way. And she was a big part of that promise! The child in her belly was the one God had promised to her great big family a long, long time ago. The people were told to keep their eyes open and keep a look out for him. He would be "a child... born to us! ... and a son ... given to us! ... he will be our ruler... and he will be called, "Wonderful Counselor," "Mighty God," "Eternal Father," ... the "Prince of Peace." Mary's world needed that peace and our world today needs that peace too. As you and I live into the mercy of God each day (and share that mercy with others), we too will be working to build a world full of peace instead of hurt and struggle and sadness. And God desires that we do just that—at Christmas and all year around!

Can you think of a new way to praise God—thank God for being who God is—for Advent or Christmas?

How can you live a life of mercy that helps bring more peace to your part of the world?

Find some scrap paper and crayons or markers and draw a picture of how you can share God's peace in this season.

3. Pray

Prayer of St Francis or The Peace Prayer

(Grownups, you may want to spend a few moments talking about what this prayer means to the young ones so that it is more easily understood as they pray)

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. Amen.

4. Go

Go and in your own unique way, in your own particular part of the world, share God's peace with others.

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Week Three: Joy

December 17

1. Listen

Joyous News

(from *Celebrate Wonder Bible* by Abingdon Press based on Luke 2.8-20)

In the fields around Bethlehem, shepherds were watching their sheep. It was dark and cold, and they were warming themselves by a fire. Suddenly, an angel appeared! The angel said, "Do not be afraid. Today in Bethlehem a baby was born for everyone! The baby is God's Son. The baby's name is Jesus. You will find him lying in a manger." The shepherds said, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this special baby!" The shepherds found Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus. They told everyone they saw about the new baby. The shepherds praised God for letting them see the special baby, Jesus.

2. Talk

What brings you great joy? How would you feel if an angel suddenly appeared before you to share some very important news? Joy is an important part of the celebration of Christmas—and it's one of the most fun too! Who doesn't like to feel joy? It is in joy that we, too, even today, kneel before Jesus—just like the shepherds, maybe even a few animals, and eventually the wisemen. Like them, we are working our way toward Jesus throughout these weeks of Advent with a sense of eager anticipation, excitement, and joy! But some people that have some very hard things going on in their life that makes it tricky to feel God's joy. You may even know some of these people. Maybe you have a friend who doesn't even know the story of Jesus' birth and they don't understand why Christmas is so important to us. How can we share the joy of Jesus with them this year? There are children in our world right now surrounded by war and struggle and for them, joy must be very hard every single day. How can we share the joy of Jesus with them this year? Maybe your family knows another family who doesn't always have a warm bed to crawl into each night, a safe roof over their heads at night, or even enough food to eat. How can we share the joy of Jesus with them this year?

How can your family bring joy to others who may not be feeling much joy this season?

How can we better live every single day—even when it’s not Christmas—in the joy of Jesus?

3. Pray

Dear holy God of us all—whether we are happy or sad, joyful or sorrowful, whether we know who you are or we don’t—help all of us to know moments of your deep joy in this season and every season so that we might be able to live in the everlasting light of your love.

4. Go

Go into this week sharing the unending joy of Jesus with those you see along the way. And don’t forget to smile along the way—a friendly face goes a long way!

Week Four: Love

December 24

1. Listen

Heaven Breaks Through

(from *The Jesus Storybook Bible* based on Scripture from Matthew 3, Luke 1, and John 1)

About the same time Jesus was born, another baby was born. His name was John, and God had a special job for him. John was born, his dad knew God’s promise to Abraham was coming true—God was sending the Rescuer. And he was so happy he sang a song:

Because God loves us with a Never Stopping,
Never Giving Up, Unbreaking,
Always and Forever Love—
Heaven is breaking through!
He is sending us a Light from Heaven
To shine on us like the sun
To shine on those who live in darkness
And in the shadow of death
To guide our feet into the way of peace.

So John grew up and—well, to tell you the truth, he was a bit unusual. He lived in the desert. He wore itchy-scratchy outfits made of camel hair. He had a big, big, bushy beard and long, long, scraggly hair. And here is the oddest thing of all—he only ate locusts (short for big, creepy, crunchy, grasshoppers), which he dipped in honey (to disguise the taste, probably).

But God sent John to tell his people something important: ‘Stop running away from God and run to him instead,’ John said. ‘You need to be rescued. I have good news—the Rescuer is coming! Make your hearts ready for him. Yes! Get ready, because your king is coming back for you.’

2. Talk

John, who we call “the Baptizer” because he baptized many people (even Jesus!) lived his life helping others to prepare. He was trying to point others to Jesus and to prepare for his coming—the coming of the Messiah (they had been waiting for him for a very long time!). And that’s what this time of Advent does for us. Throughout this time, we have been getting ready—getting ready for the big day. And it’s almost here! The day we celebrate Jesus’ birth is almost here! In fact, it’s tomorrow! Are you ready?

Is there anything else you or your family might want to do today to get ready to celebrate Jesus’ birth?

What have been some of your favorite parts of this time of Advent?

In what ways do you feel better prepared to celebrate Jesus this year?

3. Pray

Dear God, we are so excited to celebrate the birth of your son tomorrow—the greatest gift ever given and the greatest gift we could ever receive. Help us to continue to live each day in the light of your hope, peace, joy, and love and may we always remember that wherever we go, you are always with us. Help us remember that we can celebrate you every single day. We thank you. We love you. And we want to honor you with our lives. Amen.

4. Go

In the excitement and energy of this day, go be with those you love, those who are important to you and soak up every wonder-filled moment of this day and share that wonder with those gathered around you.

Christmas Day:

December 25

1. Listen

The Birthday

(from The Jesus Storybook Bible based on Luke 2.1-7)

And there, in the stable, amongst the chickens and the donkeys and the cows, in the quiet of the night, God gave the world his wonderful gift. The baby that would change the world was born. His baby Son.

Mary and Joseph wrapped him up to keep him warm. They made a soft bed of straw and used the animals' feeding trough as his cradle. And they gazed in wonder at God's Great Gift, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.

Mary and Joseph named him Jesus, "Emmanuel"—which means "God has come to live with us."
Because, of course, he had.

Week Five: The Search

December 31

1. Listen

The Magi

(from Celebrate Wonder Bible by Abingdon Press based on Matthew 2.1-12)

In a faraway place, there were magi who spent their time watching the stars. One night they noticed a very special star in the sky. It was very bright and seemed to be moving ahead of them. The magi thought this special star would lead them to a new king.

They wanted to bring special gifts to the new king. They packed frankincense, gold, and myrrh—gifts fit for a king—and set out following the star.

The magi arrived in Bethlehem, following the special star until it stopped over a little house. When the magi entered the house, they met the new king, Jesus, and his mom, Mary. The magi knelt down and offered Jesus their gifts.

2. Talk

Did you know the twelve days of Christmas happen after Christmas day? Many Christians celebrate epiphany to mark the journey of the magi (sometimes we call them “wisemen”) as they finally, after a very long journey, found Mary and Joseph and a Jesus who was still very young, but not quite a baby anymore. It is a good practice to let the spirit of Christmas linger a bit after some of the busy-ness and hurry has settled down. What else can we learn from the wisemen?

What does it feel like when you have been looking for something for a very long time and finally find it?

Would you have expected the new king to live in a house just like you and me?

Why do you think the magi gave a child the gifts they did?

What would you most like to give to Jesus this Christmas?

Not the end, but a *New Beginning*

(From *The Biggest Story Bible Storybook* by Kevin Deyoung and Don Clark based on Scripture from Matthew 1)

The beginning of the Bible began with, well, a beginning. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” That’s the first verse in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. The New Testament begins with another beginning, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ,” That’s the first verse in Matthew, the first book in the New Testament. Genealogy is a big word that has to do with tracing your family tree. And that’s what we see at the start of the New Testament... The story Matthew wants to tell is about a new start, a new genesis, a new beginning... Except this new beginning is definitely still connected to the old beginning. Jesus didn’t come out of nowhere, like a baby just fell from the sky (that would hurt)... Jesus was a real Jewish boy born into a real Jewish family with a real genealogy full of real promises and real people with real problems... Jesus was just like us. And he was unlike us. That’s how things work when you are God and man. Jesus was born like boys and girls are born, but his birth was unlike any before or since... Things were about to happen that people had hoped to see happen for a long time. Centuries earlier the prophet Isaiah predicted that a virgin would have a son and he would be called Immanuel, God with us. In other words, a young woman with no earthly way to be pregnant would give birth to a heavenly child.

And it happened, just as he said it would... and that is a promise kept.