

On the Road to Bethlehem

Family Devotions for Advent



ALTADENA VALLEY
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

In this Advent season, we are all on the road to Bethlehem. But who will show us the way? The prophets, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and the magi can help us. The devotional readings on the following pages trace the path to Bethlehem through the words and experiences of these people. The readings culminate on Christmas Eve, when the reader makes his own pilgrimage to the stable.

PREPARING HEARTS FOR THE KING

In early days, Advent was a period of repentance and fasting. Thoughts did not turn to celebration until the third Sunday, when the arrival of Christ was near. Indeed, God's coming to earth is reason to pause and consider his holiness and our need of his mercy. Yet the clamor and tinsel of modern-day observances can obscure the enormity of God's gift to us. So be still, listen, and look to the Light of the World. And as you use this guide, pay extra attention to your children's questions and responses. In reading the scriptures and praying together, a child may experience an awareness of sin and a desire for a relationship with Jesus. As a family, let Christ's pure radiance lead you all to come to him in faith and repentance.

HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

On each of the four Sundays prior to Christmas, gather your family and read the opening reflection for the respective day. Scripture passages can be read by the children. Next, light the candles of the Advent wreath, pray together, and sing the familiar carols. You can use either an Advent wreath or a nativity scene with these devotions. Or you may want to use both. For the wreath, you will need five candles—three purple, one rose (the shepherds' candle), and one white. A candle is lit on each Sunday, and the white Christ candle is lit on Christmas Eve.

A nativity scene will provide more interaction for children and also help them visualize the events surrounding Jesus' birth. On the first Sunday of Advent, display the stable. Have your children help you collect greenery and small bare branches to place around it. On subsequent Sundays, introduce the nativity figures related to that day's reading and let children move the figures down the "road" to Bethlehem and to the stable.

*Note: The Worship Center manual titled *Young Children and Worship*, by Sonya M. Stewart and Jerome W. Berryman (Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), was the inspiration for the themes that appear throughout this booklet.*

CHRISTMAS EVE A JOURNEY'S END—AND BEGINNING

Reflection

Present baby Jesus in the manger.

Bethlehem at last! You are finally here, filled with joy and longing to look upon the Messiah. Perhaps your journey to this place has taken years, years filled with great darkness. Or perhaps you have always felt close to the light of Bethlehem. Your heart pounds as you draw closer to the manger. Then, the God of the universe reaches up a tiny hand, pale against the darkness. Your heart sings with praises to a God who loves us so, who left the glory of heaven to live and die among men, and to live again, that we might have life eternal. O come let us adore him, King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

John 3:16, 19-21

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

Lighting the Christ Candle

Light the purple and rose candles, then light the white Christ candle.

This is the Christ candle. We light it to remind us that Jesus Christ is the Light. The light shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it. Move the manger and baby Jesus to the stable.

Prayer

Father, we praise you for being the light in our darkness. Help us to always walk in your light and to love you with all our hearts. Thank you for the gift of your Son, the Light of the World. Amen.

O Come All Ye Faithful

O come, all ye faithful,
joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem!
Come and behold him, born the King of angels!
O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!

Yea, Lord, we greet thee,
born this happy morning, Jesus, to thee
be all glory giv'n;
Word of the Father, now in flesh
appearing! O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him, O come, let us
adore him, Christ the Lord!

FIRST SUNDAY—THE PROPHETS SHOW US THE WAY

Reflection

Imagine you are on a journey in darkest night. It is so dark, you cannot even see the path before you. Then from a great distance, a light appears. It's just a tiny glow, no bigger than a pinpoint. As the light nears, you feel hopeful, happy. Finally, the full strength of the light is shining all around you. You can't wait to meet the One who has brought you this light. Then you look down. To your dismay, your feet are bloodied and bruised from your journey in the night. Your clothes are torn and dirty. You feel ashamed and no longer eager to meet your Rescuer. You sink to your knees. But He has come, just for you. He knows you are dirty and weak and ashamed. He knows. But He loves you just the same.

Isaiah 9:2

Many, many years before the first Christmas, the prophet Isaiah spoke to the people of God. They had forgotten the Lord. They did not love and obey him. But Isaiah told the people that the Messiah would come, and he would save them from their sins. His message is written in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 9:2, he said, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness, on them a light has shined."

Lighting the Candle of the Prophets

Light purple candle.

This is the candle of the prophets. We light it to remind us that prophets like Isaiah listen to God and can show us the way to God.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for the prophets who have spoken your words. Help us to want the light of your presence always, especially when we feel unclean and ashamed. We pray that we would come to you and honestly confess the wrong things we have done. Thank you for sending Jesus, the Messiah, who takes away our sins and makes us right with you. Amen.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

SECOND SUNDAY—MARY AND JOSEPH SHOW US THE WAY

Reflection

If using nativity figures, present Mary and Joseph.

Mary and Joseph had traveled many miles. They were on the road to Bethlehem because the Roman government had ordered everyone to return to the city of their fathers to be counted. The journey was not easy for Mary. She must have been tired and uncomfortable. Perhaps Joseph was worried they wouldn't get there before the baby was born. But Joseph and Mary had joy in their hearts, for they had a secret. An angel of the Lord had come to them saying, "Fear not! Be joyful!" They were to be part of God's special plan. They would be the parents of the Messiah, who would save the people from their sins.

Luke 1:30-33

"Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Lighting the Candle of Mary and Joseph

Light two purple candles.

This is the candle of Mary and Joseph. We light it to remind us to not be afraid but to be full of joy. Move Mary and Joseph to the stable.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for your plan to use ordinary people for your extraordinary purposes. When we are afraid to travel down the roads you have planned for us, help us to trust you and to be joyful. We pray that we would be obedient and willing to follow you, believing that you love us and know what is best for us. Amen.

O Little Town of Bethlehem

O little town of Bethlehem, How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in thee tonight.

THIRD SUNDAY—THE SHEPHERDS SHOW US THE WAY

Reflection

Present the shepherds and sheep.

Long ago, each day was much the same as the next for shepherds on the hills outside Bethlehem. Lead the sheep, feed the sheep. Watch for danger, wait for morning. But one night, the rhythm of this dull existence was disrupted by a choir of angels, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” Imagine the shepherds’ astonishment that this message had come to them. They were the lowest of all people. But not in God’s eyes. He chose them to be the first witnesses of his plan to bring peace to the world through a tiny baby.

Luke 2:15-20

“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

. . . The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”

Lighting the Candle of the Shepherds

Light two purple candles and the rose candle.

This is the candle of the shepherds. We light it to remind us of the good news that a savior, God’s special son, is born. Move the shepherds and sheep to the stable.

Prayer

Father, forgive us for the times we have waited and watched but have not expected your help or your hope. We ask you to stir our dull hearts so that the Holy Spirit might work in us to spread the good news of Jesus to the world. Thank you for your message of peace to us and to all people. Amen.

Go, Tell It on the Mountain

Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and ev’rywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born!

While shepherds kept their watching
O’er silent flocks by night,
Behold throughout the heavens
There shone a holy light. (repeat chorus)

FOURTH SUNDAY—THE MAGI SHOW US THE WAY

Reflection

Present the magi.

Through the ages, mankind has been fascinated by the night sky. Scientists continue to have more questions than answers about what is out there. But God knows. He placed every star and planet just so. He put a special star in the sky when Jesus was born, and magi in the East saw it. They were wise and understood that this star meant a new king had been born. So they prepared for the long trip, taking with them gold, frankincense, and myrrh—precious gifts fit for a king.

Matthew 2:9-11

“ . . . they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh.”

Lighting the Candle of the Magi

Light two purple candles, the rose candle, and the third purple candle.

This is the candle of the magi. We light it to remind us of the gift of Jesus, the newborn king. Move the magi to the stable.

Prayer

Father, thank you for the wonderful gift of Jesus who came to earth to bear our sins. Thank you for providing your only Son as the holy and blameless sacrifice for us so that we will never be separated from you. Help us to love you more as we understand your great love for us. Amen.

Joy To the World

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let ev'ry heart prepare him room,
And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness,
And wonders of his love, And wonders of his love,
And wonders, wonders of his love.



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