

PREPARE

REFLECTIONS ON ADVENT



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Foreword

This Advent devotional series was born out of an assignment for one of my Master's degree classes. The assignment was for eight Advent devotions based on the spiritual disciplines. However, I wanted it to coincide with the Advent season, so I invited our church staff to be involved.

Richard Foster's landmark book, *Celebration of Discipline*, was the source for the idea and does an excellent job of explaining the spiritual disciplines, so I won't revisit his work here. As Foster so beautifully describes, there are twelve disciplines that have become commonly accepted over the course of Christian history through the influences of Old and New Testament worship, Christ himself, and other spiritual giants throughout church history. Read more about these in the Introduction.

For each devotional, you will see who wrote it and which discipline is being addressed. Our desire with this book is to provide you with a resource to strengthen your spiritual disciplines while deepening your walk with the Lord during the Advent and Christmas season. We also believe that our community of believers here at Midland Valley Community will benefit by corporately walking through Advent with a shared resource and common theme. The book starts on the first Sunday in Advent and concludes on Christmas Day, so we encourage you to read one per day across the month leading up to Christmas.

Thanks for participating! I hope you find it as fulfilling to read as it was to create. With seven different writers, you will experience a diversity of styles and approaches. Enjoy that diversity—it makes the Kingdom beautiful. Thanks to Bryan Easley for helping me with editing and graphic design. And, thanks to my colleagues in ministry for contributing their thoughts and insights through their writing. We're all hoping for an "A" in my class!

Pastor Michael McAdory, General Editor
Advent 2021
Graniteville, South Carolina

Introduction

This devotional series invites you to reflect on Advent through the lens of 12 spiritual disciplines. These disciplines are simply tools to help us connect and experience more deeply what God himself has already done: *revealed himself to us*. The goal for Advent and spiritual disciplines is not to earn God's favor or work our way into his good graces. Rather, it is to have a life-changing, transformational encounter with the living God whose story we focus on for the next four weeks. We can never exhaust the depths of who God is, what he is like, or what we have still to learn no matter how many Christmases we have celebrated or how much we've studied the Bible!

In *Celebration of Discipline*, first printed in 1978, Richard Foster grouped twelve common Christian practices into three movements of the Spirit: **Inward** (*meditation, prayer, fasting, study*), **Outward** (*simplicity, solitude, submission, service*), and **Corporate** (*confession, worship, guidance, celebration*). We are deeply appreciative of Foster's emphasis on these as movements of the Holy Spirit in both our individual lives as well as in us collectively as a church community.

Because we share God's image, we are creatures of structure and habit. We are designed to live well-ordered lives. We relate to and acknowledge God rightly through regular *worship, prayer, and fasting*. Scripture calls us to surrender and fully obey him (*submission*), to live in loving *service* of others, and to *celebrate* God and his deeds. We gain wisdom, maturity, understanding, and deeper knowledge—as Paul always prayed for his flock—through *study, meditating* on Scripture (Psalm 1), *confession*, and learning from the mature *guidance* of others (think the Proverbs or Timothy and Paul). We experience greater joy, peace, contentment, and capacity for loving others when our lives are marked by *simplicity* (rather than being owned by our money and possessions) and the renewal gained from regular sabbath-taking (or *solitude*).

As the culture around us becomes more hostile to Christianity, it's more crucial than ever that we live deeply rooted lives together rather than in the superficiality that far too often marks the church in America. May we hear God's call to deeper things in Him this Advent season!

—Dr. Bryan Easley

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Day 1 In Tune With His Heart



Read Luke 2:33–40



Prayer



[Watch BeBe Winans – “This is My Christmas Prayer”](#)

In this passage in Luke, we meet an obscure character named Anna. Mary and Joseph were presenting Jesus in the temple for consecration before the Lord. While there, they have this brief encounter with Anna. We know very little about her. All we’re told is that she was committed to the disciplines of worship, fasting, and prayer. That’s a pretty impressive resumé for someone who appears only in passing! Yet, the mention of these disciplines is noteworthy.

In the early Church, Advent was a season of expectation and preparation; at first, for the baptism of new believers; then later tied to Christmas and the coming of the Messiah. It was a time of prayer, fasting, and penance. Our church here at Midland Valley has a big vision of “Bringing Christ and People Together.” How much more effective might our church ministry be during the holiday season if we were to wrap our Advent and Christmas celebrations in the paper of prayer with the bow of fasting?


Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his book, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, “If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is quite necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray. The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart.” This is a powerful statement about the motives of our prayers. When our hearts are in tune with his heart, we aren’t praying for God to reveal his will—we are *praying his will*.

What if our church collectively prayed this way during this Advent season? With the commitment of Anna and the motives described by Bonhoeffer, imagine how transformative this Advent season could be for us as individuals and as a church!

—*Pastor Mike McAdory*

Day 2

Follow the Light

 *Read Matthew 2:1-2; John 1:4-5*

 *Guidance*

 *[Watch “Follow the Light” Worship Together](#)*

My two-and-a-half-year-old slipped away while I was fixing something on the platform. Only one door to the hallway was open. Could she have gone out it? I started calling her name, but there was no answer. Louder and more frequently. Nothing.

We had a song that Melinda made up for our three kids. Hers was “Mia Grace is the sweetest girl I know...” We usually sang it together, so, with anxiety, I sang the first line and waited. With relief, I soon heard back, “Mommy and Daddy love her so,” revealing her hiding spot.

The Gospel of Matthew records the visit of the Magi. God placed “his star” in the sky to lead them to the Christ-child. For many years, our church has had the vision to be a lighthouse over the Valley—a beacon in our community. And now, our Mission Field lights are literally lighting up the area sometimes five nights a week.


It’s more than that, though. John 1:4-5 says, “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.” God created light. He was and is light. Jesus became *the light* of the world. Through Jesus, God is drawing all people to himself. What a privilege we have that he is using this campus on a hill as part of his mission. Like a big arrow in the sky pointing to way to the baby in Bethlehem, His light is compelling!

Melinda’s lullaby was a nighttime ritual that became the path to Mia Grace’s whereabouts (in the light booth). In the same way, God’s light is good news of great joy. It is a light bursting through the darkness and still penetrating hearts today. Let’s follow Him. Let’s lead others to Him.

—*Pastor Mike McAdory*

Day 3 As You Have Said

 *Read Luke 1:26-39*

 *Submission*

 *[Watch "Be It Unto Me" Brentwood Benson Sing Joy](#)*

Sometimes we look at the hardships in our Christian walk rather than seeing the joy in humble submission to our heavenly Father. We need a shift in our thinking, a reframing of our mindset.

I have several favorite Christmas passages and this is definitely one of them. Verse 38 grabs my attention. Listen to Mary's heart: "I am the Lord's servant...may it be to me as you have said." If an angel made an appearance in my house, I'd definitely have some serious goosebumps, be more than a little alarmed, and would want hardcore evidence this was the real deal, hoping I hadn't eaten bad mushrooms.

There are a couple of good lessons here. Clearly, Mary has a relationship with God. That seems to be a necessary precursor for understanding who the messenger is as a divine servant and advocate. That relationship also allows Mary to believe this preposterous news in full obedience. Maybe in today's language, a girl might put it this way: "I'm yours, Lord...whatever you say!"

Here's a simple definition of submission: giving up my need or right to have things my way in deference to someone else. Whatever your definition for submission, it should include Mary's picture next to it. Submission to God should ideally not include reluctance or hesitation.

God had a plan using Mary to carry the Christ-child so the Word could become flesh. Through submission and obedience, could it be that he has a plan for us to carry the risen Christ out to a lost world? The answer is a resounding *yes*! Let our answer always be: "I am the Lord's servant...may it be to me as you have said."

—*Pastor Mike McAdory*

Day 4

Worshippers the Father Seeks

 Read Luke 1:39–45

 Worship

 [Watch Tori Kelly – “What a Beautiful Name”](#)

What is worship? Stop and think for a moment about your definition. Is it the music portion of the church service? Is it synonymous with praise? Is there more to worship than Sunday morning? Yes to all of those and more. Daniel Block writes, in *For the Glory of God*, that “true worship involves reverential human acts of submission and homage before the divine Sovereign in response to his gracious revelation of himself and in accord with his will.” Scriptures such as John 4:23 tells us that God seeks true worshippers who “will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth.” Paul urges his fellow believers in Romans 12:1, “in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” Notice anything about those verses? Music is not mentioned. Worship is more than that.


In Luke 1, Mary comes to visit her pregnant relative, Elizabeth. Her yet-to-be-born son, John the Baptist, recognizing he was in the presence of the Messiah, responds with praise *inside her belly!* Elizabeth likewise worshipped with an exhortation of praise. There was no indication of singing, but she and her unborn son nonetheless worshipped.

So, what is worship? It is certainly singing praise and giving thanks to God. It is also serving, praying, giving, and engaging with the Father in many other forms. What ways in your own setting today can you worship God? How might you find new, simple ways to express your wonder, awe, thanks, and love for who He is? This Advent season, let us come before the Lord with a full-bodied, fully surrendered heart, soul, and mind in worship of Him!

—Pastor Mike McAdory

Day 5

Practice Celebrating

 *Read Luke 2:8–20*

 *Celebration*

 *[Watch Voctave, “Joy to the World \(For Unto Us a Child is Born\)”](#)*

Brother Baker would slowly walk the aisles, cry, gently wave his folded hanky, and greet a few folks along the rows—if you were lucky enough to have an end seat. (I once had a young lady say she wanted to change seats because she wanted a hug from Brother Baker.) Every now and then, he would try to testify. I can still hear him: “Michael, I just want to say how good my Lord is...” Somewhere in there, he would start crying, struggling to express himself through the tears, and then usually just sit down. It was his celebrative response to what God had done and was doing in his life. Luke 2:8–20 has several expressions and actions of celebration announcing the birth of baby Jesus.

“I bring you good news of great joy” (v.10)

“great company of the heavenly host...praising God” (v.13)

“Glory to God in the highest” (v.14)

“So they hurried off” (v.16)

“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God” (v.20)

How do you celebrate? No shaming intended here, but how does our celebration differ from event to event? The big game? Awards day at school? Graduation? Salvations at our altars? Baptisms? Powerful, moving experiences of the Holy Spirit in worship? My celebrations differ from one event to the next. I have to ask myself *why*?

I want to be a person who actively practices celebrating in my life and the lives of others (glass half full). There are good reasons for this. We should celebrate what Christ has done for us. Psychologically, it’s good for us and those we’re around. Our joy even makes others curious. This Advent season, rather than focusing on negatives, celebrate the positives, the wins, and all the good things in life. It’s a better way to live!

—Pastor Mike McAdory

Day 6 Slow Down

 *Read Luke 1:26-39*

 *Meditation*

 *[Watch Sisters – “Your Presence for Christmas”](#)*

Have you ever received news that shook you to the core? News you didn't run out and tell everyone just yet—but where you had to take some time to reflect and process? I wonder if that's what Mary felt like in the moments after the angel left having just announced she would give birth to a baby to be called Jesus, Son of the Most High! Can you imagine? Maybe she sat there for a minute to gather herself. Who wouldn't after being visited by an angel?

We don't know how much time passed between when the angel left and when Mary hurried to see Elizabeth, but we hear Mary say, “I am the Lord's servant...May it be to me as you have said.” Let that sink in for a minute. A very real angel visits Mary and, knowing she's a virgin, tells her she will have a baby—and not just any baby. But THE baby the world has been waiting for! The angel further tells Mary that Elizabeth, her PrimeTimer relative, is also going to have a baby. Every detail of this news is unfathomable.

In my own life there are times I just need to sit and think about the messages I've heard from God through songs, preaching, prayer, or reading his word. A simple definition of Christian meditation is “the ability to hear God's voice and obey his word” (Foster, 1998). Christmas can be noisy. Perhaps this season might be a good time to slow down and listen for the still small voice of God who is trying to share a message with us. May it be so with us. Speak Lord, for we are listening.

—*Pastor Mike McAdory*

Day 7

Do You Know Him?

✚ Read Luke 1:26-39

🕒 Submission

🎥 [Watch Pentatonix - "Mary, Did You Know"](#)

Remember this song, “Mary, Did You Know?” My first response to the song's title question is always, YES, because the angel told her. But the song's powerful phrases capture my imagination: “Did you know that your baby boy will calm a storm with his hand” or “Did you know this child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you.” Those questions amaze me in how they remind us about the power of our God.

We don't know much about Mary except that she was a virgin and likely a teenager. We know that she was “highly favored” and that “the Lord was with her.” Even without a stunning resumé, God used her. Sweet, little Mary who kept to herself and wasn't a big “playmaker” was invited by the Creator of the universe to change the world. I think the reason God chose her was because of her willingness. When Mary heard God's plan for her life, her response was simply, “I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” Mary simply said *yes* to her Lord with no conditions whatsoever.


Where are you in your life right now? How much of yourself have you truly surrendered? Are you living the truth that “your life is not your own” and that you've been “bought with a price”? Is there something that you are missing out on because you won't let Him lead? I love the way Paul put this in Romans 14:7-8: *we don't live or die for ourselves but the Lord*. Not kind of a Sunday Christian. Not kind of a when-it's-convenient. But a full-on, holding nothing back, “my life does not belong to me but to Him” kind of commitment.

We have a Messiah, Jesus, Savior of the world. He walked on water. He gave sight to the blind and healed the lame. He came and died to make us new. He calmed a raging storm with just his words. He fed over 5,000 people with a tiny bit of bread and fish. He does the miraculous. And He has amazing plans for your life! Do you know Him?

—Pastor Mike O'Hair

Day 8

The Devil Made Me Do It

 Read *Philippians 2:10-11, 1 John 1:9*

 Confession

 [*Watch Hannah Kerr - "Emmanuel"*](#)

Our Head of School was out of town so I was acting principal when the office assistant called me with a problem. I walked into the building to a blaring alarm and the fire department on their way. This student, who shall remain anonymous (he still attends our church), was waiting in the office. Within seconds, I was giving it to him. "WHY IN THE WORLD would you pull a fire alarm???"

"The devil made me do it," he offered.

It was all I could do to keep from falling out laughing. They say confession is good for the soul. That day it saved him and gave me a great laugh.

The word 'confess' has different meanings. One definition is to confess faith in Jesus, as in *Philippians 2:10-11*: "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." Another definition is an admittance of wrongdoing, like that found in *1 John 1:9*: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins."

Jesus was born to forgive our sins—God's plan for redemption. Confession means we must admit our sinfulness, have genuine sorrow, and a transformative change in heart and behavior. The root of sinfulness is evil or, a sin-nature that lives in us. So, that student's answer wasn't wrong. Ideally, we ignore the devil when, in whatever form, he's tempting us to do something. When we fail, we confess and ask for forgiveness, not only with God but with other people. Do you have any unconfessed sin in your life? Make it right today!

(There is more to the fire alarm story. Let's chat over lunch about the lessons we learned!)

—*Pastor Mike McAdory*

Day 9

Can't Have One Without the Other

 *Joel 2:12*

 *Fasting*

 [*Watch Matt & Savannah Shaw - "Breath of Heaven"*](#)

Fasting is an important part of my relationship with God. It may not always be easy, but I always find that closeness I desire. I also get an answer to prayer. Maybe a *yes*, *no* or *wait*, but there's always an answer. Of the many things I love about fasting, one would be the anticipation that comes with it. The anticipation of the time that I have set aside daily, the denial of self, and awaiting the answer to my specific need.

Fasting during the Advent Season is all about this sense of anticipation. The waiting for the miracle that would change the world forever. It's a stark reminder of how desperate our need is for God to do something about the condition of the world and human hearts. It's about the longing and anticipation of awaiting the Christ-child, knowing this was no ordinary pregnancy. And this child would be no ordinary child.


For most of us, fasting may be uncommon in our daily routine but daily prayer is not. Just as Jesus came to earth in a most unordinary fashion, worshipping God through fasting along with prayer brings us to a higher level of closeness to Him. Fasting draws us into a very intimate time in our relationship with God as we realize more deeply how He alone fulfills our deepest need.


I love the visuals in Scripture of the night of Christ's birth. It was a very intimate setting which was interrupted only by those coming to worship Him. During this Advent season, open your hearts to a deeper time of intimacy with Christ. Allow Him to fill you with His peace while you worship Him with your whole heart and mind.

—Pastor Pennye Duncan

Day 10

Be Prepared

 *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

 *Study*

 *[Watch “When I Think Upon Christmas \(Live\)” Hillsong Worship](#)*

Throughout my military career, my training and study helped me succeed as a soldier. I studied the tactics, maneuvers, and strategies necessary to be prepared to face any enemy or adversarial situation I might encounter. Over the years these studies served me well in dealing with all kinds of difficult situations and circumstances.

As Christ followers, we, too, are fighting against a well-armed enemy. One who comes to “steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). He’s a ruthless opposing force. To be prepared to victoriously fight that battle, we must equip ourselves by studying the Word of God.


Paul instructed Timothy that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Scripture teaches us how to handle every situation we may be faced with. God’s Word equips us for the battle and instructs us how to overcome this enemy when he comes. It helps us to understand the tactics of the enemy; the maneuvers necessary to evade, fight and rid our lives of that enemy; and how to tap into the power and authority of the only force greater than the enemy, God Himself.


By studying Scripture, we can be vigilant and ready for the attack and deeply assured of winning the battle! The study of The Word of God is a lifelong process and something one must never take lightly. Scripture promises us the enemy will attack. Get prepared. Be ready to fight.


—*Pastor Wayne Cheselka*

Day 11

Worship the King

 *Luke 2:8-20*

 *Worship*

 [*Red Rocks Worship - "A Christmas Medley"*](#)

Worship and praise are different but complement each other. Praise is the admiration and approval of God. Worship is the expression of humility and surrender from a place of deep love and respect for God. Worship involves receiving and giving something. We receive the Spirit of God when we have real faith in our hearts that Jesus is our Savior. Once we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, a supernatural relationship begins which pours out into the community around us.


A daily relationship with God produces what Scripture calls the Fruit of the Spirit (lots of agricultural farming metaphors in the Bible). The idea of fruit here brings to mind what Jesus said in John 15, that those who abide in him will bear much fruit. Such fruitfulness brings forth many forms of worship that glorify God: serving, giving, loving, praising. We receive wisdom and discernment and start recognizing true blessings and miracles. We continually testify about what God has done for us through our thoughts, words, and actions.


Luke's Christmas narrative describes the angels worshipping and the shepherds rejoicing at the birth of Christ: "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told." They were testifying to what God had done. Let us, too, worship Christ, the newborn King this Advent season as we focus on the great things that God is doing!

—*Pastor Chris Ward*

Day 12

Don't Miss the Moment

 2 Timothy 3:16-17

 Simplicity

 [Watch Lauren Daigle - "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas"](#)

Christmas can be a rat race. Hectic last-minute shopping. Worrying whether the gifts will arrive on time. Struggling to find the perfect gift for that one person. Decorating the house (including checking every single bulb on a strand of lights to find that one shorting out the rest). Up late, wrapping present after present after present. Or preparing for your extended family to take over your house for the day. It's easy to get lost in the busyness of Christmas and to miss what's most important.

We see this happen in Luke's story of Mary and Martha. Jesus comes for a visit and a meal. Martha spent her time running around cooking, serving dinner, and cleaning. These were all very good things, but "busy" things. Meanwhile, Mary sat in the company of Jesus. When Martha asked Jesus to tell her to help with work, Jesus replied, "Mary has chosen what is better."


Jesus is telling us to live in the moment. It is great to be a willing servant like Martha, making sure that all the right stuff is done. But don't do it at the expense of a missed opportunity to have a real conversation with a family member you don't see often or to see your child's face light up because they got exactly what they asked for. It's not about all the things we must do, the list of tasks we have check off. Instead, it's about being present in the ordinary holiness of the moment.

This year don't miss out on the better. Take the opportunity to enjoy the time you have with friends and family. Take time not to worry about the things you must do, but to enjoy the people you get to be with. Be present where you are, be present with the people. Embrace what is better. Have yourself a merry little Christmas. Let your heart be light!

—Pastor Mike O'Hair

Day 13

Enjoy the Beauty of God

 *Reading: Luke 1:5-25*

 *Solitude*

 [*Watch Chris Tomlin – “Noel” \(Live\) ft. Lauren Daigle*](#)

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, he and his wife Elizabeth were self-proclaimed PrimeTimers. Sadly, they were never able to have children. In their culture, this was a source of shame and disgrace. They had done everything right, loving and serving God. Yet, this was a prayer that went unanswered...or, so they thought.

Behind the scenes, God's plan of redemption was being carried out. One part of that plan was the birth of John the Baptist—the forerunner for Jesus Christ. Curiously, Luke records that after Elizabeth became pregnant, she went into seclusion for five months. Why? This stumps me. Various scholars have different suggestions as to the reasons.


My mind wanders to our recent quarantines and the resulting feelings of isolation and loneliness. I don't think this is the case with Elizabeth. Maybe she was resting and preparing for what could be a taxing pregnancy at her age? What we do know is that she and her husband were upright and honorable in God's sight. Her thanksgiving for answered prayers might provide a clue that her solitude was not a bad thing but rather an elective act of worship and reverence to God for what He had done.

I can't help but wonder if the solitude was her sacred response to the overwhelming joy of what God had done for her. There are times when our most appropriate response to the clear work of God in our lives is to steal away from the noise and worship Him in the beauty of solitude. Find some of those moments of solitude during Advent this year to intentionally focus on who God is and all He has done.

—*Pastor Mike McAdory*

Day 14

Ponder These Things

 *Luke 2:16-20*

 *Meditation*

 *[Watch Shane & Shane – “Be Thou my Vision \(Lord You Are\)”](#)*

When you hear “meditation,” you might picture the crossed-legged eastern guru, eyes closed, humming with his inverted fingers touching. The goal in eastern meditation is to empty the mind and become one with the essential energy of the universe. To recognize that true enlightenment is escaping the illusion of the non-existent self.

In contrast, God made us as rational, thinking, embodied beings, with distinct personalities. Curiosity, imagination, questioning, a hunger to know: these attributes of our Creator are stamped into our humanness. We were purposefully made for intimate fellowship and communion with the God whose image we bear. A God that communicates, that desires to share himself and be known, ready to guide, instruct, counsel, and encourage. The God who invites us to grow in wisdom, knowledge, and truth. The aim of meditation for the Christian is to encounter the living God so as to live constantly in his life and presence.


I’m intrigued by these simple words about Mary in the Christmas story after the events of the nativity and arrival of the shepherds and magi. Having observed these miraculous events, Mary “pondered these things in her heart.” They captured her attention, a fact now recorded for all human history in Scripture. Psalms 1:2 describes this as meditating on God’s law (or word and deeds) day and night.

This Advent, stop to see the things God has done and is doing around us with eyes of awe and wonder. Move past just reading Scripture to check off a daily devotional (if you do that). Spend time letting your imagination and curiosity take you deeper into the majestic mystery of the Word made Flesh this season! Ponder these things. Let your mind be occupied with questions and wonderings even as you are about the ordinary routines of your day. For the deeper we go into who He is, the greater we find our own lives and experiences day by day.


—Pastor Bryan Easley

Day 15

Living in Favor Instead of Fear

 *Luke 2:19-37*

 *Study*

 [*Watch The Petersens - "What Child Is This?"*](#)

The Virgin Birth of Jesus is a core tenet of Christian doctrine. It's easy at Christmas to take this supernatural phenomenon for granted without carefully considering what happened. As the Nativity scene plays out in Luke's beautiful account of our Savior's birth, "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." The language here indicates a very reflective investigation, or study, on Mary's part, in order to process this Immaculate Conception, and subsequent Virgin Birth.


Note what Mary "treasured up" and "pondered." An angel of the Lord told her that she had been chosen by God for this extraordinary role. Wow! What would you have done? Mary's reaction is understandable in its humanness: she was "greatly troubled" and wondered what was going on. Perhaps you can relate to various spiritual impartations as the Holy Spirit nudges in your heart and mind from time to time. Mary did not overreact to this message, but pressed in further to get clarity and direction. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God." Details follow with incredible specificity: you will be with child, you will give birth to a son, his name is to be Jesus, He is the Son of God, His kingdom will never end! I love Mary's very realistic response: "How will this be? I am a virgin?"


Life is a journey, a process. When we do not understand what God is doing, spend time in prayer and study. God has the answers to our questions. The angel said to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you...For nothing is impossible with God." Over the next nine months, Mary no doubt "pondered" (intently studied) these things. As she saw this promise come to pass, she gladly "treasured up" all these things. Her mind was renewed and her life transformed forever! God has promises for all of us today. Let's study them carefully and we can be renewed and transformed likewise.


—*Pastor David Gallimore*

Day 16

What Do You Want for Christmas?

 *Luke 2:25-30*

 *Prayer*

 *[Watch For King & Country - "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"](#)*

As little children, we loved being asked what we wanted for Christmas. We'd recite a long list of things we longed for: toys, trinkets, electronic gadgets galore. Everything we wanted was all about our selfish desires. Over and over, we repeated our requests in hopes that Christmas morning we would awaken to find our dreams come true.


Too often, our prayer lives are just like this, our focus dominated by what we perceive to be our greatest needs and wants. Prayer becomes rote and routine. We use enough Bible words to sound spiritual and take pride in how much time we spend daily in our devotions. It's like we put our order in at the fast-food drive through and then demand our food in a hurry! And in that, we become the subject of our own prayers. Give me what I want!

At its core, prayer should be objective, directed to Almighty God, a process resulting in our transformation rather than our gratification. The story of Simeon in Luke 2 is a perfect example of prayer. Simon, like many Jews, had been waiting his whole life with the expectation that the Messiah would come any day. In prayer, the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simon that he would see the Christ before his death. That day, in the Temple, Simon stands holding the fulfillment of God's promises in his arms! He broke out in praise, saying "you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation."

WOW! Talk about getting what you want for Christmas! May our prayers this Advent season reflect a deep inner desire for God's Kingdom to come, and His will to be done, right here, right now, on earth.

—*Pastor David Gallimore*

Day 17 Give It Back

 *John 13:14-15*

 *Service*

 [*Watch Elena Chavez - "The Gift"*](#)

Christmas is filled with a different atmosphere than any other season of the year. People tend to be happier, friendlier, and more generous. Everywhere you go, you'll witness people doing acts of kindness for others. Volunteers ring a bell for donations and the search for the perfect gift is on everyone's mind.

The gift of Christmas came to us many years ago in the form of a baby in Bethlehem. That gift has given hope, offered forgiveness, and the possibility of an eternal reward in Heaven. The perfect gift. Yet with that gift there is a certain expectation. Just as with your "perfect gift," you expect gratitude and maybe a gift in return. For the ultimate gift of a Savior, we are to live in such a way as to be pleasing to Him.


That night with his disciples, Jesus did the unexpected. He wrapped a towel around His waist and performed the work of a servant. Stooping down, He washed the dusty, dirt-covered feet of the disciples. Then he instructed them, "So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other's feet. I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you do."


His example here teaches us to serve others just as He did. Jesus had earlier told the disciples that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve." Like them, we, too, are to serve. This Advent season, learn what Jesus taught and begin a life of service, not just during Christmas, but every day of your life.

—*Pastor Wayne Cheselka*

Day 18

Make Room

 *Luke 2:41-52*

 *Study*

 *[Watch Casting Crowns - "Make Room" featuring Matt Maher](#)*

I cannot fully wrap my mind around Jesus being fully God and fully man, though I believe it entirely! I have so many questions. Some say Jesus voluntarily set aside some of his divine attributes, but does that conflict with him being fully God? I don't think so. But, if he didn't set aside some of his divine ability, why did he get hungry or need rest? Couldn't he satisfy his own need for food and sleep without actually eating and sleeping? Yes, he could. But, he didn't.


Being fully God, Jesus was the Word Incarnate—God in the flesh—and had access to the fullness of God. And yet, we find the twelve-year-old Jesus sitting under the tutelage of the temple teachers listening, learning, understanding, and reflecting with uncommon comprehension of their teachings. When his parents, probably more than a little worried and frustrated, asked why he had bailed on them, Jesus' answer was that he had to be about his Father's business.


If Jesus-as-fully-God was this intentional about learning Scripture, how much more should we attend to our study of the Word? We'll give ourselves to a lot of really good things this season, like family, church, fun parties, gift-giving, and serving. In our busyness, let us not forsake the study of Scripture "so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).


By the way, check out biblegateway.com. It is an incredibly helpful resource with many Bible translations. Compare this passage in the NIV [New International Version] and NKJV [New King James Version].

—Pastor Mike McAdory

Day 19 Are You Listening

 *Matthew 1:20-25*

 *Submission*

 [*Watch Mercy Me - "Word of God Speak"*](#)

I absolutely love the times of silence or quiet worship during our Christmas Eve Service. During those times, I'm unusually relaxed, and my racing thoughts cease for just those brief moments. I could use more of those moments in my life, knowing the results of allowing God to speak to me when I allow my mind to get quiet. I had a great aunt that would often say, "The Lord spoke to me..." and she would go on to share those experiences with me. I dearly loved those conversations.


When faced with a very obvious call from God on my life to go into full time ministry, I immediately did what many in my situation have done. I ran! I ran hard and I ran fast! After months of sheer misery, I went to visit her because she always had the answer to my questions on theological and spiritual matters. I began by asking her why God didn't speak to me in an audible voice as He did to her. I can still see that beautiful smile and those tiny beady eyes as they looked into mine. She simply said, "Darlin', are you listening?" I left knowing that I had been doing all the talking and none of the listening. I couldn't hear God over my own voice. That week, I got alone with God and totally submitted my life to full time ministry as I heard Him boldly call my name and His plan for me.

To this very day, I am in awe as to why He chose me to do His work at this capacity. I encourage you to get alone with God. This song by Mercy Me puts an amazing perspective on submitting ourselves to God. Would you take a few minutes to be quiet and listen? I can promise you will hear His voice when you do!

—*Pastor Pennye Duncan*

Day 20

What Are You Hungry For?

 *Luke 1:46-55*

 *Fasting*

 [*Watch Israel & New Breed - "Christmas Worship Medley"*](#)

Can I be honest with you? Really honest? (Perhaps this is more than a pastor should say to his people!) I think I know you well enough to know that you are a grace-full people. I'm going to tell you this for two reasons: accountability and a challenge for all of us.

I struggle with fasting. Aside from the headaches, hunger pains, and deliriousness (okay, not that, but you get it), I like food...a lot. I like sweets. I like snacks between meals. Fasting isn't easy for me. Maybe that's why I struggle. Generally, I try to do at least one fast every year for Lent—the season of preparation leading up to Easter.


Bible characters who fasted include Moses, Esther, and Daniel. Even the ancient Greeks like Confucius and Plato fasted. Right after his baptism prior to beginning of his public ministry, Jesus went into the wilderness and fasted. Matthew 4:2 tells us that "after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry." Could that be any more understated, Matthew? *He was hungry?* Go figure! And I have trouble giving up social media for Lent. Ouch.

Another moment of honesty: the thought of fasting during Advent is not really appealing. Did I mention I like food and sweets? I'm wondering if part of pondering and celebrating the deeper meaning of Christmas should involve me sacrificing my food intake for spiritual purposes? That's really what fasting is. It definitely is not, "Oops! I missed lunch today... Yea! I fasted!" If Jesus fasted forty days and nights preceding his time of ministry on earth, maybe in the season of expectation (Advent) and preparation for the new year, I should spend some extra time intentionally focused on spiritual things. We fast for Lent. Why not for Advent? It won't be easy, but who's with me?

—*Pastor Mike McAdory*

Day 21

A Hard Confession

 *1 John 1:9; Isaiah 9:6-7*

 *Confession*

 [*Watch Matt Maher – “Lord I Need You”*](#)

A hard confession: we want the wrong things for the wrong reasons. We chase consumer desires. We spend our money on presents for those who give us gifts in return. We spend our time with family and friends out of obligation. We do not know our neighbors. We look at the poor and hungry as if they are the problem. We do not hear the cry of a broken mother whose heart has been hardened. We do not see the orphaned child without hope. We see peace as something owed to us. We think happiness is something we deserve regardless of others. We see Christmas as a holiday burden of finances and a time of personal increase. *Lord forgive us...*

Oh Lord, hear our confession: We confess we have not loved you with our entire heart and that we failed to fulfill your desire for us to love one another. We confess our focus has been on the world and not on the Heavens. We confess we have lost the meaning of Hope, Peace, Joy, Love, and, most of all, the true meaning of Christmas.

THANK YOU, OH LORD, for this reminder of Advent, “The Coming.” Thank you for your Son, Emmanuel, “God with us.” Thank you for HOPE, the coming of the Messiah. Thank you for PEACE, the birth of a Savior who was born in Bethlehem that fulfilled Your promise. Thank you for JOY, even in our brokenness. Thank you for the LOVE You have for us by sending Your one and only Son into the world to save us.

—*Pastor Chris Ward*

Day 22

What Would You Have Done?

 *Matthew 1:20-21*

 *Submission*

 [*Watch 4Him - "What a Strange Way to Save the World"*](#)

One of the most fascinating characters in the Bible is the carpenter Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. We don't really know very much about him. He was obviously much older than his teenage fiancée. He was considered a "righteous" man, which indicates he had status and standing in the civil and religious world of the day. Then, an apparent scandal breaks out: this young girl that he is engaged to is pregnant! To make matters worse...he is NOT the father! What would you have done?

The language used in the original New Testament Greek describing Joseph as a "righteous" man indicates him as one who was completely devoted to the Mosaic Law. He was a good Jew. As such, Joseph would have been obligated by the law to expose Mary's seemingly adulterous activity. This is a serious predicament, with radical consequences. For Jews in the first century, the penalty for adultery was death by stoning. What would you have done?


Even though we know very little about Joseph, we learn a lot about *submission* from his encounter with the angel. He was instructed to keep his vow of marriage to Mary and, then, when the baby was born, to give him a name (the right of the father in Jewish society). Joseph gets the privilege of bestowing the name "Jesus" on the Christ Child and raising him because he submitted to the will of God! It could not have been easy, but he was willing to deny himself (can you imagine the gossip) and do what God told him to do.

Joseph becomes an unsung hero of the Christmas story because of his submission. Let's learn from that this Advent season and not only submit ourselves unto God's will, but to one another.

—*Pastor David Gallimore*

Day 23

What Dreams May Come

 *Luke 2:7-14*

 *Guidance*

 [*Watch Jeremy & Adie Camp - "Give Me Jesus"*](#)

What's the strangest dream you've had? Ever experienced one you were absolutely certain was so real that even after awakening, you still wondered if it had really happened in some way? I don't remember most of my dreams, but my wife often has dreams about stuff happening to our children, usually terrible things involving water! To her chagrin, she tends to dream in vivid detail, so the next morning brings a great sigh of relief when everything turns out to be okay. But what happens when those dreams—whether news of a newborn or terrifying threats against your child—might be divine encounters involving real-life instructions? How would you deal with such a dream? *Did that actually happen?*


Ever notice how much takes place through dreams in the Christmas narrative? Much of the guidance and direction God gives occurs in dreams with angels. And not just the birth announcement. After Jesus's birth, the magi are told in a dream to change their route home so as to avoid King Herod who's plotting to kill the infant king. Likewise, God tells Joseph in dream to take his family and flee to Egypt to escape Herod's hunters. (Interesting sidenote: many converts from Islam and African tribal religions come to faith having seen Christ in a dream.)


As a Nazarene congregation, our Wesleyan-Arminian tradition affirms that God speaks to us through Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. *Experience* here includes subjective personal means such as dreams, the Holy Spirit speaking directly to our minds, or the wisdom and voice of other people. Importantly, we understand Scripture to be the foundation and capstone of God's authority, so any subjective voices must square with Scripture (not vice-versa). But as we reflect on the message and meaning of Advent, let's ask God to guide and direct us in whatever personal, intimate way he may choose...and be open to hearing from God, even if its unexpected, unusual places.

—*Pastor Bryan Easley*

Day 24

A Simple Peace

 *Luke 1:26-38*

 *Simplicity*

 [*Watch Melodie Malone – “Hush” at The Grove*](#)

Although we don't know for certain, many scholars have estimated Mary to be around 14 years old. It would also seem, from what we observe in Scripture and know of the context, that she was probably a simple girl that lived a simple life.

Richard Foster, in *Celebration of Discipline*, writes that “we deceive ourselves if we believe we can possess the inward reality [of simplicity] without it having a profound effect on how we live” (p. 79). In other words, we often live really complicated, busy, hectic lives, and this can be reflected in our attitudes and actions. Don't get me wrong. Not everyone who is busy has a bad attitude. Rather, I think a simple, inner peace and child-like faith can be lived out even on busy days.

How long does it take, though, of living the crazy life until we begin to recognize things may not be going well? Stress. Anxiety. Health problems. Angry at our spouse or kids. If we are not careful, the complexities of life will manifest in ways we don't want.




Which line above is more like your life? I'm pretty sure mine is the one on the left. I wonder which one was most like Mary's? How about Jesus? While Mary's life may have been more complicated than we know, there seems to be a simple, childlike faith that allowed her response to the angel's pronouncement to be, “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Inner peace and simplicity = outward response.

We all have responsibilities and lives to live. May we strive to live them in a way that reflects simplicity and peacefulness which manifests itself in our daily walk.

—*Pastor Mike McAdory*

Day 25

Embrace Obedient Service

 *Luke 1:5-25*

 *Service*

 *Watch [Voctave - "Mary, Did You Know" ft. Mark Lowery](#)*

As a priest, Zechariah regularly fulfilled his responsibilities in the temple. He knew how to do his job well, serving both the Lord and the people. While working at the altar one day, an angel appeared to Zechariah, who was immediately gripped with fear. That's an understatement! The angel delivers incredible news, and Zechariah, a well-seasoned PrimeTimer, asks what seems to be a very reasonable question: "Uhhh...I'm old and so is my wife. How's this going to happen?" The angel Gabriel responds saying "I'm God's messenger and because you doubted, you're gonna zip it until the baby is born." (Note to self: If an angel ever appears to me, don't question him!)


Zechariah is a servant of the Lord who is intimately familiar with his role and likely has a strong grasp on Scripture. Yet, even he had doubts and questions. Remember that an important part of service is obedience. When Zechariah and Elizabeth later dedicate their newborn son, it is a beautiful moment of redemption for Zechariah. Though not a family name, they name the baby "John" because his father and mother are obedient to what the angel said. At that moment, then, Zechariah can suddenly speak.

Jesus is the perfect picture of obedience and service. In *Celebration of Discipline*, Foster says, "Jesus took a towel and basin and redefined greatness" (p. 126). Zechariah and Elizabeth weren't chosen because they were great. They were simply servants. Jesus, rather than acting as the earthly king Israel longed for instead demonstrated greatness by serving others. During this Advent season of expectation, let's find ways to take up a towel and serve others.


—*Pastor Mike McAdory*

Day 26

The Power of a Silent Night

 *Luke 1:21-22*

 *Solitude*

 [*Watch Andrea Bocelli - "Silent Night" \(a capella\)*](#)

Ever noticed how often in the Christmas story characters have a supernatural encounter when they are alone? Gabriel comes to Mary to tell her about her pregnancy and to Joseph in a dream telling him to keep Mary as his wife. Zechariah the priest encounters the angel while alone in the temple. The shepherds' quiet slumber at night is interrupted by the thunder of a heavenly choir.

God's great act of redemptively breaking into his world happens not through grand, dramatic fanfare but through the quiet solitude of personal encounters and an infant's cries in a stable. C.S. Lewis described God's invasion of the world through the virgin birth as a landing in disguise in enemy territory to wage a war of sabotage against evil. The power of the kingdom advancing against the forces of darkness lies not in our strength, intellect, or flurry of activity, but in our ability to rest and abide in this King who goes before us.


As God's people, we live in a battlefield with all the accompanying stress, chaos, and conflict. Families are pulled constantly in competing directions. The noise and voices of hostile culture clamor from every channel in media and entertainment. Battles of economics and finances, education, employment, and daily living drain us of our energy. How do we live lives of joy, peace, trust, and contentment amid such upheaval?

By remembering that the arrival of Christ as the Redeemer-King happened in the quiet solitude of a humble, ordinary moment. By remembering that God often speaks to his people in the quiet places. It's not dramatic intervention we long for quite so much as divine presence in the midst of the chaos. Jesus often disappeared off alone for prayer, especially when things got crazy. His strength *for* ministry was sustained only by slipping away from the "battle" *of* ministry and putting himself into a position where he could hear from his father, the King.

—Pastor Bryan Easley

Day 27

Did You Get What You Wanted?

 *Luke 2:11-14*

 *Celebration*

 [*Watch "Joy to the World" LIVE for Joy! Irish Christmas*](#)

One of the saddest pictures of an overly commercialized Christmas culture is children (or adults) opening present after present only to toss them aside a short time later with no appreciation for the gifts they just received. An attitude demanding to know "what else is there for me?"

In the Old Testament, the wisest man in the world, King Solomon, was known for having everything, and yet he was miserable. Over and over the refrain rings out "Meaningless! Meaningless!" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). His misery was not for want; rather, he didn't understand the concept of appreciating and celebrating his blessings.

At the other end of the socio-economic spectrum in Bible days were shepherds. They stood on the bottom rung of the Palestinian social ladder. They shared the same status as tax collectors and dung sweepers, and yet the announcement of Jesus's birth came to shepherds:

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men."

When those shepherds received this announcement, they immediately hurried to find the Christ Child in Bethlehem's cradle. Then the celebration began as they glorified and praised God. In a world that is often lonely, miserable and depressed, this Christmas, let us join in the celebration of His Advent, the Coming of Our King and Redeemer! Even if we find ourselves in an earthly struggle and we think He is literally all we have, we can celebrate that He is all we need.

—*Pastor David Gallimore*

Day 28

Final Thoughts

For 22 centuries, Christ followers have celebrated the birth and life of Jesus of Nazareth. While other world religions have messiah figures and stories of a deity appearing in human form, Christianity stands alone in one crucial way: Jesus the Christ was a *real person*. He walked and talked on the earth in a very specific place in geography and time. On both the calendar and the map we can point to when and where. His contemporaries saw him, lived with him, and wrote about him.

Overwhelming evidence shows the reality of his existence and details of his life and death as presented in the Gospels! He is no mere story; no fictional hero meant only to warm our hearts and make us feel charitable and happy. He is HISTORICAL FACT. But more overwhelming, as John put it, this is God himself taking on human nature in order that he might redeem the world and bring us to himself!

This silent night we celebrate that transpired in a little village in central Israel all those centuries ago was the culmination of even more centuries of expectant and sometimes desperate waiting for the Jewish people. From the beginning and as spoken through the prophets, God had promised He would act to redeem his broken world by sending the one who would be Israel's true king, who could set the hearts of the people right once and for all. Through this infant king, humility defeated pride, weakness defeated strength, love defeated evil, and life triumphed over death! Christmas means that Satan's grip on a dark world is broken. Light is here! God's redemption is coming to our families and to our world!

Jesus, as God Incarnate, is worthy of our adoration and trust through worship, prayer, and fasting. The more we study, meditate, and make time to get away and listen and learn, the more we grow into his image and into intimacy with Him! The more intentional we are about being in fellowship with others, serving, confession, and celebrating, the more we experience the life of Christ the way it was meant to be. And in all of this, God is worthy of our celebration for all that he is, all that he is done, and all that is yet to do! This is Christmas!

—Pastor Bryan Easley



PREPARE is a collection of devotional reflections for Advent based on Richard Foster's classic 1998 book, *Celebration of Discipline*. As so beautifully described in the book, there are twelve disciplines that have become commonly accepted over the course of Christian history through the influences of Old & New Testament worship, Christ himself, and other spiritual giants throughout church history. We intend this book as a resource to strengthen your own journey of spiritual discipline while deepening your walk with the Lord during Advent. We also believe that our community of believers here at Midland Valley Community can benefit by corporately walking through Advent with a shared resource and common theme.