



TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

SIMPLE DEVOTIONALS
FOR ADVENT



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READ

Luke 1:1-22, 57-66

I love surprises. To my poor husband's chagrin, I refuse to participate in the shabby tradition of telling him what to get me for Christmas. I know it's a practical way to exchange gifts, and one that lots of people prefer, but to me, Christmas without surprises is like a cupcake without the frosting – I'll still eat it, but feel like I've somehow missed out on the best part.

I know I'm in good company here, because when you read the stories of Christ's birth, it's easy to see that God loves surprises too. Take the first narrative Luke unfolds for us, where an unknown priest shows up for his annual ministry at the Temple and gets waylaid by an angel as he burns incense on the altar. When Gabriel announces Zachariah's role in the grand Gospel story, Scripture says he became paralyzed with fear. Terror soon gave way to cynicism, however, as the angel promised him the surprise of his life – a chance to father a son in his very old age.

The thing about God's surprises is that so often they come when hope is gone and dreams have died. Not only had Zachariah given up on having a son, but he was one of millions of Israelites who'd heard nothing from God for over 400 years. Think of it. For ten generations there had been no angel visitations, no angry prophets, no clouds by day or fires by night, no temples filling with smoke or Mount Sinai's quaking with the glory of the Lord. It would be safe to say that most of God's children were living with little anticipation of the promised Messiah showing up to free them from the tyranny of Rome.

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But the blessed truth about God's surprises is that so often, just when we feel as if time has run out, God breaks in and we realize He had a plan all along. In His sovereign wisdom, our heavenly Father has been carefully lining things up, preparing the way for break-through, even though we are oblivious to his ways and at times have given up completely. Yet as we look back, we see how every detail of God's plan was perfectly chosen with our best interests at heart.



In this story, for example, Zachariah had left the hills of Judea to come to the busy metropolis of Jerusalem. He was not ministering at the temple alone in the early morning or late at night, but at mid-day, when the crowds came to offer prayers and hundreds would see him come out and know that something supernatural had occurred. And though Zachariah came as a priest to perform his temple duties once a year, this was the only time in his life when the lot fell for him to enter into the holy of holies. Surely this was no coincidence. What better place to be ambushed by God?

All in all, when you consider what would soon unfold, God had a pretty novel idea to kick the whole thing off. Not only did an old man get a wish that he'd long ago given up on, but his miracle baby would prepare the way for the fulfillment of the greatest promise ever given, the coming of the Messiah.

So as we enter the final stretch before Christmas, let us ponder deeply the story of a faithful priest and the people of God who endured 400 years of Sovereign silence. May we hold onto hope and take delight in the reality that we have a heavenly Father who, when least expected, loves to come crashing into our world with glorious surprises.

REFLECT

Are there areas of your life where you have given up hope of God breaking in? Do you long for some fulfillment of a promise, some sign that God is here for you? If so, reflect on this story and offer these things to the Lord, asking Him to give you fresh hope in Him. Be as honest as you can with the Lord, but end with an affirmation that He will accomplish His purposes in His time, just as he did with Zechariah. Write your thoughts to the Lord in a journal.

RESPOND

Zechariah burst out in praise as soon as God loosened his lips. Read his words below aloud, personalizing them as your own prayer of praise to God from Luke 1:67-79:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

A CHRISTMAS ACTIVITY

Plan a way to surprise someone who might least expect it today. As you experience the joy of doing so, reflect on how God takes pleasure in bestowing surprises upon you, his child.





READ

Luke 1:24, 39-45, 57-66

There are people like Elizabeth in each of our lives – those unsung heroes who walk quietly and faithfully before God. They are the ones we want to run to when we struggle as well as when we soar. Knowing that they are there and will give us just what we need when we come to call, is like an old, familiar song that plays somewhere comfortably in the back of our minds.

What made Elizabeth the kind of person her teenage niece would want to stay with during her first months of pregnancy? Scripture tells us Elizabeth was six months along herself, but would that have been enough to make Mary journey all that way alone to see her? What else do we know of this woman who played such a significant role in preparing for the coming of the Messiah?

First, Elizabeth was a righteous woman who walked honorably before God. This means that she had really tried to keep his commandments diligently all the days of her long life, no small feat under the best of circumstances. But in her case, it meant trusting God even as the one thing that defined her identity as a Hebrew woman -- having a child of her own – eluded her, year after year after year, into old age.

WHAT I LOVE ABOUT ELISABETH IS THAT THERE IS
SIMPLY NO TRACE OF BITTERNESS IN HER STORY



What I love about Elizabeth is that there is simply no trace of bitterness in her story. Though others around her probably believed she was deficient in some way, there's no evidence that she took offense, nor does she seem to waste time with self-recrimination or second guessing God about how this could have happened in light of her faithfulness before Him. This, I believe, is more than anything, what made Mary want to be in her presence during the most trying time of her life. The young girl needed someone who would do exactly what Elizabeth did – rejoice with her and give God glory over an outrageous situation that would cause countless others to question or condemn her outright.



Those three months must have been a special time for the two women, with Elizabeth encouraging and instructing Mary in everything from a proper diet to handling false contractions. I suspect they had many conversations about what it would mean to raise children who belonged wholly to God and his purposes. I can just see them pondering, praying together and preparing their hearts for the days to come. In the end, there is no doubt that Elizabeth's gentle strength was a gift Mary would treasure her whole life, as the mother of the incarnate Christ.

On these days before Christmas, let us consider what it means to trust God in every circumstance, to walk before Him with honor, even when we cannot see His hand. Above all, let us remember the spiritual strength of this amazing woman, and choose daily as she did, to refuse to be offended at how God orders the course of our lives. This is the greatest preparation we can make for the miracles that have yet to unfold and the call to God's purposes that await us in the days to come.

REFLECT

What situation might you face today that makes it harder to walk honorably with God? What might be his heart for you in this? Pause and ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you, asking him questions such as: Lord, how do you want to encourage me with Elizabeth's life? What do You want to show me of yourself through this? Jot the things you sense him saying down in your journal.

RESPOND

Read the following passage prayerfully, asking God to impart its truths to your heart and life. Then re-write it in your own words, as it relates to your personal situation. Make it a psalm of praise and worship to the Lord.

Habakkuk 3:17-18

*Though the fig tree should not blossom
And there be no fruit on the vines,
Though the yield of the olive should fail
And the fields produce no food,
Though the flock should be cut off from the fold
And there be no cattle in the stalls,
Yet I will exult in the LORD,
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.*

A CHRISTMAS ACTIVITY

Call, write, text or send an email to someone who has been there for you spiritually in the past, and thank them for their faithfulness and witness in your life.





READ

Luke 1:13-16, 39-43, 57, 80, John 3:25-30

In 1623 a young woman in France gave birth to one of the greatest mathematical minds in history. From early on he demonstrated amazing genius; discovering at the age of 12 that the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles – a fact now taught in every basic geometry class. As an adult, Blaise Pascal devoted himself to mathematical experiments, traveling about to lecture on his findings. Then one night something happened that changed everything.

He was driving a coach home when the lead horses took fright and fled wildly across a bridge, railing into the dark waters below. Had the reins not snapped, Pascal would have plunged to his death, a reality that deeply affected him. Later that night as he pondered his near-death experience, the presence of God descended in a dramatic way. He wrote of it on a piece of parchment and secured it in an amulet that he kept next to his heart. Giving up mathematical pursuits, he went on to devote himself completely to the study of Christ. Upon his death they found the amulet around his neck, with the paper he'd written that night. It contained these words: . . . *O righteous Father, the world hath not known Thee, But I have known Thee. Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.* . .

JOY, JOY, JOY...TEARS OF JOY



Joy is the birthright for all of us who follow Jesus, for it flows from the heart of God and resonates on page after page of Scripture. The Christmas story is peppered with whispers of joy. One of the lesser known ones is found in the story of Jesus' forerunner and cousin, John the Baptist. Though we often see John as some kind of odd prophet, eating locusts and wild honey in the wilderness, the truth is that his life made him a courier of joy from the very start. First, the angel Gabriel promised John's father Zechariah that his birth would bring him great delight. Then the infant John leapt for joy in his mother's womb when Mary came to visit. And the entire village celebrated John's entrance into the world with one big party.



As a young man, John's joy was wrapped up in wonder at being chosen to announce the coming of the long-awaited Messiah. We see this in a conversation he had with his disciples one day when they were worried that he was losing his standing to a newcomer named Jesus of Nazareth. Though he'd told them many times that he was only there to prepare the way, they lost sight of that as the crowds thinned around them and people flocked to hear Jesus.

John patiently explained to his disciples that he was like a best man in a wedding, waiting with everyone else for the bridegroom to arrive. Once he heard the bridegroom's voice, he realized that the wedding was imminent and he was filled with joy. John's happiness flourished as he saw his ministry fading into the background, even as *the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world* gained in popularity. This, even though Jesus' appearance on the scene was the beginning of a terrible end for John; one that he may very well have anticipated even while speaking of his own fullness of joy.

So with every Christmas carol we sing in the coming days, let us remember that we are made for joy, that no matter how busy the season, or how long our to-do list, our birthright is to experience gladness of heart. As we practice joy, we too prepare the way for Christ this Christmas--in our hearts and lives and families and workplaces and neighborhoods. As we listen carefully for the Bridegroom's voice and open our hearts to the wonder of His coming, we are blessed to be His couriers of joy.

REFLECT

Though joy is our birthright as children of God, we can easily forget in the busyness of the season. Pause for a few minutes and just sit with the joy of having been chosen by Christ to know Him and walk with Him and celebrate His goodness. See everything about this season--from the shopping to the partying to the gifting and receiving--as an invitation to joy. How will you respond?

RESPOND

John the Baptist rejoiced to hear the Bridegroom's voice. Ask Jesus to speak to your heart today by giving you a revelation of who He is and His presence with you, as you read the following verses. Spend some time worshipping by rejoicing in Him.

1 Chronicles 16:32-34

*Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it!
Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth.
Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever!*

A CHRISTMAS ACTIVITY

Make the Christmas Carol, JOY TO THE WORLD your song of the day. Sing it to yourself or as a family, and as you do, think of joy as the greatest gift of all in Christ. Celebrate!

Joy to the world, the Lord is come; Let Earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing, and Heaven and nature sing, and Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.

Joy to the Earth, the Savior reigns; Let all their songs employ; While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains,
Repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy, repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.

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.





READ

Luke 1:26-35, 46-56, Matthew 12:46-50, Acts 1:12-14

One sunny Spring day, Abdel-Qader, a government employee in southern Iraq discovered that his 17 year old daughter Rand had been seen in public chatting with a British soldier. Enraged, he waited for her to come home, at which time he stomped on, suffocated and then stabbed the young girl to death. Though he was arrested, he was released two hours later, after having been congratulated by the police for acting to restore his family's honor in the face of the girl's immorality. The murder was fully sanctioned by law, though Rand had done nothing more than engage in conversations with the soldier during her breaks at work.

Though there were no such laws in first century Judea, the culture in which the teenage Mary had grown up would have had some similar values. People, for example, were not viewed as individuals, but rather as members of their group or clan, and therefore, whatever one person did reflected on all of them. Nazareth was a small, conservative village with only about 400 inhabitants, which meant that everyone would most likely have been drawn into her pregnancy in some way. The fact that she claimed it was an act of God could only have made matters worse.

Yet, when the angel appeared announcing God's call to Mary, her response was nothing short of miraculous. Though deeply troubled at first, she answered with humble acquiescence and then broke out with the *Magnificat* – one of the most glorious psalms of worship ever written. This girl had a tender heart toward the God of her childhood.

MARY WAS MIRED IN A CRUCIBLE OF GOD'S OWN MAKING



But can you imagine how Mary must have felt as she stood before her father, sharing the news? Even Joseph's plan to marry her could not have assuaged the rage and shame and sadness that the teenager's dad must have expressed. Mary's baptism by fire had begun. As if months of rejection and scorn weren't enough, the very pregnant girl had to travel 80 miles in six days through the desert on a donkey, only to encounter a maelstrom of frustrated pilgrims fighting for lodging, finally giving birth in a grotto that sheltered sheep. With no sister or aunt or mother or midwife to hold her hand, Mary was mired in a crucible of God's own making, toughening her up for even greater heartache to come.



By the time she'd raised Jesus, Mary had become a strong, confident, even headstrong woman. At the wedding in Cana, she quickly dismissed her son's objection to doing miracles before his time, telling the servants to do whatever he said. She traveled with him off and on after that until the day Jesus discharged her by declaring that all those who did his Father's will were now his mother and brothers and sisters.

That is the last we hear of Mary until Jesus hung in a bloodied heap from the cross of Calvary. While most of his disciples fled in fear, the woman whose womb had carried him looked bravely on as her first-born took his final breath. What memories flashed across her mind in those painful hours? Did the roar of the mocking crowd bring back the ridicule she had faced so long ago? When the soldiers bartered for his ragged robe, did she see herself in that stable, swaddling her infant against the chill of night? When water and blood shot from the stab wound in her Son's side, did she hear a distant echo of Simeon in the temple, warning her of a sword that would pierce her soul? In that moment, did she wonder how in the world she would ever recover?

But recover she did, at least in part, for the book of Acts tells us that Mary was there after Christ's ascension, praying with Peter and James and John and all the others in the upper room. Only eternity will reveal the role she played in those days of the early church and the spreading of the gospel throughout the land and beyond.

So as Christmas comes, let us consider this woman who pondered things in her heart and pressed through her pain again and again for the higher good. Let us remember the way her trials shaped her and the strength she gleaned from the sacrifices she made. And as we see her pushing through and persevering in the face of a struggle we cannot even begin to comprehend, let us give thanks; for we are all to this day in that woman's debt.

REFLECT

Consider this amazing woman and the words she begins her spiritual venture with: *Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.* Imagine the many times she must have reminded herself of this throughout Jesus' life and death. Now think of what she must have experienced when the Holy Spirit fell at Pentecost. Radical obedience always produces incredible rewards. How have you seen this in your own life? Where might you need to say these words again?

RESPOND

Worship the Lord by personalizing the Magnificat, the prayer of Mary upon learning of God's call:

Luke 1:46-55

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."

A CHRISTMAS ACTIVITY

Write Mary's words of submission on a card and carry it with you throughout the day, offering it up as often as possible as your own prayer. Share it with someone else: *Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; Let it be to me according to your word.*





READ

Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 2:3-5, Matthew 13:54-55, Luke 4:22

If there is one character in the Christmas story that seems to get short shrift, it's probably Joseph. This could be because he wasn't Jesus' biological father or because Scripture doesn't say much about him after Christ's birth. Whatever the reason, people don't talk about Joseph much, even today.

But when you think about it, being the step-dad of the Messiah had to have turned that carpenter's life upside down in ways we probably fail to fully appreciate. It would be hard, for example, to measure the price Joseph paid in loss of reputation and privacy and respect, when he married the young pregnant woman instead of finding a nice way to get her out of his life.

Or consider the inner turmoil that must have plagued Joseph as he faithfully raised the boy – wrestled with him and taught him and fed him and disciplined him and tucked him in at night – knowing all along that it wasn't really his son at all. Can you imagine how Joseph's heart must have been pierced after searching frantically all over the temple for Jesus during their annual visit, only to have the twelve year old ask, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"

IT ALMOST FEELS AS IF JOSEPH WAS A STRANGELY SILENT
BYSTANDER, WITH NOTHING TO SAY AT ALL.



Though we can surmise about these things, the reality is that Scripture gives us little to remember Joseph by. After the temple visit he fades from view and we have no record of how or when he died. In all of the Gospel narratives, there is nothing written about what he felt or the things he might have said--when the angel woke him, or he took Mary as his own, or when the baby Jesus was born. It almost feels as if Joseph was a strangely silent bystander, with nothing to say at all.

Or was he?



Truth be told, Joseph left us a profound legacy – not in words, but through his acts of quiet obedience. When Gabriel told him to wed his pregnant fiancé, he did so without argument. When an angel warned him to leave Bethlehem, he took Mary and baby Jesus and traveled to a hostile land where they would have no family, no friends and no source of income. When Herod died and God told him to take his family back to Israel, Joseph packed up and went once again. But when he got there, warned not to settle in Judea--the place that clearly would have made the most sense--he journeyed instead to Galilee to set up housekeeping, ensuring that a prophecy about the Savior being a Nazarene would be fulfilled.

What can we glean from these few scattered verses about the legal guardian of our Lord? Whatever else Joseph might have been, it is clear that he was a man who loved God enough to relinquish his rights to comfort or career or status or security or even social identity. Over and over God asked Joseph to make hard and costly choices, and he did again and again, seemingly without complaint.

So as we approach Christmas, let us look a little more intently at this one whose quiet obedience tells a story all its own. May his life cause us to consider what kind of message our stories send to those who may be watching on any given day. And as we remember this one who stood so humbly at the edges of the Christmas chronicle, may we offer our hearts afresh to the God he served with such abandonment.

REFLECT

Spend some time prayerfully meditating on Joseph's quiet obedience in light of your own life. Are there acts of quiet obedience that no one knows about in your life? Do you need to hear God whispering to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant?" Let God minister to you today. Consider your own desire to follow, even when no one knows or affirms you. Hear God's affirmation of love.

RESPOND

While our tendency is to glorify such awesome obedience, there is a hidden reality that is far more important. Why did Joseph obey? What had he seen of God that made him so willing to sacrifice? Only the Almighty, full of grace and glory, could inspire such incredible submission. Worship Him this morning as you make the following verses your own:

Psalm 104:1-2, 31-34

Bless the LORD, O my soul!

O LORD my God, You are very great;

You are clothed with splendor and majesty,

Covering Yourself with light as with a cloak,

Stretching out heaven like a tent curtain.

Let the glory of the LORD endure forever;

Let the LORD be glad in His works;

He looks at the earth, and it trembles;

He touches the mountains, and they smoke.

I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praise to my God while I have my being.

Let my meditation be pleasing to Him;

As for me, I shall be glad in the LORD.

A CHRISTMAS ACTIVITY

Look for opportunities to respond with quiet obedience to the Lord as you go throughout this day, and rest in the wonder that He is pleased with you, no matter who else sees what you do.





READ

Luke 2:8-20

Footloose and fancy free. That's what comes to my mind when I think about those shepherds in the Christmas story, I suppose because of the way they dropped everything and went the Bethlehem to see the new born king. That term has a storied past, but most agree that it refers to someone who has no obligations to anyone, no love or family interests to consider as they choose their path day in and day out.

But *footloose and fancy free* doesn't really describe those shepherds. After all, they were poor peasants, trying to make a living in one of the most difficult occupations of that time. Day by day they wandered the hillsides outside of Bethlehem, moving their small flock around, making every lamb got its fill of healthy foliage. At night they drew together – perhaps for camaraderie or comfort or for the safety found in numbers. Sleeping under the stars, they had to protect the sheep from predators like wolves or other savage beasts, making sure they didn't wander off. The livelihood of a shepherd's family, which may have included his parents or widowed sisters, rested on his shoulders. Even if he was a free spirit at heart or footloose in his yearnings, a shepherd didn't have the luxury of doing whatever suited his fancy at any given time.

EVEN IF HE WAS A FREE SPIRIT AT HEART OR
FOOTLOOSE IN HIS YEARNINGS, A SHEPHERD
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SUITED HIS FANCY AT ANY GIVEN TIME.



That's what makes their reaction so intriguing. There they were, resting after a long day, perhaps sharing some bread and swapping stories, having no idea that they were about to be brought into the central drama of history. Out of nowhere, some strange and ethereal light splattered the night sky and an angel materialized at their feet, telling them of a Savior born in a stable. If that wasn't enough to make them want to run for their lives, the deafening sound of an angel choir singing something like the Hallelujah Chorus came crashing in on every side. What in the world were they to think?



But that's just it – they didn't think. They didn't stop to talk about what they had seen, or to plan a course of action. They didn't debate what to do with their sheep, or how they'd convince anyone of what they had seen, or where they would go once they got to Bethlehem, a city bulging with a million pilgrims. Someone said, "Let's go," and they all took off as if they hadn't a care in the world.

Those shepherds were making space for God, something that, ironically, we can find harder and harder to do during this season. Reading their story makes me want to change all that. Though I've never witnessed the glory of the Lord filling the sky above me, or had an angel set my heart pounding, or heard a heavenly host singing arias to the Most High God, I know that God can break into the ordinariness of my days with thundering grace, leaving me with the same decision they faced. Will I drop what I am doing and run to see what and where and when and in whom and how he wants to show me His glory? Will I make space for him?

Footloose and fancy free. Will you join me during these days of Christmas by offering Christ a heart that will drop everything to invite Him in? In the shopping, caroling, wrapping, eating, gathering, cooking and partying, will you determine to be a footloose follower of Jesus, if only for a minute or an hour or even a day? Who knows what glories might be ours for the taking if we do?

REFLECT

Think of times when you have made space for God. What did He show you? How did He meet you? Spend a few minutes reminiscing with a grateful heart. Now, what would it look like for you to drop everything and make space for God today? This week? Journal your thoughts with the Lord on this.

RESPOND

Worship the Lord as you imagine what it would have been like to hear the choir of angels singing, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.*"

Offer your own song of praise, personalizing the Psalm below:

Psalm 43:3-4

*Send forth your light and your truth,
let them guide me;
let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.
Then will I go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight.
I will praise you with the harp,
O God, my God.*

A CHRISTMAS ACTIVITY

Ask God to enable you to do something completely out of the ordinary today. Listen for His voice throughout the day and when you hear that gentle whisper, drop everything as best you can, and go do it.





READ

Luke 2:9-15, Mark 1:13, Matthew 26:52-53, Luke 22:42-43, Ephesians 3:10, 1 Peter 1:10-12

If there is one set of characters that dominates the drama of Christ's birth, it is the angels. What would the Christmas story be without Gabriel and friends stunning Zachariah in the Temple or announcing the call to Mary or showing up in Joseph's dreams, or serenading the shepherds? For that matter, what would Christmas be without a rousing chorus of *Hark the Herald Angels sing*?

But the angels play roles in Jesus' story far beyond the holy family's humble beginnings. It seems they were always showing up--warning Joseph of impending danger, meeting Jesus in His 40-day wrestling match with Satan or strengthening him in the garden of Gethsemane. You almost get the sense that the hosts of heaven hung around the Son of God all the time, just waiting for a chance to do something, hoping to be of service to Him in some way.

As it turns out, that is exactly what they were doing. When Peter sliced off a temple guard's ear, Jesus informed them that he could call twelve legions – one for each of them – which meant that over ten thousand angels hovered at his beck and call. Peter later wrote to the new believers that God's plan to save the world was something angels yearned to understand. The word he used implied an insatiable curiosity; depicting them stooping down and examining all the parts, hoping somehow to finally grasp the big picture. Angels, it seems, were privy only to the snippets of the story that God chose to bring them into.

ANGELS, IT SEEMS, WERE PRIVY ONLY TO THE SNIPPETS
OF THE STORY THAT GOD CHOSE TO BRING THEM INTO.



Can you imagine Gabriel heading back to heaven with the details he'd discovered about the Almighty God planning to enter a woman's womb? Can you hear that heavenly chorus jabbering all at once, trying to figure out the meaning of the song they'd been given to sing over a band of peasants on a hillside? How would the morning stars who once sang for joy over creation have felt at that troubling scene, where the One who spoke the world into existence now lay in a heap with blood oozing from his pores? Could the story of their Master sacrificing his life to save those who had rejected his love ever make sense to the angels who existed to do Christ's bidding?



At first glance, the answer would seem to be no, that the angels will never have the blessing of understanding redemption's story. After all, the Gospel is a mystery that even those of us who are made in God's image must grapple with, gaining understanding only when he opens the eyes of our hearts by grace. But Paul wrote of a profound reality, one that boggles the mind, which is that those who've been purchased with the blood of Christ actually have the privilege of making this mystery known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places. How in the world is that supposed to happen?

Paul doesn't go on to explain, but it seems to me that it must be through the way our lives are transformed through the Spirit's working within us. Isn't it true that the Gospel story is being retold in our stories as we live redemptively as the Light of Christ shines through us? This is amazing, when you think about it. With each work God does in your heart and mine to make us more like him, heavenly hosts are stooping down to eagerly watch, insatiably curious to see why he sent His Son to earth on that first Christmas 2000 years ago.

So as we rejoice in our salvation this Christmas, let us be in awe that we are uniquely privileged to grasp the beauty of his plan, formed before the foundation of the world. And as we go about our holiday busyness, let us remember that we are being looked upon with wonder, that our lives are on display before myriads of angels who long to understand the glorious mystery of the Gospel. As they watch you and me this day, may their wish indeed be granted.

REFLECT

Consider that your life is the story of redemption, that the transforming power of Christ within you is one of the ways God makes his manifold wisdom known to the angels. Ponder this reality for a few minutes. Reflect on the truth that as a participant in Jesus' story, you have privileges that the angels who live in God's very presence yearn to get a glimpse of. What might these be?

RESPOND

The glory of God refers to all that he is – His character, attributes and ways. What would you want your life to say to the angels about God's glory, which perhaps they don't know on their own? (Remember that they have no personal experience of salvation). Make a list of these things and give God thanks, worshipping Him for the wonder of being human, and being His children.

MY LIST

A CHRISTMAS ACTIVITY

Look around for angel decorations – on the tree, on wreaths, in stores etc. Each time you see one; ponder the amazing truth that through you, God is revealing the beauty and wonder of his redemptive story to the angels who fill the heavenly realm.





READ

Matthew 2:1-8, 16-18; Luke 4:16-21

My father died two weeks before Christmas and though I'd always loved the holiday season, for years afterwards I felt depressed from the moment the first decorations went up in stores. Even today I can hear a carol at the mall or see children practice for Christmas pageants, and the dormant ache of grief erupts. I am not alone. We need only look around to see stories of childhood trauma, or family fractures, or deaths like that of my father written on weary faces for whom the holidays can feel less like a time of celebration and more like an opening of painful wounds. Christmas seems to bring out our brokenness, and many feel walled in by it, with memories of losses they would just as soon forget.

Perhaps this was the case for Herod the great, who was so threatened when magi from the East showed up looking for a would-be king, that he determined to have all baby boys in the region killed. What might have produced such brokenness in one of the most powerful men in the country? It may well have begun in childhood wounds that were never healed. With a Jewish father and Arab mother, Herod fit in nowhere, and was likely bullied by peers on either side as he grew up. Then he watched as his older brother became the favored one in the family, and was given the coveted Jerusalem to rule, while Herod was left with that of Galilee.

WE NEED ONLY LOOK AROUND TO SEE WEARY FACES FOR WHOM
THE HOLIDAYS CAN FEEL LESS LIKE A TIME OF CELEBRATION
AND MORE LIKE AN OPENING OF PAINFUL WOUNDS



We don't know much more about his early years, but by the time Herod was 30, he had fought back, paying his way into the highest levels of Roman government, and as a reward had been made king of Judea. When the Jewish religious leaders called him out for his pagan practices, he abolished their rule and replaced the centuries old inheritance system with one of buying and selling so that he could ensure every priest's loyalty to Rome. In the process, he had many of them killed, including one who had become like a spiritual father to him.



Though Herod had several wives, his greatest love was a beautiful Hasmonean princess named Miriamne. For no apparent reason, he began to suspect her of having an affair, and being riddled with jealousy, brought charges against her. Miriamne was executed after he bribed his own sister to testify against her. Many suspected the real problem was that Miriamne had greater favor with the Jews than he did, something he could not bear. History suggests that shortly after this event, Herod lost his mind and never fully recovered.

Throughout the 37 years of Herod's monarchy, his cruelty cast a long dark shadow over his accomplishments, one that remains to this day. When he realized that he was facing his final hours, he demanded that all Jews be rounded up and executed, so that the nation would have reason to mourn upon his death. In the end, his sister Salome released the thousands of Jews from the Hippodrome, preventing a massacre of immeasurable proportion.

As Christmas carols fill the air and warm fires burn in our decorated living rooms, let us not forget this dark page in the story of Christ's birth. May Herod remind us of the pain that often lies beneath our own brokenness and that of others. As we celebrate this year, may our hearts soar with wonder that Emmanuel came to bring God's favor – a favor that can save and heal, that can set captives free and lead the oppressed to liberty. And in remembering, let us receive afresh the babe who grew up to crush the bars and rescue you and me, and now stands ready to bind our broken hearts, heal our hidden hurts and restore our souls to wholeness once again.

REFLECT

Read the following words of Jesus slowly and meditatively (to meditate means to turn something over and over in your mind again and again, like looking at all the facets and prisms in a beautiful diamond):

Luke 4:17-21

The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me

to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,

to release the oppressed,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

RESPOND

Spend a few minutes pondering what your life would have been like had Jesus not set you free. Don't rush past this – what kind of mental prison might you be living in now if He hadn't?

Are there any areas you need His healing for this Christmas? Offer it honestly to the Lord, and ask Him to meet you right where you are at. Receive His favor. Read the above passage one more time and affirm that it is true for you personally as you wait in His presence. Then worship the King of grace.

A CHRISTMAS ACTIVITY

Though we are all broken in many ways, some of those who suffer most can be found in mental wards and on the streets – people who've lost touch with reality and know no way out. Pray for God's direction and do an act of practical kindness. Bring a stocking to someone in a hospital mental ward or offer a cup of coffee or some Christmas goodies to a homeless person who seems lonely or confused.





READ

Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11, Malachi 1:11-12, Psalm 141:2, Revelation 5:8, John 19:38-40

My love language is gifts, which according to author Gary Smalley, means that while some people need encouraging words, or acts of service, and others need quality time, or physical touch to feel loved, all I need you to do is give me a present. (When you add that to the fact that it has to be a surprise, you can see the kind of pressure my poor husband lives under!) This probably explains why my favorite part of the Christmas story is when the magi from the east brought gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ child, an act that spawned the centuries-old tradition of giving gifts in celebration of His birth.

As it turns out, the fact that they brought gifts might be the only detail we get right when we include those wise men in our plays or carols or crèches. Even a cursory read of Matthew's account of their journey reveals that they were never at the manger, and had to have arrived much later. (I think of that every year when I set out my mother of pearl nativity set, and solve the problem by setting them slightly apart just to prove that I am not Biblically illiterate.) There are however, a few other fallacies about the magi that seem to have become embedded in the Christmas story.

ALL OF THIS THEN BEGS THE QUESTION, HOW DID
WE END UP WITH THESE NOTIONS ABOUT THE WISE
MEN'S ROLE IN THE DRAMA OF CHRIST'S BIRTH?



For example, the Bible never calls the wise men kings, nor does it tell us where they came from (other than the east), or that they arrived on camels. In fact, nothing indicates that they actually followed a star, although they definitely saw one before they started on their journey, and were filled with great joy when they saw it again as they approached Bethlehem. Though Scripture mentions three gifts, it doesn't tell us that there were only three magi – there could have been a dozen of them. All of this then begs the question, how did we end up with these notions about the wise men's role in the drama of Christ's birth?



An in-depth internet search on the subject sent my head spinning. What I discovered is that scholars differ on the source of every one of these things, although many assert their opinions with a great deal of authority. After a frustrating few hours of trying to assimilate the plethora of information out there, I threw up my hands and asked for wisdom from above. When things didn't get any clearer, it occurred to me that perhaps God never intended for us to ferret out the intricate details of these men's role in the story, that all along He has left us in the dark for good reason. Why? For one thing, because He is a God of wonder and mystery, and loves to watch us wrestle with His Word and wanting to know more.

But beyond that, the sparsity of details regarding the magi may be meant to point us to the one thing that is beyond dispute, which is that these men from the east brought gifts to the Christ child. Why? Perhaps God wanted us to know how much he delights in giving, indeed that the inclination to bless others is at the very heart of His character. This is an awesome truth. But then, what about the actual gifts? Is there some spiritual symbolism in the gold, frankincense and myrrh? Well, if you like your packages neatly wrapped (no pun intended); even this might be a bit disappointing. Once again, scholars offer a host of ideas about these things, loosely tying them to various Scriptures. While many of these are fascinating to consider, in the end, they are all still, simply ideas.

So as we wrap our gifts and tie our bows and enter into the joy of giving this week, let us think about the mystery of those men who traveled far from home, bearing treasures fit for a King. With each present we share – to those we love or to strangers in need – let us remember that giving has always been God's idea, that He does indeed love to give good and perfect gifts to all of His children. And in the rush of final preparations for Christmas, may we each find at least one quiet moment to kneel before our King as the magi did so long ago, and offer Him that which will bring Him the greatest pleasure – the one thing no one else can give – the love we each have for Him in our hearts.

REFLECT

While Scripture is not definitive on the symbolism of the gifts the magi brought, it makes a great study, and there are meaningful insights to glean. I have included a few references in the Scripture readings for today. Go back and read them again ([click here](#)). Spend some time pondering these three things, asking God to speak to you personally about their meaning for your life today. Ask Him these two questions about each of them:

Lord, is there a truth about yourself that You want to captivate my heart with today in regards to this?

Lord, is there something about my own life You want to reveal in regards to this?

RESPOND

Take a few minutes right now to physically kneel before the Lord, imagining what it must have felt like for the magi when they met the Messiah. See yourself giving Jesus the only gift no one else can--the affections of your heart. Know that this gives Him great joy. Rest in the wonder of this.

A CHRISTMAS ACTIVITY

It's time to get creative! Consider the three gifts of the magi and try to come up with a way to tell the Gospel story, using these. You could do so through teaching, or even coming up with a fictional story about the three gifts. Share what you come up with over dinner with your family or some friends.

GOLD

FRANKINCENSE

MYRRH





READ

Luke 2:22-34, Luke 18:1-8, Hebrews 11:6, Romans 8:24-25

Stick a needle in my eye...When my best friend Beckee and I said that to each other growing up, we were dead serious about whatever it was we were promising--to keep a secret or stay friends forever or give the class Casanova a collective cold shoulder. Cambridge dictionary tells us that people say this to show that *what you have just said or promised is completely true or sincere*.

Here's the thing about promises; they rely on trust, and as such, bind us together in a certain vulnerability. But what if the one making the promise is God? If we take a risk and trust Him, what happens when it feels as if He isn't coming through? When days and weeks and years pass, and still there is no sign that He is keeping His promise?

Simeon understood this feeling well. We know little about this man, other than he was righteous before God and devout in the eyes of men, and that at some point God had given him a promise that he would see the Messiah before he died. When Simeon shows up in the Christmas story, he is an old man who has walked with God for many years.

DAY IN AND DAY OUT, THE GOD OF THE UNIVERSE
SEARCHES THE EARTH, LOOKING FOR EVEN THE SMALLEST
WHISPER OF OF A HEART THAT STILL TRUSTS.

Simeon's encounter with the baby Jesus and his parents is, at heart, a story of unfailing faith. He never gave up on the promise, even in the face of impossible odds. Year after year after year, Simeon kept showing up, expecting something to happen. Where did Simeon get this kind of faith? Interestingly enough, the name Simeon comes from a root word that means to hear, which is highly appropriate, because Simeon was a man who listened for God's voice. Faith, for each of us, is birthed in divine whispers and nourished through intimate communion with our Maker, a secret Simeon had clearly learned. As a result, the aging saint ended up in the right place at the right time for God to fulfill His long awaited promise.



But, here's the thing. We don't know how many days Simeon had listened and heard nothing, or how many nights he lay in bed wondering if God would ever come through. Still, he kept himself in that tender place, ever ready to hear, should the Almighty grant him a word. This, it seems to me, is at the very heart of the kind of faith that makes God smile – ears that are ever tuned to hear His voice, waiting patiently and listening expectantly for Him to speak, even if it might seem the silence has gone on far too long.

So in these final moments before Christmas, let us remember a man named Simeon who showed us how to live, by hanging on to God's promises, listening to His voice and never letting go of the hope of reward. He trusted till the promise was fulfilled, and only then was he ready to leave this world, full of peace. Let us honor the memory of this great saint by listening ourselves for the tender voice of our Lord, so that we too may be granted the gift of persevering faith.

REFLECT

How does Simeon's story speak to you? Is there a promise from God you struggle to hold onto? Do you listen to the Lord as you journey with Him? Come to Him today, offering yourself afresh, asking Him for fresh faith, perhaps for a word that might sustain you in the waiting.

RESPOND

Ponder the reality that faith brings God pleasure, so much so that He waits to reward those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). Read the following promises and write prayers of thanksgiving to Him in light of them:

Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. Romans 4:20-21

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. 2 Corinthians 1:20

For this is contained in Scripture: "BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." 1 Peter 2:6

A CHRISTMAS ACTIVITY

Make today a day to practice listening to the Lord. In your moments of greatest busyness, plan a timeout where you simply stop, acknowledge God's presence, ask Him to speak to whatever situation you face at that time, and then wait and listen. You might be surprised at all He has to say!





READ

Luke 2:36-38, Matthew 5:6, John 6:35

Her name was Anna and she was the talk of the town. First there was that temple insanity. Day in and day out she'd practically lived there for as long as anyone could remember. Some claimed her pretense of piety had gone on for decades, ever since her husband died, leaving her a young widow. Praying and fasting, fasting and praying, ignoring priests and prophets, even wellborn Pharisees, who wagged their heads at her foolishness.

And now...well it was beyond belief. Just like that, they say she flew out of the temple laughing like a lunatic, cornering anyone crazy enough to listen to her babbling about some baby destined to be the Messiah. What in the world had gotten into her?

I find the story of Anna fascinating— three short verses that resonate with joy and intrigue. Luke tells us little about this woman he calls a prophetess, except that she'd been widowed at a young age and had given herself to temple prayer and fasting ever since. She was most likely well into her 60's or 70's at the time of her encounter with the infant Messiah.

HER LIFE BECAME A TESTIMONY OF A PARADOX ALL
CHRIST'S LOVERS EVENTUALLY LEARN, WHICH IS THAT WE
CAN BOTH HUNGER FOR THE BREAD OF LIFE AND BE FILLED
BY HIS TENDER TOUCH, ALL AT THE SAME TIME.



The question that I can't get away from when I read of this woman's devotion, is why? What was it that kept Anna coming back day after day, praying... fasting... trusting that what she was doing was not in vain, though it had been centuries since Malachi had uttered the final prophecy about the Christ to come? Perhaps in the beginning it was a way to heal her heart at her husband's loss, but wouldn't a year or two have been sufficient to assuage her grief? And surely any ill-placed religious zeal or efforts to earn God's approval with her piety would have petered out long before as well.



The answer might be found in bit of this woman's heritage. Anna's father's name was Phanuel, derived from the altar Jacob built after wrestling all night with an angel. The name meant I have seen God face to face and I have lived (Genesis 32:30). Because names held great significance in the Hebrew culture, family members would have known well the meaning behind that of their patriarch's. I can just imagine Phanuel holding little Anna on his lap and telling her the story of their forefather Jacob; of how he wrestled with God all night, refusing to let go until he blessed him. Perhaps Phanuel related the tale to the entire family with great dramatic flair, unfolding the details of the interaction that was so intense it put Jacob's hip out of joint, causing him to limp for the rest of his life.

I have seen God face to face and I have lived. The meaning behind Anna's father's name could well have been a seed that was planted in her young heart, captivating her with the idea that God in heaven sometimes peeled back the veil and allowed mere mortals to encounter Him and be transformed in the process. Perhaps in her most quiet moments as a child, she'd pondered that thought and prayed that one day she too could experience a divine visitation. Then, when she lost her husband at such a young age, her grief may have become like oil thrown upon the flame of desire, igniting her passion to see God like never before.

But what had caused it to continue burning so brightly those tens of years later when Mary and Joseph arrived in the Temple that day? I believe it was because there in the shadow of the holy of holies, Anna had tasted of God's presence and knew from experience that nothing else would ever satisfy her soul. Her life became a testimony of a paradox all Christ's lovers eventually learn, which is that we can both hunger for the Bread of Life and be filled by His tender touch, all at the same time. This is, in fact, our very destiny – to be both satisfied and yet driven by desire for more of Him, until the day we too see Jesus face to face.

So as we look at this unique moment in the Christmas narrative, let us remember the woman who wouldn't let go, the saint whose hunger for God shaped her entire life. May her zeal inspire us with fresh faith once again that God is a rewarder of those who seek Him. And with each foretaste of glory He imparts, let us be reminded that our hunger for Him is a promise of a greater fulfillment yet to come.

REFLECT

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RESPOND

Now write a prayer of affirmation based upon these words of Jesus: He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.

A CHRISTMAS ACTIVITY

As you snack on Christmas goodies and prepare for special meals – shopping, cooking etc. – think about the meaning of food and what Jesus wants it to teach you about His relationship with you.





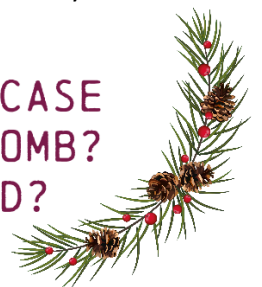
READ (Please see following pages for Family Version)

Luke 2:1-7, Isaiah 9:6-7, Isaiah 53:3-11, Revelation 4:1-11

Have you ever taken the time to think deeply about what happened when the Almighty entered into the womb of a woman? When the Son of God became the Son of man -- flesh and blood, bones and joints, muscle and sinew? I love the picture Daniel Fuller paints in his book, *Unity of the Bible*, in which he describes the incarnation as a winding staircase, stretching from the glory of heaven down into a battered and broken planet. While God's redemptive plan was in His heart before the foundation of the world, humankind's first glimpse of it is in the stable that reeked of animal dung and moldy straw, where a newborn babe lay shivering in the chill of night, vulnerable in every possible way.

To me, the most stunning thing about Christ's descent from glory was His choice to let go of His role in sharing equality with God. Though in essence He retained His Deity, in experience He chose to give up His rights as God, meaning He had to depend upon His heavenly Father for power or wisdom or guidance or even sustenance. What must it have been like for the all-sufficient Son of God to know that in coming to earth He would be at the mercy of weak and sinful human beings? Can you see Him there, standing on that staircase just before the Spirit placed Him in Mary's womb? What kinds of thoughts went through His mind?

**CAN YOU SEE HIM THERE, STANDING ON THAT STAIRCASE
JUST BEFORE THE SPIRIT PLACED HIM IN MARY'S WOMB?
WHAT KINDS OF THOUGHTS WENT THROUGH HIS MIND?**



From that manger in Bethlehem, Christ's descent from glory soon continued. His parents became vagabonds, settling as strangers in a foreign land where their livelihood depended upon Egyptians who probably detested them. Later Mary and Joseph would establish their family in Nazareth, a place of derision for its lack of any distinguishing mark, even among the Jews. As Jesus prepared for public ministry in the wilderness fast, the god of the world He'd come to save taunted Him for His fall from power, daring Him to reclaim His rights as the Almighty. He refused, and the descent went on.



For the next three years the Son of Man sought to do His Father's will while sleeping in fields and hills, looking to benevolent women for financial support, seeking solace through prayer in the wee hours of His dark and lonely nights. Scorned by heathens, rejected by the religious elite, living under constant threat of death, the drumbeat of descent pounded out its rhythm day after difficult day.

Down and down and down the winding staircase Jesus went, as His closest followers denied and abandoned Him upon His arrest. Then mocked, spat upon, slapped, and scourged to a bloody pulp, He was paraded through the streets like a criminal and hung to die, while His earthly mother looked on in despair. And for six hours on Calvary, the Son of Man descended to the very depths of depravity as He took on the sins of the world, leading to the most painful predicament of all – a severing of relationship with His Father.

This is just a smattering of the descent from glory that awaited the baby Jesus when He entered our world. We will perhaps only grasp the scope of it when we see Him one day on His throne, radiant in splendor, attended by angels and worshipped by saints from every tribe and tongue. But there could be no better time to ponder such a thing than on Christmas Day, as we celebrate our Lord's birth.

So as we read the Christmas story and exchange our gifts and share our meals, let us take time to remember what it really cost to redeem fallen humankind. May we muse on that manger scene through the prism of glory, where our King reigns over all; His beauty filling the temple of the heavens and splashing out across our world in wonders we are privileged to behold. And as we do, let us bow and worship the One who planned that descent to make us His own long before this world was formed. Worthy are you Oh Lord.

REFLECT

Today is one of celebration, family, sharing, and fellowship. Take a few minutes to give thanks for all of these things as you ponder that staircase. See Jesus going down it step by step. Read the following passage slowly and prayerfully, asking the Spirit to give you fresh revelation of what it meant for Jesus to humble Himself and become a man.

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)

RESPOND

Now read the rest of the passage, turning into a prayer of praise and worship for the King of kings and Lord of lords whose birth we celebrate today.

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

A CHRISTMAS ACTIVITY

ENJOY THE DAY!





Parents: Make sure you have a picture sheet for each child. Read through the following devotional ahead of time and have Scriptures ready to read. You can read the commentary aloud or devise your own to move through the story.

Introduction

What do you think it must have been like for the Almighty God to come to live as a person—eating and sleeping and dreaming and playing—just like you and I do every day? One man wrote a book where he described Jesus coming to earth like he was walking down a staircase that stretched all the way from the glory of heaven where everything was perfect, to our world, where there is a lot of suffering and sickness and pain. (*point out staircase on picture sheet*). Today we will celebrate Christ's birth in a unique way—by journeying with Jesus through some key moments as he moved down that staircase. (*Explain to children that they will be looking for the right picture when you tell them, and will draw a line from it to the number on the staircase*)

READ: Philippians 2:6-8

First Moment

The Bible tells us that God planned for Jesus to come to earth even before he created the world. Then he waited and waited and waited until just the right time and put things into place so that Jesus could be born as a baby, just like you were.

Have children point out picture and draw a line to #1 on the staircase

Discuss: Can you see Jesus there, standing on that staircase just before he let himself become small in his mommy's tummy? What kinds of thoughts went through His mind? Was he excited? How did Jesus feel about the journey he was about to go on; about coming to earth as a person?

READ: Luke 2:1-7

Second Moment

Our first glimpse of Jesus as he enters the world is in a stable that reeked of animal dung and moldy straw, where he lay shivering in the chill of night, with only his young parents nearby. Discuss: Can you imagine what it felt like to be there after you'd just been living in heaven? What would you say was the worst part? What kinds of thoughts went through His mind? Was he excited? How did Jesus feel about the journey he was about to go on; about coming to earth as a person?



Have children point out picture and draw a line to #2 on the staircase

SING: Away in a Manger

From that manger in Bethlehem, Jesus went further down that staircase as his parents became vagabonds, settling as strangers in a foreign land where they had to get jobs from Egyptians who probably detested them. Later Mary and Joseph would establish their family in Nazareth, a town no one really or respected.

READ: Philippians 2:6-8

Third Moment

When Jesus grew up, he went out into the wilderness to fast and pray for 40 days. Satan, his enemy, showed up there and taunted Him, daring Him to show everyone that he was God and could do anything he wanted. Jesus refused and moved on down that staircase.

Have children draw a line from picture to #3 on the staircase

For the next three years Jesus went around helping people—healing them, feeding them, showing them compassion, and doing lots of miracles. On many lonely nights, he probably slept out in the fields and hills, praying to his heavenly father. Every day he did exactly what God wanted him to do, but some people didn't like it. They made fun of him and rejected him and threatened to kill him.

Fourth Moment

Down and down and down the winding staircase Jesus went until one day he was arrested. His closest friends ran away or pretended they didn't know him. One of them even betrayed him with a kiss.

Have children draw a line from the picture to #4

Discuss: What do you think Jesus wanted to do when people were so mean to him? Have you ever been treated badly by a friend you really liked? How did that feel?

READ: Isaiah 53:3-7

Fifth Moment

People made fun of Jesus, spit at him and slapped him, beat him with a whip and then marched him through the streets like a criminal. Finally, they hung him on a cross to die. For six hours Jesus descended to the lowest place possible as He took on the sins of the world.

Have children draw a line from the picture to #5

Sixth Moment

But we know the story didn't end there. Jesus rose from the dead and ascended back to heaven. We will probably only understand what it really felt like for Jesus to go down that staircase when we see him one day, sitting on his throne, radiant in splendor, attended by angels and worshipped by saints from every tribe and tongue.

Have children draw a line from the picture to #6 on the staircase

READ: Revelation 4:1-11 (or for shorter reading, 1-3,11).

Spend a few minutes having each person offer a word of thanksgiving for the special blessings we have this Christmas because of what Jesus did.

SING: Joy to the World



