

The image features four wrapped gifts in brown paper, tied with twine and decorated with greenery. The gifts are arranged in a scattered pattern across the white background. The text is centered over the image.

# The Gift of ADVENT

A DEVOTIONAL BY HERITAGE CHURCH

# Friends,

We are so delighted that you have chosen to engage with us during these 12 moments of intentional preparation, readying our hearts for the most important part of the Christmas season--celebrating the birth of Jesus and what that means for each one of us. It is our prayer that you would be blessed as you take time to pause and reflect on what Jesus's first arrival meant and what his return will mean for humankind.

Should you choose to engage daily in these devotional reflections, you'll find each entry has a suggested date. If your natural rhythm is more weekly than daily, you'll see we broke the readings into two weeks; each reading fits in a weekly reading schedule, noted alongside each date. Either way, know you're reading, reflecting, and praying with others, as we press into this season together.

What a privilege to be able to celebrate the fullness of Emmanuel, God with us, and also a Savior who will return again as a conquering King.

Joining with you,  
The Heritage Ministry Team

Note: In some entries, you'll find prayer moments noted by an asterisk (\*); these are invitations to pray for specific ministry environments which may be meeting on the date of those entries.

# December 14th | Week 1, Reading 1



## Advent Defined: Coming

This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.

- John 3:16, MSG

The season leading up to Christmas has been called Advent by followers of Jesus for centuries. At once, Advent means both arrival and waiting. In this season, we celebrate that Jesus has been given as the Most Wonderful Gift-- Christ has come! The arrival of Jesus as the promise of God with skin on gives us so much to celebrate.

As you interact with all the Holiday season has -- memories (both sweet and sad), activity, and even pressure--remember that the reason we celebrate is because the great love of God on display has already come. A whole and lasting life is not a promise for a later day, but a very real thing we can know and experience right now, today.



### REFLECT

What does it mean to you that God loved you, your family, and those around you so much that he has already given Jesus? What kind of value does this communicate? What do you think a "whole and lasting life" looks like? What are some evidences you're living that kind of life? What are some things in the Holiday season that can keep you from experiencing this?

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### PRAY

"God, thank you for the gift of Jesus. Thank you for loving us so much and giving so freely. Help me to experience the presence of Jesus this season; show me how I can offer this love to others."

# December 15th | Week 1, Reading 2



## Advent Defined: Active Waiting

But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;  
They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and  
not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

- Isaiah 40:31, NKJV

You'll recall the season leading up to Christmas, Advent, means both arrival and waiting. As much as we celebrate the coming of God's great love for us in the person of Jesus, there's still a great deal we're waiting for. Jesus brings healing, but some of us are waiting for that healing in fullness. Jesus brings fulfillment, but there are still empty spaces in our lives. Jesus brings power, but there are times we feel powerless. In many ways this season reminds us we are in a waiting space.

What do we do in this waiting space? Quite simply, we wait... but we do so with anticipation. The season of Advent reminds us that, even when we can't see it, God is active. And more than just the passive ticking away of time, our waiting is active, assured expectation.

This kind of waiting is no easy work—which is why holding onto the promise of God for renewed strength and vigor even as we wait is so important.



### REFLECT

What are you waiting for this season? Why is it significant that even as you wait God doesn't grow tired or weary? What do you think it looks like to wait on the Lord? Some translations say, "trust in" or "hope in" instead of "wait on;" what is significant about that?

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### PRAY

"Jesus, help me to wait on - to trust in and hope in - you today. Show me what it is to live with faith today that you are at work even in ways I don't understand. Give me strength as I wait for you."

# December 16th | Week 1, Reading 3



## Peace Has Come

For to 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. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.

-Isaiah 9:6,7a, NIV

The world had long waited for the birth of the Savior, for the much anticipated Messiah to come. His arrival for many heralded what they thought would be the end of oppression, conflict and occupation. Isaiah prophesied Emmanuel would be the Prince of Peace and the peace he would bring was never ending. Yet, shortly after Jesus was born, a decree of death was issued for all boys under the age of two. So what peace did this babe in a manger actually bring? Jesus came to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah so that we could experience ultimate peace in our relationship with God. Colossians 1:20 tells us, "God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross."

So we could know peace that didn't first require the spilling of blood, Jesus came as a babe and grew up to be a man who would die on a cross to make true peace possible for us. We can know peace because of Christ regardless of the circumstances we face. Jesus is the ultimate peacemaker!



### REFLECT

How do you define peace? More than the absence of conflict, the biblical notion of peace is shalom, a beautiful word meaning wholeness, contentment, and friendship with God in covenant. As you think about what Jesus's arrival as a baby in Bethlehem means for you, are there specific ways you can point to peace being evident in your own life? How can you reflect the peace of Christ this Christmas season to those you influence around you? What tends to rob you of your peace? What choice can you make now to protect the peace of Christ at work in your life?



### PRAY

Spend some time thanking Jesus for being willing to come and enter this imperfect and broken world to be OUR PEACE. Ask Holy Spirit to give you insight about what robs you of peace and to give you wisdom for how to shore up those areas of vulnerability in your life.

\*As we gather as His Church this Sunday, ask that God would equip us to be peacemakers each in our own space and collectively may we be known as a church that embodies the peace of Christ.

# December 17th | Week 1, Reading 4



## Waiting for Peace

How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.

- Habakkuk 1:2-3

Our world has suffered through turbulent times before -- world wars, horrific natural disasters and epidemic diseases have plagued mankind repeatedly, and it sure seems we are currently in the midst of crisis everywhere we look these days: The destruction of fires in California, rampant gun violence in America, tension at our southern border, ebola rearing its head in Congo, and famine in South Sudan and Yemen. All of these are often affecting precious children, with whole families losing life, property, and livelihood. It's a lot to take in and so we wonder, when will there ever be peace? We long for peace and yet we cry out, "How long O Lord must we call out for you to return, to bring, and to be the lasting Peace our world so desperately needs?" Habakkuk's name, the prophet who wrote the words above, means "love's embrace." Martin Luther wrote of Habakkuk's name that it "signified an embracer who embraces his people and comforts them and holds them up with the quiet assurance that, if God wills, it shall soon be better."



### REFLECT

What is your first response to destruction, violence, and need around you? What would it look like to be able to offer "love's embrace" to those around you who desperately need to experience the peace only a relationship with Jesus can provide? In John 14:27 Jesus tells us that he came to give us real peace, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." Until Jesus returns--John 14:28 reminds us of this truth that he is returning--we will experience trouble, but his peace that sustains us is what the world desperately needs to see lived out in our lives. We choose to wait with anticipation for his triumphant return!



### PRAY

Ask that Holy Spirit will help us to experience the peace of Christ in our hearts, minds, lives, and relationships this Christmas season. Invite Holy Spirit to call to your mind the words of Jesus when you need to be reminded of truth that is greater than the worry or fear before you. Pray that God would give you courage to incarnate or "be" peace to a conflicted world that is crying out for the rescue the return of Jesus will bring.

\*Pray for our Kewanee campus tonight--ask that as the men gather they would experience the peace of Christ now as they prepare for their return to their families and community in the future.

# December 18th | Week 1, Reading 5



## Hope Has Come

Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.

- Luke 1:78-79, NLT

The above passage of scripture is attached to a song that originated from Zechariah (the father of John the Baptizer). It was essentially the first words that Zechariah had spoken in about nine months (seriously, go back and read the whole chapter, it's a great story!). It's a wonderful expression of praise and hope. Zechariah, along with all of Israel, had been waiting a long time to hear of ANY news of the promised Messiah.

It had been a long and grueling wait. In our Bibles, all we have to do is flip a couple of pages forward to get from Malachi (the last book in the Old Testament) to Matthew (the first book in the New Testament). But we need to understand that there were 400 years between the last Old Testament prophet and the events detailed in the gospels. In that span of time, all or part of Israel lived under the political rule of the Persians, Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians, and Romans. Truly, Israel was a people who desperately needed a burst of hope.

It is only in putting ourselves in the shoes of those individuals that we can begin to understand how exciting it must have been to hear rumblings of the coming of the Messiah. As Zechariah wrote: Finally, the Messiah was going to come and shine light on those stuck in darkness. Finally, the Messiah was going to initiate a plan of freedom and salvation from Israel's oppressors. Finally... hope could be restored!



### REFLECT

Consider some of the times that God has infused renewed hope into your life: What were the surrounding circumstances? How did God intervene? Are there spaces in your life currently where you are asking God to show you renewed hope?



### PRAY

Read Luke 1:68-79. This is the entirety of Zechariah's song. Now go back and pray through the song. Give thanks for the many different reasons that the promised messiah can bring hope to this world.

\*Typically, on Tuesday nights across the Heritage network, our Go! Kids mid-week environments are meeting. Pray for our Go! Kids staff, volunteers, kids and families as they engage with the story of Jesus together.

# December 19th | Week 1, Reading 6



## Waiting For Hope

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

- Romans 8:18, NIV

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

- Revelation 21:3-4, NIV

The season of Advent is a special time of preparation that helps us journey toward the celebration of Jesus's arrival in this world. Historically, one of the major themes of the Advent season is the reflection upon the second coming of Jesus. In fact, we find ourselves in a similar posture as ancient Israel: We are also waiting for the Messiah to come (return) to this world and set all things right.

This is an active waiting. We have access to hope and we are called to bring hope to this world through the message of Jesus. This active waiting is challenging because we live in an "already, but not yet" reality--Jesus has already brought victory but we have not yet experienced the final culmination. Jesus has begun the process of ushering in his kingdom but there is still work to be done.

Part of the task of active waiting is to offer hope to this world. We can do this in a variety of ways: perhaps through a prayer for another person or through an act of kindness. Maybe it will be through a letter of encouragement or through a hug or a smile. It could be that you will help usher God's kingdom to this world through a donated winter coat or through investing your time around our community. Allow the promise of your eternal hope to be the catalyst for your continued investment of bringing hope to this world!

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# December 19th continued



## REFLECT

How can you begin to leverage your hope in such a way that you begin to stoke the fire of hope in other people? What words could be said or what actions could be taken (in the next week, even) to help infuse hope into the lives of your family members, coworkers, friends, or neighbors?



## PRAY

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"Jesus, help me to see the world through your eyes. Thank you for the hope you have given to me. Help me to steward that hope and to pass it along to those around me."

\*Pray for the leaders, volunteers and student who attend our Heritage Student Ministries (HSM) environments, which often meet on Wednesdays. Pray that they all encounter Jesus this Christmas season.

# December 20th | Week 2, Reading 1



## Faith Has Come

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.  
- Hebrews 11:1-2, NIV

So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.  
- John 1:14, NLT

Webster defines faith as complete trust in someone or something regardless of the measure of proof attached to the belief. Scripture elaborates further for us in Hebrews and gives us concrete examples of where faith was exemplified. Faith is the courage to obey with confidence rooted in the hope that we have because of Jesus. When Jesus came as a babe in a manger, he arrived full of unconditional love and faith. Faith that was modeled time and again, as Jesus obeyed with confidence all that his Father commanded. He left the splendor and intimate relationship with his Father in heaven to come and embody Peace, Hope, Faith, Joy, and Love for us and to us. Because he came, we too can courageously choose to walk the path of faith.



### REFLECT

Where in your life do you struggle to embrace faith, the obedient response to trust even when we can't see the end result? Why is this a struggle? While the perfect embodiment of faith arrived in a manger, there are many individuals in the nativity story who exemplify faith: Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah, and the wise men. Whose narrative in the story encourages and instructs you the most? Choose a scripture that reminds you to choose to walk in faith and put it somewhere you can see it regularly (could be in your phone, on a 3 x 5 card on your bathroom mirror, etc).



### PRAY

"Father, thank you for sending Jesus and letting us see your glory personified in your Son. Jesus, you came to earth and modeled for us the courageous nature of faith. Thank you for being obedient and full of love. Holy Spirit, grant us courage and confidence to live and act with faith - that God is Faithful and True and works on our behalf because we love Him. This Christmas we ask that you would help our faith to increase as we acknowledge that our hope, our life, our joy is in You and because of You. We pray this in the strong name of Jesus, our Savior,  
Amen."

"Faith is unseen but felt, faith is strength when we feel we have none, faith is hope when all seems lost." ~Catherine Pulsifer

# December 21st | Week 2, Reading 2



## Waiting For Faith

Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory.

- Romans 5:1-2, NLT

"The principal part of faith is patience." George MacDonald

There is a present reality that illustrates our faith in our everyday choices - like whether we choose to embrace doubt, worry or fear in the face of life's unknowns and difficulties. The truth is, yes, our faith is exhibited in life's routine moments, but it is because of our confidence in our ultimate destiny that our faith can flourish. Our hope and confidence is not in anything that this world has to offer; the relationships, success, wealth, and status that we achieve in this world are fleeting...it is the eternal that anchors our faith in this life. And so we wait for the ultimate fulfillment of our faithful journey towards him - whether that be through his return or our passing into sharing God's glory forever.



### REFLECT

When we enter into a relationship with God through Jesus, this is our first step of faith. Faith is an active journey, one that is full of invitations to keep obediently stepping out with confidence because he who has promised us is faithful to the end. How does releasing our desire for "worldly accomplishments" free us to faithfully pursue things that are of eternal urgency? What would a tangible example of doing this look like in your life? What do you need to surrender so that you can reorient your faith journey? When we see someone around us struggling, it is a real gift when we can offer to share some of our faith on their behalf. Praying for them, speaking words of life and hope over them, and being faithful to speak truth to them. Who might God be bringing into your life that needs that kind of connection?



### PRAY

Spend some time prayerfully celebrating the ways that you have seen your faith grow over this last year. Ask that God would grow your faith even more in the coming year. Ask that God would give you eyes to see those around you who are struggling and might benefit from you sharing your faith; ask for courage to act on that knowledge.

# December 22nd | Week 2, Reading 3



## Joy Has Come

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

- Luke 2:10, NIV

Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning.

- Psalm 30:5b, NLT

December 21st, 2018 is the Winter Solstice. In the northern hemisphere of our planet, this represents the shortest day and the longest night. Some groups of believers attach the concept of a 'blue Christmas' to winter solstice--this is the recognition that many engage with the season of Christmas in a place of darkness... with broken hearts and downcast souls. It is important to remember these brothers and sisters in the midst of a season that is typically full of family, vibrant decorations and gift giving. Not everyone is able to approach the Christmas season with a happy heart.

With that in mind, today's reflection on joy is appropriate. The arrival of Jesus marks a time in human history where the grip of darkness begins to recede next to the power of God's light. As the angels communicate in our passage today: this news of Jesus' arrival is really good news that should spark celebration. It is a message of joy for the whole world. It is a message of joy for you: Whatever darkness you are in the midst of right now, God has provided an answer through Jesus! He gives us access to a deep well of joy, even in the midst of sorrow and loss.



### REFLECT

As you reflect upon the arrival of Jesus to this world, in what ways does this bring joy to you? How can we begin to reflect that joy to those closest to us?

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(Example of a prayer used in a 'Blue Christmas' service)



### PRAY

"God of love, in this Christmas season we embrace and offer up to you all that used to be which is now lost to us, and cannot be again. With celebration all around us... memories of what was and fears of what may be weigh heavy on our hearts. Please hold us close in your embrace, be near to us this night, until the light returns and morning comes. Lord, hear our prayer."

Take a moment to pray for friends or family members who are enduring a difficult season.

\*Take a moment to pray for our Kewanee campus. They will be meeting for a Christmas service tonight. Pray for safe travels and a joyous Christmas celebration.

# December 23rd | Week 2, Reading 4



## Waiting For Joy

I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!

- John 15:11, NLT

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

- James 1:2-3, NIV

In a recent interview, Bono (lead singer of Irish rock band U2) used a unique phrase to describe how the band wanted to proceed in the midst of difficult times: defiant joy. We live in a world that is constantly in chaos. We have an enemy that seeks to steal our joy through circumstances and deception. There is nothing more defiant than choosing to live with joyous gratefulness, even in the midst of great suffering.

Many of the central characters of the Christmas story model this for us. Mary and Joseph held on to defiant joy, even when the optics of Mary's pregnancy were challenging for both of them. Folks like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna lived with defiant joy, even after many difficult years of waiting for the promised Messiah to arrive. For a Christ follower, circumstances should not be a barometer of our joy--no circumstance has the power to steal our joy unless we give it the power to steal our joy. We can choose joy through the power of Holy Spirit who resides within us. Moreover, we can offer our joy as a gift to our family, friends, and community. We can offer a persevering joy that stands defiant against oppression and fear.



### REFLECT

Is there a difference between happiness and joy? Is there a place in your life where you need to choose joyfulness instead of succumbing to fear, envy, or worry?

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### PRAY

"Dear God, grant us the courage to experience joy.  
Joy in the face of apathy,  
Joy in the face of sorrow,  
Joy in the face of uncertainty.  
Amen."

(Prayer written by Katherine Hawker)

\*Take a moment and pray for our first two Christmas Eve services which will happen today at 9AM and 11AM. Pray for Holy Spirit to open hearts and minds to the story of Jesus.

# December 24th | Week 2, Reading 5



## Christ Has Come

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!

And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."

- Luke 2:8-14

This is what Christmas is! Jesus has come as the King of an entirely new kind of kingdom: one given first to outcasts and the unimportant; a kingdom announced by angels and the reassurance we don't need to be afraid. Because Jesus has come, everything is now different. He has brought a new and lasting peace, real hope, living faith, and genuine joy.

Because Jesus has come, we can experience the glory of Heaven and a rescue we may not have otherwise known we needed—good news that brings great joy to all people.



### REFLECT

Why do you think it's significant that Jesus's birth was first announced to shepherds—people on the lowest rung of the social ladder? What does this say to us when we feel unworthy or insignificant? What do you think it says about how different the Kingdom of Jesus is that it was announced by angels? Where do you need to hear the words, "Don't be afraid!" in your world today?

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### PRAY

"God, I echo what was said on that first Christmas night — Glory to God in the highest heaven! Where I am afraid, I ask you to show me where you are at work. Where I feel unseen, I ask you to show me what you see. Lead me into places where I am more dependent on and confident in you."

# December 25th | Week 2, Reading 6



## Waiting for Christ

He (Jesus) said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

- Acts 1:7-10, NIV

The birth of Jesus isn't just a sweet story about a baby, shepherds, and angels. It's the climax of God's great story of creation—the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of God's Anointed King. And the very last thing Jesus said to his followers before ascending to Heaven were words of command and commission: to go in the power of his Spirit and serve as witnesses of his new kind of kingdom.

Advent reminds us that King Jesus will return again—everyone will recognize him as King and he will finish setting all things right. On the first Christmas, we were invited into the waiting space between Jesus coming as King and his kingdom being experienced in fullness. In this waiting space, followers of Jesus are messengers and bringers of his hope, love, peace, and joy.



### REFLECT

Have you ever thought of yourself as a messenger or bringer of heaven's goodness? How does this change the way you view each day? How do you think waiting and our activity are related?



### PRAY

Take a moment to thank God for Jesus. Ask him to help you see the places where he's calling you into a renewed waiting for him. Pray that God gives you awareness of opportunities to help others experience the hope, love, peace, and joy of his kingdom.