



DEVOTIONS

JOURNEYING THROUGH ADVENT WITH THE JESSE TREE

The Jesse Tree is a way of journeying through Advent that traces the lineage of Jesus. It refers to an image in Isaiah 11, in which Jesus is compared to a shoot sprouting

from the stump of the tree of his ancestor Jesse. It reminds us that the coming of Jesus was long prophesied, and that in the stories of his ancestors, we can hear echoes of his own life, death, and resurrection.

Start these devotions on the first day of Advent simply by flipping to that day's date. The date varies from year to year, but Advent always begins the Sunday after the last Thursday in November. For more context on a particular Scripture passage, you can pull out your Bible and read the whole passage listed for that day, rather than shorter selection included with the devotion. (If you have children between the ages of 2 and 12, you might also be interested in the family devotions. You can find those at www.rca.org/jesstree.)

These devotions were written by Grace Claus, managing editor of *RCA Today*. All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.



A shoot shall come up

□ READ: Isaiah 11:1-2

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

*The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

□ REFLECT:

This is hope: that even when the forest has been decimated, every last living plant hacked to the ground, no birdsong in the trees—even then, when all seems lost, *a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse*.

In today's passage, we read about Israel, having endured slavery and wilderness, now in exile. The people of God are weary and battered, discouraged by their own sin and the wickedness of the world. They look around: No one lives honorably. Evil reigns. Orphans are preyed upon. Widows are neglected. People are puffed up, and institutions corrupt. And God, in his righteous judgment, intends to put a stop to it by bringing it all to the ground. He "will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down" (Isaiah 10:33). All that will be left is a barren landscape, the bald remains of a clear-cut forest.

But—

"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isaiah 11:1).

Imagine wandering through that post-apocalyptic landscape, seeing nothing but gray for miles, and suddenly coming across that shoot! The first green. The first bit of supple growth, signaling water beneath and, someday, a tree.

Who is this shoot, whom the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon?

Jesus. Jesus, descendant of Jesse. Jesus, descendent of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus, the one promised centuries before his arrival. Jesus is the one we hope for this Advent. When the forest is felled, Christ remains.

□ PRAY:

God, I am amazed at your patience and your plan for redeeming all things. Give me the strength to keep hoping. Give me the faith to keep trusting. Jesus, would you show up this Advent? Amen.



Present in the beginning

▣ **READ:** A selection from Genesis 1:26-31

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

▣ **REFLECT:**

In the story of the creation of the first two humans, the cast of characters is actually more extensive than it appears at first glance. Of course, there are the two humans and God the creator. There's also the Spirit, hovering over the scene. And there's the second person of the Trinity, the Word who was with God in the beginning, through whom all things were created (John 1). That person, Jesus Christ, may not be present in his human flesh quite yet, but he's certainly part of this scene.

As God squats in the dust, gathering it into the form of a man, he has another human in mind—Jesus Christ. Though Jesus has yet to be born into the world, when he is, he will define humanity for all time. He is first—*alpha*—and ultimate—*omega* (Revelation 1:8).

So when God creates that man and that woman in Genesis, fashioning them after his image, he is really fashioning them after the image of Jesus Christ, who is *the* image of God (Colossians 1:15). If we humans bear God's image, Christ *is* God's image.

Keep this in mind the next time you hear that it's our ability to reason, to create things, or to relate to other people: that it is the image of God in us. It might be that. Or it might simply be Jesus Christ, the perfect human, the one there from the beginning, the one who is always interceding for us (Romans 8:34). If we worry that the image of God has grown dim in us, we can be confident that through Christ, it's shining brightly.

▣ **PRAY:**

Jesus, I am grateful that you are the image of God, and that you are the true human. And I'm thankful that through the Holy Spirit, I'm united to you. I pray that you would shape me to look more and more like you each day. Amen.





Three trees

READ: A selection from Genesis 3

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. ...

Then the Lord God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"— therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.

REFLECT:

Everything has begun to unravel.

The birdsong has gone eerily flat; the leaves on the trees are quivering. A deer, browsing in the meadow, suddenly darts into the forest. Death is in the air.

Sin has taken root in God's good world like a noxious weed. Stubborn and pervasive, it seems impossible to rid the garden of it. Now, quite literally, the land will produce thorns and thistles, making daily sustenance into hard labor.

Because Adam and Eve ate the fruit off the tree that God commanded them not to eat from, they are banished from the garden. Exiled. They ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and now they are cut off from the tree of life.

But you might know how the story ends. There's a tree at the beginning of the story, and there's one at the end. At the end, the tree is smack dab in the center of the city, drawing its nourishment from the river that flows from the throne of God. The leaves of the tree have restorative powers: they are "for the healing of the nations" (Revelations 22:2). The people who live in the city have a share in that tree.

So how do we get from the tree at the beginning to the tree at the end? It's by way of another tree—the cross upon which Jesus hangs. God the Son takes up residence in the world, not like a noxious weed, but like a careful gardener, tending his creatures and sacrificing himself on our behalf. Because of his birth, death, and resurrection, we are invited back to the tree. We can eat of its fruit, find rest in its shade, and delight in its beauty. Thanks be to God.

PRAY:

Lord of life, sometimes your sacrifice takes me aback. Along with Adam and Eve, I'm the one who eats the fruit I shouldn't—but I'm not the one who is punished. Jesus, you took on the consequences of sin, willingly being exiled from the presence of God the Father so that we could be reunited with him. Thank you for inviting us back to the tree. Amen.



The breath of life

READ: A selection from Genesis 6:11–9:13

The flood continued forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters. The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died.

REFLECT:

The wickedness is too much to bear. Cruelty and violence are overwhelming. Everything is corrupt to the core: “every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5).

Fed up, God demolishes it. He drowns it in rain. Water, murky water, swallows up the whole of God’s creation. What was once a lush landscape had been marred by the evil of people, so God buried the whole thing in water.

Only Noah and his family and a sampling of animals survive. And even they are powerless, reliant on God’s mercy to stop the rain and begin again. The lonely ark drifts on the vast expanse of water.

Until the rains stop, and the deep holds back its fountains. Still the ark drifts.

The waters subside. But still the ark drifts. A bird sent out returns, finding no place—not a single twig—to alight on for even a moment.

The waters recede further, though not enough to see more than the tops of mountains. No grassy plains, no flower-strewn meadows, no tree-lined valleys. Just rocky peaks.

Noah sends out another bird. He doesn’t hold his breath. It may very well return bearing no sign of life. But wait—what’s that in its beak? An olive leaf, smooth, fragrant, redolent with life. Hope is born.

PRAY:

Lord, I understand the impulse to wipe everything out. Sometimes the evil is so prevalent that destroying it entirely is the only way to eliminate it. And yet you promise not to destroy all flesh again. Instead, you’ve made another way. In Jesus, we have the hope of new life. Come soon, Lord. Amen.





Leaving home

READ: A selection from Genesis 12:1-7

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

REFLECT:

Moving isn’t most people’s idea of a good time. Packing feels overwhelming, loading and unloading the truck are exhausting, and settling in seems never ending. (Who doesn’t have one box still unopened in the basement?) Then there’s the way moving often takes us far away from the places we know and the people we love.

But God doesn’t let those challenges stop him from calling us to a new home. Abraham and Sarah had to pack up their tents, load up their camels, and slowly make their way from their home in Ur to a new land, Canaan. Abraham and Sarah could have decided to stay put, figuring that the energy of moving wasn’t worth it. They could have established themselves more deeply in Ur and remained close to their families.

If they had done that, though, God’s blessing wouldn’t have gone out to the world. Through Abraham, God promises to bless all the families of the earth. Abraham’s willingness to do something uncomfortable and unknown means that the grace of God goes out.

In Abraham’s journey, we can see the faint outlines of Jesus himself. The Son of God also left his home, where he dwelled with the Father. He also traveled to a distant land, the land of humanity. And through him, the grace of God went out.

Jesus’s willingness to leave the comfort of the divine dwelling and enter into our world means that *the blessing extends to us*. From him, we have received grace upon grace.

PRAY:

Jesus, you were born of flesh and came into the world, an uncomfortable home for someone used to divinity. But you knew that if you didn’t, I wouldn’t receive your grace. So you came. Thank you. Help me to step away from familiar spaces into new ones, where you can spread your grace through me. Amen.





A promise in the stars

▣ **READ:** A selection from Genesis 15:1-6

[God] brought [Abraham] outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

▣ **REFLECT:**

On a night when you're far from city lights and the sky is cloudless, the view is enough to stop you in your tracks. Plum-black backdrop, speckled with a thousand pinpricks of light. And the longer you stare, the more those thousand multiply into a thousand thousands. The dimmest distant stars reveal themselves.

That's what Abraham saw. He couldn't count them. He might have tried, curious about exactly how many descendants God was promising him. But you know how it goes—as you try to focus on one star, the rest go shimmery, and you lose count.

Childless Abraham, being promised not just one son, but a multitude of descendants.

And the really magnificent thing is that those descendants aren't limited to the blood relatives of Abraham. The reason his descendants would be as numerous as the stars is that we're among them, too. In Christ, we were grafted into the family tree. A tree that includes Adam and Eve, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Jesse and David, and Jesus himself. We are those stars. We are part of the story, too.

▣ **PRAY:**

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, thank you for grafting me into your family tree. Thank you for inviting me into the covenant promise. Help me reflect the family name well. Amen.





Which brother are you?

READ: A selection from Genesis 37:1-36

Now [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. ... So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

REFLECT:

The story of Joseph and his brothers is not the Bible's only story of betrayal and denial.

Judah isn't the last person who values money over a close relationship—think of Judas, who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. And Reuben isn't alone in his cowardice. Think of Peter on the night that Jesus was arrested: he too was too ashamed to stand up in defense of the innocent. Nor is Joseph the only person to end up alone in the pit of despair. Jesus himself knows what it's like to be betrayed, ignored, and left for dead. He knows all about being at the bottom of a dark pit when you don't deserve it.

The incredible thing is that whichever brother you're most like—the traitor, the coward, or the one at the bottom of the pit—Jesus Christ loves you. If you're a Judah or a Reuben, you are forgiven. God cherishes you as a precious child.

And if you're a Joseph, the one deep down in the dark pit, Christ himself is there with you. You're not alone. Jesus is holding you close and loving you.

PRAY:

Lord, what a relief it is that the Bible is full of real people, whose weaknesses are so like my own. Forgive me for my failings and assure me of your love and presence. Amen.





Fulfilling the law

▮ **READ:** A selection from Deuteronomy 5:1-22

Moses convened all Israel, and said to them:

Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire.

▮ **REFLECT:**

On the one hand, the Ten Commandments seem fairly easy to keep. No idols—check. Don't murder—check. Don't steal—got it. We might get the impression that it's within our power to do right, to keep the commandments, even to earn God's love.

But as Jesus expounds upon the commandments in Matthew 5-7, obedience starts to seem less and less attainable. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," Jesus says to the crowd (Matthew 5:48). Be *perfect*? That's nigh impossible.

Until we remember how the whole thing works. Jesus is the true human. He's the one perfectly reflecting the image of God (Colossians 1:15). And he hasn't come "to abolish the law" (Matthew 5:17) by dismissing it as no longer relevant in an age of love and forgiveness. Nor has he come to make it ridiculously hard to keep, although we could stand to be reminded that we're incapable of earning our salvation by perfectly keeping the law. Instead, says Jesus, "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17).

Ah yes, that's right. Jesus comes to fulfill the law, to keep the commandments that we fail to keep, to reverse the fall, and to break the curse. He does what we cannot. And when we are united to him by the power of the Holy Spirit, we mysteriously keep the law, too. Praise God!

▮ **PRAY:**

Jesus, I don't understand it completely, but I am so thankful that your life fulfills the law I daily fail to keep. Holy Spirit, work that mysterious process in me, and make me one with Christ. Amen.





An unlikely person

READ: A selection from Joshua 2:1-21

Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, “Go, view the land, especially Jericho.” So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there. The king of Jericho was told, “Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land.” Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, “Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land.” But the woman took the two men and hid them. ...

Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men: “I know that the Lord has given you the land. ... The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family.” ... The men said to her, “Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the Lord gives us the land. ... We will be released from this oath that you have made us swear to you if we invade the land and you do not tie this crimson cord in the window through which you let us down, and you do not gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your family.” ... She said, “According to your words, so be it.”

REFLECT:

The family line of Jesus is full of unlikely people. They regularly forget, disobey, or betray God. They're sinners, not honorable, composed saints.

Rahab is one of these unlikely people. And she's more unlikely than most to be named in Jesus's genealogy (Matthew 1:5) because she is an outsider on three counts: she's (a) a woman, (b) a Canaanite, and (c) a prostitute.

In a genealogy that stretches from Abraham to Jesus, she's one of just five women named. In a patrilineal genealogy—a record of fathers and sons—she makes the cut. Just as shocking, she makes the cut despite being a gentile, a non-Israelite, someone decidedly outside the family tree. And, of course, she's a prostitute.

And yet God finds her worthy of a place in his family. He invites her to play a role in the story of Israel claiming the land God has promised. And he grafts her into the family early enough that she gets to be one of Jesus's great- great- great-grandmothers.

What an encouragement to us! Not only does God want us in his family, he wants to use us. When we join the family, he'll put us to work, helping move this story along to its beautiful conclusion. Rahab got to play a part in Jesus's coming as a baby, but we get to join in as Jesus comes in glory.

PRAY:

God, your grace is astonishing! You could care less about my pedigree, and you're even willing to overlook my sin as you graft me into your family and your story. Would you help me to be faithful like Rahab as I do the work you've called me to do? Amen.





The kinsman redeemer

READ: A selection from Ruth 3:1-4:12

Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.” [Ruth] said to her, “All that you tell me I will do.”

REFLECT:

If you read the whole book of Ruth, you may notice where the action takes place: in Bethlehem. It’s not the last time we’ll find ourselves in that town this Advent.

Maybe you know this story as a story about a woman uncommonly devoted to her mother-in-law. Or a story about a woman humble yet bold enough to find favor with Boaz, who could make life easier for these two widows. And certainly it is a story about Ruth’s faithfulness. But it’s also a story about Boaz’s faithfulness, which points to the faithfulness of one who was born in Bethlehem years later.

In Israelite law, there was a provision for widows with no sons. The brother of the deceased man was commanded to take the man’s widow as wife, both redeeming the man’s land and providing a son to carry on the family name. Without this man, called a kinsman redeemer, the widow would be left with nothing, and the family would cease to exist.

In the book of Ruth, Boaz steps up as the kinsman redeemer, a relative of Naomi’s husband with the power to redeem the land, marry Ruth, and carry on the family.

Who else do we know who steps up as a kinsman redeemer? Indeed, Jesus Christ is our kinsman redeemer. By virtue of his humanity, he is our brother, our kinsman, and he is willing to become the bridegroom in order to redeem us. He faithfully steps up to save us. He lovingly joins himself to us, impoverished though we are, and makes us his own. Thanks be to God.

PRAY:

Jesus, how humbling it is that you would consider yourself my kinsman, a member of my family. And how humbling that you would pay the price with your life to redeem me. Thank you. Amen.





God loves underdogs

READ: A selection from 1 Samuel 16:1-15

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." ...

Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

REFLECT:

It's hard not to love the story of an underdog. Like so many people in Jesus's family history, David is an unlikely pick. He's not the firstborn. In fact, he's the baby of the family, the last of Jesse's eight sons. In his life thus far, he hasn't been much of a hero. When Samuel anoints him, David hasn't defeated Goliath. He hasn't created complex battle strategies. He's an unknown farm boy.

Yet it's David, the underdog, whom God chooses to lead his people. God subverts expectations, choosing a young shepherd, not an experienced politician.

God has a habit of subverting expectations. David was an unexpected choice, as was Israel as a whole. If you wanted to bless the world, would you work through a tiny people group, often dominated by other nations?

And when you finally came to save your people and express your love for the whole world, would you come in the flesh as a member of that underdog nation? Would you be born as a baby, vulnerable and unknown? Would you work as a common tradesman, acquiring none of the experience or accolades of a political victor? Would you submit to humiliation, persecution, and even death at the hands of a powerful empire?

In Jesus Christ, descendant of Jesse and David, God's love for the whole world is shown. Jesus is the one anointed to be king, not just of Israel but of all people. In the greatest subversion of expectations, God makes himself the underdog and triumphs over sin and death.

PRAY:

Thank you, Lord, for working in ways contrary to what I expect. Thank you for showing me the way of humility and self-sacrifice, in both your birth and your death. I rejoice that you rose from the dead and reign in glory, and I await your return. Amen.





The shepherd-king

▣ **READ:** A selection from 2 Samuel 5:1-5

The Lord said to [David]: “It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.” So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel.

▣ **REFLECT:**

King and shepherd: the two seem like polar opposites. Kings sit on thrones. They wear expensive clothes and talk to important people. They are calculating and political and oversee whole nations. Shepherds, on the other hand, stand on the hillsides. They wear clothes that can get dirty, and they talk mostly to sheep. They are cautious and patient and oversee a single flock.

David, though, was both. He was a shepherd whom God chose to be king. A quick review of world leaders might suggest that actually, a shepherd would make the best kind of king. A shepherd is humble and cares more about people than about power. David carried his shepherding spirit into his reign as king.

It’s an honor for David to be called both “shepherd of my people Israel” and “ruler over Israel” because he’s not the only shepherd-king in Scripture. In John 10, Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd, the one who knows all of his sheep and lays down his life for them. And he is also king, the one who is victorious over the powers of sin, death, and evil.

▣ **PRAY:**

King Jesus, I praise you that you have the heart of a shepherd! How wonderful that you are both mighty and gentle, both self-sacrificing and victorious. Would you bring a spirit of gentleness and self-sacrifice to the political rulers in power today? Amen.





More than a temple

READ: A selection from 1 Kings 5-6

So I intend to build a house for the name of the Lord my God, as the Lord said to my father David, "Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house for my name." ...

Now the word of the Lord came to Solomon, "Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes, obey my ordinances, and keep all my commandments by walking in them, then I will establish my promise with you, which I made to your father David. I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel."

So Solomon built the house, and finished it.

REFLECT:

The temple is more than a temple. You've probably figured that out by this point in Advent. All of these Old Testament stories point beyond themselves. Like little mirrors, they catch the light of Christ's birth, his life and death, his resurrection and ascension. Their reflective beams even give us a glimpse of what's to come—his ultimate return to set all things right.

So how is the temple more than a temple? Well, throughout Israel's history, the temple served as the meeting place for God and humanity. (Before Solomon built the temple, that meeting place was the leather-sided tabernacle, a tent that could be set up and taken down as Israel moved from place to place.) In the temple, in the holy depths of its interior, God lived. There, in the temple, God coexisted with humanity.

Eventually, the temple was destroyed by Israel's enemies. So now where would God coexist with humanity?

In Jesus Christ. In the person of Jesus, deity and humanity exist together. They are one. Jesus is the temple. Despite the efforts of the Jewish leaders to destroy that temple by crucifying Jesus, it was rebuilt—resurrected, risen.

And because of Jesus, we don't have to go into the inmost interior of a building to meet God. Through Jesus, we can know God directly. What a gift!

PRAY:

Jesus, thank you for being the temple, the place where I can meet God. I don't have to trek for miles to a specific place where God dwells. By your Holy Spirit, I am connected with God as I'm connected with you. Remind me of your presence with me today. Amen.





Taking risks for the kingdom

READ: A selection from Esther 4

When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.”

REFLECT:

You can hear the resolve in Esther’s voice: “If I die, I die.” She’s not resigning herself to her fate; she’s facing it head on.

She has just learned from her cousin Mordecai that Haman is more than scheming to kill the Jewish people. Haman has convinced the king to issue a decree that authorizes the governors to kill all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day.

When Esther hears of the decree, she evaluates the situation. She remembers the fate of Vashti, another headstrong queen. Is it worth it to visit the king, uninvited, to see if she can do something about the decree?

Esther would be risking her life to appear before King Ahasuerus. The rule is that if anyone enters the king’s inner court without being called, that person will be put to death. And Esther knows it. Since entering the king’s harem, she has lost virtually all of her agency. Her life is not in her hands.

And maybe that’s the whole point: her life belongs to the Lord. Maybe that’s what finally persuades her to risk death and go before the king.

Esther’s life belongs to one who likewise gave himself up to save his people. Jesus did more than risk death. He actually died. By virtue of our baptisms, we have, too, which frees us to take risks the way Esther did. We can look past our own security and make sacrifices for others. The risks we take may very well bring life for other people.

PRAY:

Jesus Christ, you willingly went to the cross so that I could live. In baptism, I have died, too, so I no longer have to fear death. Help me take risks, whether big or small, for the sake of other people. Amen.





From darkness to light

READ: A selection from Isaiah 9:2-7

*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.*

REFLECT:

Deep darkness is unnerving. Maybe you've experienced it while camping. The night is moonless, the trees thick overhead. Your campsite is at the far end of the road, and you've left your flashlight in the tent. The fire has died. You can see nothing. No silhouettes, no shadows, no specks of light in the distance. Nothing.

You don't know what's around you. You've lost your bearings. Your eyes strain to adjust, but the futility of it gives you a headache. The darkness is oppressive.

This is the kind of deep darkness the people of Israel walked in—disorienting, oppressive darkness. They had been walking in it so long, they'd lost hope. They'd nearly forgotten what it was to see.

It's into this darkness that the sun comes blaring over the horizon, heralding a new day. On this day, a Son will be born. He will be a righteous king, and with his reign of light come hope and peace. The atmosphere has changed completely. Rather than feeling disoriented, the people know which way is up. They are certain of what is right, of where they are headed.

This is the hope of Advent. God promises that morning is coming. Whatever our dark, depressing circumstances, we can have confidence in this: a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace is on his way.

PRAY:

God of light, I can't wait for your arrival. I pray that you would shine into the darkest corners of our world and of my life, bringing hope and setting things right. Amen.





The world to come

▣ **READ:** Isaiah 11:6-9

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

▣ **REFLECT:**

What a scene! Wolves wander alongside lambs. Leopards nap next to baby goats. A parade of calves and bears is led by a bright-eyed toddler, who stops to invite a snake to join the fun.

The scene has a fantastical, circus-like quality to it, so playful as to be silly. You can practically hear the honky-tonk in the background. Is it a joke? It's so farfetched that it might as well be.

When in this dog-eat-dog world would a wolf ever restrain itself enough not to tear into a plump young lamb? When would a mother dare to let her child wrestle with a bear cub? When would a venomous snake lick a baby's hand the way a puppy might?

In this world, probably never. Even the most optimistic among us wouldn't expect a lamb to survive in a pasture with a wolf. But in the world to come, the world that's just over the edge of the horizon, this improbable parade will be the way of things. In the world where the Lord reigns, all of this improbability becomes not just probable but actual. Isaiah's scene is no fable. This is what we have to look forward to!

▣ **PRAY:**

How eager I am for a world in which predator and prey play together. May your kingdom come, filling the earth with the knowledge of you. Amen.





Repent and obey

READ: Jonah 3:1-5

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

REFLECT:

Let’s play a word association game: I say, “Jonah.” You say, “_____.”

If you said “whale,” I don’t blame you. That’s the first thing that pops into my head, too. If you said “sackcloth,” bonus points for you! Because the story of Jonah doesn’t end in the belly of the fish. The story of Jonah is actually about calling the city of Nineveh to repentance, and that’s exactly what happens. The story doesn’t end until the people listen to Jonah’s message about God, repent of their wrongdoing, and turn to what’s right.

And their change only happens once *Jonah* listens to God, repents of *his* wrongdoing, and turns to what’s right—namely, bringing God’s message to Nineveh. It’s a good reminder that we’re capable of standing in the way of others’ obedience. Once we obey, they can, too.

Thankfully, Jesus, who also spent three days in a dark, dank place, was obedient. His obedience, even to the point of death on a cross, has made it possible for the rest of us to be obedient, too.

When we abide in Jesus, we don’t have to scorn Nineveh and run the other way. We can proclaim Jesus so others can follow, too.

PRAY:

God, search my heart and point out the places where I haven’t been following you. I confess that I have fallen short. Help me, like Jonah and Jesus, to be obedient. To where or what are you calling me? I want to follow. Amen.





God is with us

READ: A selection from Daniel 6

The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God. Then they approached the king and said concerning the interdict, "O king! Did you not sign an interdict, that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions?" The king answered, "The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked." ...

Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. ...

Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?" Daniel then said to the king, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong."

REFLECT:

Don't mistake Daniel 6 for a children's story. This is the gruesome stuff of nightmares—a sinister plot to trap Daniel in his singular devotion to the God of Israel, a pit full of hungry wild beasts, and in the end, the mauling and death of whole families, including children, by those lions.

The story reminds us of the risks of following God, of the very real consequences of dogged faithfulness in the face of a cruel, power-hungry world. It reminds us that to be a Christian is a political statement and a political act. The fragrance of Christ is threatening to people who reek of selfish ambition and corruption. Daniel's insistence on "smelling" like the God of Israel nearly got him killed by people who couldn't stomach the aroma.

But he didn't get killed. And that part of the story reminds us of God's faithfulness to us when we are faithful to him. God has promised that he will be with his people, so he doesn't shut the mouths of the lions from a distance. He sends his angel to keep Daniel company. In the Bible, angels are more than messengers, delivering God's words like celestial mail carriers; they are understood to represent God. It's as if God himself is with Daniel in that den. The Lion of Judah tells those lions of Babylon who's boss.

What encouragement for us when we feel like we're surrounded by bloodthirsty lions—whether it's a competitive work environment, a mental soundtrack that tells you you're just not measuring up, or an illness that threatens to sap all your strength. God, who delivers and rescues, is with you always.

PRAY:

Living God, your kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world. You invert the usual power systems and provide a different set of rules to live by. Living in your kingdom can put me at odds with the world around me, but even when I feel under attack, you are with me. Amen.





A better promise

READ: A selection from Micah 5:1-5

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.
Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;*

*then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.
And he shall stand and feed his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.*

REFLECT:

Our ears aren't accustomed to hearing prophecies. We sure hear a lot of promises—campaign promises, wedding vows, promises from brands that buying their product will improve our quality of life. But those promises are so often broken that we start to think promises hold no real weight. And we might think the same is true of prophecies. They won't possibly come true, will they?

Don't let your skepticism about promises color your hearing of this prophecy: from Bethlehem will come someone who will rule, not the way those promise-breaking politicians do, but like a shepherd. He won't say one thing and do another. He won't disregard his constituency. No, this leader cares for his people the way a shepherd cares for his sheep. He'll stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord.

The people who heard this prophecy for the first time worried about the same things we do: what to eat for dinner, how to make amends with their mothers, whether their homes and land would be secure. And the prophecy can bring us the same comfort—comfort that we will live securely and in peace. The same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, fulfilling Micah's prophecy, will come again to reign as Prince of Peace. Come, Lord Jesus!

PRAY:

Prince of Peace, I am eager for you to return. Some days, both the world and my life seem out of control and beyond repair. But I am trusting you to keep your promise to come and rule like a good and gentle shepherd. Amen.





The habit of silence

▣ **READ:** A selection from Luke 1:5-25

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. ... 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. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

▣ **REFLECT:**

The punishment for Zechariah's unbelief seems disproportionately harsh: no voice for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy? Really? This punishment comes from a God who says it's enough to have faith as small as a mustard seed (Matthew 17:20). Zechariah doesn't outright reject the angel's message, after all. He doesn't laugh the way Sarah does when she overhears that she will bear a son in her old age (Genesis 18:12). He just asks how he can be sure the angel is telling the truth, a fair question to put to any stranger who promises to fulfill the deepest desires of your heart. So why is Zechariah prevented from speaking for the better part of a year?

Perhaps we can see Zechariah's silence not as a punishment but as a gift. As the child grows in Elizabeth's belly, he is given space to reflect quietly. He won't run off at the mouth, crowding out the Spirit inside him with his own blathering. He's saved from saying stupid things, from bragging about his encounter with the angel, from broadcasting his skepticism.

Rather than questioning the silence God imposes on Zechariah, we might consider adopting a habit of quietude ourselves this Advent. In a season of stimulation—lights! music! sugar!—we need to carve out space to reflect and prepare. In these final days before Christmas, find a quiet corner. Turn off the Christmas station. Set aside your phone. Open your Bible and listen. What is the Spirit saying to you?

▣ **PRAY:**

Speak, O Lord, for your servant is listening. Help me to quiet my buzzing thoughts. What do you want me to hear? What invitation are you extending to me today? Amen.





Prepare the way of the Lord

▣ **READ:** Matthew 3:1-6

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. 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:**

A lonely voice is carried down the centuries by a dry desert wind: *Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!*

The voice prophesied by Isaiah is growing louder, clearer. Its source is coming into view. It is John the Baptist, calling out to the people of Israel. The years of waiting made the people nearly forget about God’s promise to send a Savior, someone who would redeem the people from their lives of misery, sin, and oppression. But John the Baptist is here to refresh their memory. You might have forgotten, but God hasn’t! A Savior is on the way.

John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus Christ to come. He invites the people to be baptized in preparation for Jesus’s arrival. The people confessed their sins and were washed clean.

Like John and the people he baptizes, we can prepare for Christ’s coming. We can confess and repent of our sins. We can ask God to make us clean, fit to be in the presence of our Savior.

▣ **PRAY:**

Lord, would you point out the places in me that are a mess? The places that are making it hard for me to encounter you? I confess those sins to you. Make me clean. Prepare my heart to welcome you. Amen.





No longer ordinary

READ: A selection from 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."

REFLECT:

Imagine the ordinariness of this moment: Mary is padding around the house in her socks, wiping the crumbs off the breakfast table and washing the dishes. She stands at the sink, one hand plunged into the dishwasher to clean the spoons, the other tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

Or maybe she's weeding the garden or assembling a bookshelf that's been sitting in a box in the front hall all week. Who knows—she might be walking to the corner store to pick up some cold medicine. Whatever she's doing, it's so ordinary that it's not worth mentioning.

What isn't ordinary is the unexpected arrival of an angel, who interrupts her with his tidings. He breaks into her day, changing the character not just of that moment but of her life as a whole—and of every life, the ones that came before and the ones that would come after.

Her life won't be ordinary anymore. Mary might do ordinary things again—walk the dog, take out the trash, have the neighbors over for dinner—but those moments will be shot through with the reality that her son, Jesus Christ, is the Son of the Most High.

History is changed. The God of the universe has just taken up residence in the womb of a human. This is the moment where God unites himself to humanity in the person of Jesus. It's not just the angel who is breaking in; God himself is breaking in, infusing all of history with his redemptive love. Knowing that truth, let's consider every moment holy.

PRAY:

Most High God, what an incredible thing you've done by entering into history as a human being and redeeming me as one of your own. As I go about my day, help me to remember that fact. Keep me attentive to the holiness of each moment. Nothing is ordinary anymore. Amen.





Set aside your fear

▣ **READ:** A selection from 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.”

▣ **REFLECT:**

In the story of Jesus’s birth, Joseph plays a bit part. He’s not as central to the narrative as Mary, yet we shouldn’t overlook him. Consider the honor with which he conducts himself. Mary’s miraculous extramarital pregnancy tarnishes both of their reputations. Still, Joseph resolves to “dismiss her quietly,” without fanfare or scandal. He doesn’t want to make things harder for her, this woman he has come to love.

Then an angel comes to him in a dream and instructs him to take his righteousness a step further by going ahead and marrying Mary. Yes, her pregnancy seems to taint her with sin. Yes, it will rub off on your reputation, too. But it’s okay. *Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife*, the angel says. Don’t let fear rule you. Let compassion and love motivate you. If you’re willing to unite yourself with Mary in marriage, you’ll be opening yourself to a wonderful role in the story. Rather than being the guy who ditched Mary in favor of his reputation, you’ll be Joseph, father to Jesus Christ. You’ll get to be the man who loved the woman who carried the Savior of the world in her womb. You’ll get to teach God the alphabet and how to build a chair. You won’t be the star of the show, but it’s a pretty cool part.

And to all of this, Joseph says, *Yes!*

How might we say yes? How might we set aside our fears? How might we take our righteousness and good intentions even further and embrace the risk of following God’s lead?

▣ **PRAY:**

God, thank you for inviting Joseph into your story, and for the example he sets for us. Where is a place that I’m resisting following you because I’m worried about how it might affect my reputation? Is there some good I’m doing that I could ratchet up a notch? Give me the courage to say yes to you. Amen.





We're almost there

▣ **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:**

Folks, we're on our way. We're on our way to that town that has come up again and again this Advent. We're on our way to Bethlehem.

We journey with Mary, uncomfortable in the final days of pregnancy. Our bodies are tired and pinched. We're aching and ready to give birth, to experience the life that lies on the other side of labor.

We journey with Joseph, anxious about what's ahead. We're nervous about the birth itself, as well as about the responsibility of caring for this new life. We don't know what to expect. Like Mary and Joseph have been waiting, preparing as Mary's belly swells, we've been waiting, too. We're waiting for Jesus to come, too, this time in a different way. The labor pains are still there—so much about our lives keeps us awake at night and wears us down and makes us want to cry in exasperation. It makes us impatient. Don't make us wait longer than we have to, Lord. Be merciful. We want this new life to *be here!*

We're antsy with anticipation. Come, Lord Jesus. Come and be born. Come again and stay. Come and light up the darkness. Come and breathe new life into everything. Come and overturn the maddening political structures. Restore the broken friendships. Heal the diseased bodies. Fulfill the longings.

We are ready.

▣ **PRAY:**

Come, Lord Jesus. I am ready for your arrival. I've made all the preparations I can think of. On the eve of your birth, grant me peace. Grant peace to your world, as we wait, in eagerness and longing, for you. Amen.





The first witnesses

READ: A selection from Luke 2:6-21

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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.

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. ... So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

REFLECT:

Into the darkness of that dank stable, a child is born. Into the darkness of the world, a light shines. From the knotty, gnarled stump of Jesse, a shoot springs up.

This is it. *To you is born this day a Savior. A Savior!*

The waiting is over. Hope is here. This is the olive branch in the beak of Noah's dove, the confirmation that all is not lost. Life will flourish again.

And who gets to witness it? Who gets the privilege of being called over to see the solitary green shoot, so fresh it hasn't yet unfurled?

The shepherds.

Not the clean, charismatic professionals with access to big marketing budgets and platforms to publicize the news. Just a shabby bunch of shepherds. Maybe it's because they share the vocation of the one who was just born; like him, they tend and guide a dim-witted flock, prone to wandering. Maybe they're more likely to rejoice in his birth rather than feel threatened by it. Maybe they understand best of all what his coming means.

And guess what: today, you're among those shepherds. You get to hear the news, to be a witness. You're invited to the birthing room of Jesus. You're sent back to glorify and praise God for all you've heard and seen.

What a privilege! Cherish it. Go see the Savior and come back singing.

PRAY:

Welcome, Jesus! How thrilled and grateful I am that you willingly entered into the darkness of the world to bring your light and life. The life you bring is just the beginning of a whole new creation in your Spirit. I can't wait to see what's yet to come. Amen.



