



THE JOY OF ADVENT

DEVOTIONS ON THE FIRST CHRISTMAS AS TOLD BY MATTHEW AND LUKE

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Santa Clarita, CA
December 1, 2024
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Welcome to “The Joy of Advent” Devotional

We welcome you to our devotional “The Joy of Advent.” Advent means “coming.” The Christian season of Advent is the four weeks before Christmas when we look forward to celebrating the coming of the Lord Jesus into the world. During each week, we invite you to read and meditate on one of the stories of the First Christmas as told by the Apostles Matthew and Luke in their Gospels. Each day explore a different perspective of the story and connect with the emotions, thoughts, prayers, worship, faith, struggles and joy of those faithful people of long ago.

If you miss a day, feel free to move on to the present day. You can always go back. Share these stories and your insights with your family, your children, your grandchildren and your friends. Read the stories together at breakfast or at dinner and share comments about the day’s questions. Tell the story to others in your own words. Finally, offer a prayer of thanks for the joy of Advent and Christmas.

We wish you a Joyful Advent and a Merry Christmas,
Rev. Rosie DiBianca and Lay Pastor Jack Irwin
From Santa Clarita, CA, Advent 2024

THE JOY OF ADVENT: The Joy of Anticipation

First Week of Advent: Sunday Dec. 1 thru Saturday Dec. 7
Each day read the Advent story in Luke 1:26-56

The Joy of God’s Working

This story is full of the joy of anticipating the future that is in God’s hands for both Mary and Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will have a son, who has a significant future in God’s salvation as the coming Messiah. Mary travels from Nazareth south to Judea to visit her older relative Elizabeth, whose own baby in the womb leaps for joy at Mary’s coming. Elizabeth’s first child will grow up and be known as John the Baptizer, who will years later baptize Mary’s son Jesus as He enters His ministry. Mary bursts into a song of joy and praise. Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months before returning to her home in Nazareth. Yet, the story tells us that joy does not come without challenge, change, perplexing situations and emotions.

Each day, re-read this story of anticipation and meditate using the following guide to connect with the different emotions and faith of Mary and Elizabeth. Pray whatever comes to your mind to share with God. Like Mary and Elizabeth, thank God for advent of Jesus into the world and into your life. Just as Mary shared with Elizabeth, share your insights and joy with your family or a friend.

Sunday, Dec. 1, First Sunday of Advent Why was Mary troubled with the appearance and message of the Angel? Have you ever felt troubled by the Lord? Maybe your prayer was not answered the way you wanted? Maybe there was a time when God seemed silent. Maybe a passage in the Bible was disconcerting or confusing. How did Mary resolve to accept God’s will? Recall times when you felt troubled. How did trusting in God give you comfort or direction or help?

Monday, Dec. 2 Do you sometimes wonder what the future holds for you? The Angel Gabriel’s message suddenly changed Mary’s future. Why was she perplexed? Remember times in your life when events changed your future. How did you feel? How did Mary cope with this sudden change when she said, “I am the Lord’s servant.” When your future changed or when you simply wonder about your future, does Mary’s answer give you comfort? How does the Lord watch over you, too

Tuesday, Dec. 3 With whom do you share important news of your life? Mary had resolved to accept the message of the Lord. “Then the angel left her.” She did not immediately break out in joy; we see that later after she meets Elizabeth’s joyous reception. Excited and joyous, Mary and Elizabeth shared the important events that were God’s blessings. Do you immediately break out in joy when receiving good news or are there times when it must sink in before you celebrate? How has God blessed you? Today, like Mary, share with someone any good news in your life and rejoice together.

Wednesday, Dec. 4 This story is one of exuberant praise to God. Upon Elizabeth’s greeting, Mary burst into a song of joy that God had chosen her. Her song is called the “Magnificat” for it magnifies or glorifies the Lord. How have you been surprised this past month by God’s care for your life and concerns? Are there times when you burst out in praise of what God has done?

Thursday, Dec. 5 Do you ever feel that God has forgotten you? How does Mary’s response indicate that the Jewish people possibly felt that way? Now, Mary has great joy because, after their longing of many years, God has remembered His promises centuries ago to Abraham, to his descendants the Jewish people, and even to all the peoples of the world. (See God’s covenant with Abraham, Genesis 12:1-3) When you pray for your needs and concerns today, how does the angel’s message and Mary’s response of joy, help you to trust that God is good, faithful and merciful toward you?

Friday, Dec. 6 Do you sometimes feel you are insignificant? Mary’s song revealed her thoughts about her lowly status in the world. Yet, she recognized that the qualities significant to God are humility and lack of self-pride, hunger for the goodness of God and faith in God. Is there someone you know who needs encouragement that they are significant in God’s eyes? Call or send a card, email, or text.

Saturday, Dec. 7 Have you ever felt that you were in an impossible situation or condition? Mary and Elizabeth both shared how God overcame impossibilities in their lives - Mary will have a son before she is married to Joseph and the barren Elizabeth is now pregnant. Today, offer a prayer of thanks to God for overcoming those situations in your life that seemed impossible, and as you pray, entrust yourself again to God’s loving care.

Let us close our Pilgrimage with Mary and Elizabeth with this familiar Christmas hymn composed by Charles Wesley in 1744. The key last line speaks to our Joy of Advent, as we anticipate celebrating the coming of the Lord Jesus into the world.

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

Come, Thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in Thee.

Israel’s strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Praise and Amen!

THE JOY OF ADVENT: The Joy of the Lord's Caring

Second Week of Advent: Sunday Dec. 8 thru Saturday Dec. 14

Each day read the Advent story in Matthew 1:18-25

The Joy of God's Caring

Each day read this passage Matthew 1:18-25 Joseph is seriously troubled by Mary's pregnancy and considers divorcing her to break their engagement. The Lord cares about Joseph and speaks to him in a dream that this child is from the Holy Spirit and urges Joseph to take Mary as his wife. He obeys and marries Mary even in her pregnancy, faithfully guarding Mary. When the baby is born, Joseph names him Jesus, as instructed by the Lord's angel. The name Jesus is the Greek form of the Jewish name "Joshua" which means "God saves." Matthew says that this new birth fulfills the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 that a virgin will give birth to a son who will be called "Immanuel." Immanuel comes from the Hebrew word in Isaiah 7:14, meaning "God with us" ("immanu" meaning "with us" and "el" meaning "God").

Sunday, Dec. 8 Second Sunday of Advent Have you ever had your plans suddenly scrapped by something you over which you had no control? Joseph was happily engaged to Mary and then his whole world turned upside down. What emotions did he have? How did he plan to protect himself and yet protect Mary, too? When have you faced unexpected changes? What emotions did you feel?

Monday, Dec. 9 When you have faced "trouble," how do you get through it? In the Jewish culture of that time, divorce was the only way to break an engagement, which was a legal contract to marry. Yet, Joseph chose not to make a public display of Mary's seeming unfaithfulness but continues to care for her and protect her from disgrace and gossip. Have you ever worked your own way quietly out of a troubling situation?

Tuesday, Dec. 10 Has there been a time of fear in your life in response to some situation or event? Joseph is quite fearful and uncomfortable in this new situation. How did the angel's message, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife" calm him down? What faith did Joseph have? There is plenty of fear going around these days. Pray to place your fears in God's hands. What relief do you feel when you hear the Lord's message, "Do not be afraid." Is this part of the Joy of Advent?

Wednesday, Dec. 11 Have you ever felt God directing you to go a different direction from what you had planned? How did God direct Joseph to change his direction? Why did Joseph not resist God's urging in the dream but obeyed to marry Mary? Have you experienced God's direction amidst situations that you have faced? We live the joy of Advent that God cares for us.

Thursday, Dec. 12 Have you had an experience where you had to be rescued? The angel tells Joseph to name the child Jesus, because he "will save his people from their sins." Today, the Advent of the Savior gives us joy. Thank God! Pray for someone to sense the advent of Jesus.

Friday, Dec. 13 Do you remember your dreams? This dream so impressed Joseph that he remembered and obeyed the angel's message. Today missionaries report stories of Jesus' revealing Himself to Muslims through dreams and visions. Have you had spiritual experiences that changed a decision or a direction in your life? Offer a prayer of joy for God's continuing guidance and care for you.

Saturday, Dec. 14 Have some plans or goals in your life taken a long time to fulfill? Matthew says the Advent of Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy given almost seven centuries earlier. Yes, it took a long time to fulfill this prophecy, but God was ultimately faithful. Although sometimes you may have waited, how has God been faithful to you? Shout with advent joy! Keep the Advent Message of God's Faithfulness in your heart all this next week.

Let us close our Pilgrimage with Joseph by meditating on the words of this 15th century German Christmas carol. The carol's verses tell the Christmas Story. Mary is the "tender stem." Isaiah and other prophets in the Old Testament are the "faithful prophets." Matthew 1 and Luke 3 present the lineage of Jesus back through the Old Testament history, which includes Jesse and his son King David. Jesus is the "Rose" and is called the "Son of David."

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

Lo, how a rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung,
Of Jesse's lineage coming,
By faithful prophets sung.
It came a floweret bright,
Amid the cold of winter,
When half spent was the night.

Isaiah 'twas foretold it,
The rose I have in mind.
With Mary we behold it,
The virgin mother kind.
To show God's love aright,
She bore for us a Savior,
When half spent was the night.

Praise and Amen.

THE JOY OF ADVENT: The Joy of Good News

Third Week of Advent: Sunday Dec. 15 thru Saturday Dec. 21
Each day read the Advent story in Luke 2:1-20

The Joy of the Angels and the Shepherds

Joseph and Mary had to travel from Nazareth to his family's hometown of Bethlehem in Judea to register for the Roman census. The trip was arduous for pregnant Mary, and walking the 90 miles, perhaps up to 20 miles per day, meant the trip could have taken a week. We don't know how long after they arrived that the birth came, because the story says, "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born." Many people had returned to Bethlehem to register, since the couple found no vacancies in the inns. They were only able to rest in a stable where Jesus was born. The angels announced the good news with great joy to the shepherds, giving them the sign that they would find the baby in a manger of straw. Indeed, they did, praising God and telling all they met the great news of the new born Savior.

Sunday, Dec. 15, the Third Sunday of Advent Have your plans ever been interrupted? As any pregnant couple, they were probably looking forward to the birth in their home in their hometown of Nazareth with family and friends around. What did they feel about the change in plans? Did they wonder what God was doing now? When have you experienced dislocation? What did you feel? How did faith in God help you?

Monday, Dec. 16 The Jews believed the Prophet Micah's prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), and in Matthew 2:6 the Jewish leaders told the Magi that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. However, during Jesus' ministry, the Jewish leaders argued that Jesus could not be the Messiah, because he came from Nazareth in Galilee. (John 7:41-43) God was faithful and fulfilled Micah's prophecy in an unexpected way, forcing Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem by means of the census. How have you experienced God working in unexpected ways? What effort of faith is needed to believe that God watches over us even in the difficulties that impact us? Does this give us the Joy of Advent?

Tuesday, Dec. 17 Have you experienced lowly conditions you never expected? Joseph and Mary were thrown another curve ball, finding no inn in Bethlehem, when she was about to give birth. What a place to give birth ... in a lowly, dirty, smelly stable! Yet, God was there, calling others to come and see! Imagine the many children around the world born into poor conditions. Imagine the many refugee camps housing the Yazidis today in northern Iraq. Pray for all displaced families and for churches and NGOs whose resources and people are bringing good news of relief and hope to the "least of these."

Wednesday, Dec. 18 When have you ever been struck with fear? Imagine the lowliest in the society-- these shepherds -- exposed on the cold night, protecting the flock. Sheep are not cute, nice and clean, and danger lurks -- weather, wolves and thieves. Shouldn't angels only appear to the priests at the Temple in Jerusalem, but not to lowly, dirty shepherds? Why were they struck with fear? In your prayers, also share your fears and sense the presence of the Holy Spirit, bringing God's message "Fear not" to you. It is part of the Joy of Advent.

Thursday, Dec. 19 When have you had fear and upset converted to hope and excitement? The angel told the shepherds "Be not afraid!" since the promised Messiah (King) was born. All the Jews longed for the promised King, spoken of by the Old Testament prophets. Isaiah wrote: "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace ... He will reign on David's throne ... from that time on and forever." (Isaiah 9:6-7) Like the shepherds, glorify God for fulfilling the promise of the Messiah who came not only for the Jews but for all peoples of the world, including you.

Friday, Dec. 20 Have you ever had the inspiration or gumption to do something for God? The shepherds did. They sent some of their number to look for this Holy Family, who they found just as the angel told them. On the way back, they glorified God and shared their joy with many. What joy do you have this Advent as we celebrate the birth of our Savior? Share your Joy of Jesus' Advent with someone today!

Saturday, Dec. 21 What is your response when you witness God's actions? In this passage, Luke shares two reactions. The shepherds told everyone, who were amazed. But Mary hid all this experience in her heart. Years later, the good doctor Luke must have interviewed Mary to learn these hidden stories of Jesus' birth. How and when did you learn of the Advent of Jesus? How have you been inspired by the teachings and life of Jesus?

Let us close our Pilgrimage with the shepherds by reading (or singing) the words of this Christmas carol. Christina Rossetti, the English poet, wrote this poem in 1872. The music was composed in 1906 by Gustav Theodore Holst. This poignant carol speaks to our hearts.

In the Bleak Midwinter

In the bleak midwinter, Frosty wind made moan
Earth stood hard as iron, Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold Him, Nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away, When he comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter, A stable place sufficed
The Lord God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

Angels and archangels May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim Thronged the air;
But His mother only, In her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the beloved With a kiss.

What can I give Him, Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part.
Yet what I can I give Him; Give my heart.

Amen.

THE JOY OF ADVENT: The Joy of Good News

Fourth Week of Advent: Sunday Dec. 22 to Christmas, continuing thru Saturday Dec. 28
Each day read the Advent story in Matthew 2:1-23

The Joy of the Magi

Epiphany is the celebration of the Magi, coming from Persia, to visit and adore the Christ Child. Epiphany means “revelation” and celebrates the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles. The Persians were among the many peoples of the world who were not Jews; the English Bibles call them “Gentiles.” Epiphany occurs after the 12 days of Christmastide, and this season, Epiphany is on Monday, January 6th. We meditate on this part of the story during Christmas Week.

Who these Magi were is still up for discussion. Some Bible translations call them “kings” or “wise men.” “Magi” is an ancient word that gives us our words “magic” and “magician.” Magi are thought to have followed the Zoroastrian religion. They practiced astrology, interpreting the signs of the heavens. They believed that a heavenly sign was a portent of a king’s birth. The Magi did not know the Jewish Scriptures and asked the court of King Herod where a king was to be born. Today, some have identified the Magi as the ancient Medes, whose present-day descendants are the Kurds.

The tradition of three Magi is due to the three gifts. The passage does not tell us their number. Eastern Christian traditions number them as twelve. Theirs must have been a large caravan – the Magi plus slaves, camel drivers and other helpers - traveling 1000 miles from the “East,” probably Persia, now Iran. Their worship of Jesus anticipated Jesus’ Commission to his disciples to go not just to the Jews but to all the Gentiles, preaching and teaching the Good News of Jesus. (Matthew 28:16-20) The Joy of Advent was evident in these foreigners who came to welcome, adore and bow before the newborn King. We are inspired by the Magi to celebrate the Joy of Advent.

Sunday, Dec. 22, the Fourth Sunday of Advent Have you ever had an experience in nature that you felt showed the presence of God? God motivated the Magi through their sighting a special “star” or heavenly light. By what signs has the Lord ever spoken to you? Is there someone with whom you can share your experience?

Monday, Dec. 23 The Magi’s presence caused a great disturbance in Jerusalem. Why was King Herod and all Jerusalem so upset? Do you see the conflicts between earthly kingdoms and the Kingdom of God? How does the Kingdom of God influence how you live your life in this world?

Tuesday, Dec. 24, Christmas Eve Do God’s promises in the Old Testament come true? Verse 2:6 quotes the ancient Jewish Prophet Micah, 700 years before the time of Jesus, that a king, the Messiah, would be born in Bethlehem. These Jewish leaders still believed this and told the Magi. How have you held on to faith when it seemed you were waiting a long time? Pray for faith and trust that God does care and help will come in answer to your prayers.

Wednesday, Dec. 25 Christmas Can you remember your childhood excitement at the gifts waiting to be opened? The Magi brought precious and expensive gifts appropriate for a king. God gifted the Magi the heavenly star. Imagine being there with the Magi. What excitement would you feel? What do you feel this Christmas as we “reopen” God’s greatest gift to humankind? Express thanks to God for the gift of His Son.

Thursday, Dec. 26 Ah, the day after Christmas, a peaceful, calm day to enjoy, to savor memories and perhaps visit with friends and family. Imagine for a moment, the Magi arriving back in their hometown in the East. They probably told everyone their story of finding the king, just as the shepherds, returning to the fields, told everyone their amazing story. Have you savored the Christmas story? Who can you tell about revisiting the First Christmas?

Friday, Dec. 27 Have you ever settled down to enjoy Christmas and something unexpected happened? The Holy Family settled in Bethlehem; the Magi did not come to the stable but to their “house.” After the Magi were on their way home, suddenly God uprooted the Holy Family and sent them as refugees to Egypt to protect them from King Herod. What were Mary and Joseph feeling? Have you ever had an experience when you, too, wondered what God was doing? Have you ever experienced God’s protection? Give thanks to God that we, like Mary, Joseph and the babe, are under the Hand of Heaven. This is part of the Joy of Advent.

Saturday, Dec. 28 How many times have you moved in your life? Mary and Joseph were afraid to resettle in Bethlehem and instead moved back to Nazareth, their hometown (see Luke’s story). Jesus grew up in this unassuming village, unannounced, until at 30, He began His ministry that changed the world forever. How did Mary and Joseph feel about all this moving around? Is it not amazing that God in Jesus moved into a neighborhood, settled and grew up there, became a carpenter, and only after

that, did Jesus begin his ministry? How have you sensed the Living Lord Jesus moving in the neighborhood of your life? Pray to sense God's presence now and praise God for the Advent of Jesus into our world and into our lives.

We close this Fourth Week of the Devotions with the Christmas Carol "We Three Kings of Orient Are," composed by John H. Hopkins, in 1857. He was an Episcopal clergyman, who was well known for the many hymns and tunes he wrote for the church. As you read or sing the carol, may these words resonate in your heart and soul as they express the Joy of Advent experienced by the three Kings – the Joy of the birth of Jesus who is Immanuel, come for our salvation.

We three kings of Orient are;
Bearing gifts we traverse afar,
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,
Following yonder star.

Refrain:

O star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain
Gold I bring to crown Him again,
King forever, ceasing never,
Over us all to reign.

Frankincense to offer have I;
Incense owns a Deity nigh;
Prayer and praising, voices raising,
Worshiping God on high.

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.

Glorious now behold Him arise;
King and God and sacrifice;
Alleluia, Alleluia,
Sounds through the earth and skies.

Hallelujah and Amen!