



A  
NEW VISION



*2021 Advent Devotional*

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CITY CHURCH HOUSTON







## **Introduction**

In January 2020, City Church joined a number of other churches in launching a new sermon series titled “2020 Vision,” utterly and ironically unaware how little foresight any of us had regarding the events of the last two years. Unlike God, we are not people of deep and complete vision. In fact, the God of the Bible works profoundly through miraculous visions and dreams, pointing out just how much of our provision and future is dependent upon his work. As such, the birth of Jesus Christ is likewise accompanied by powerful visions, making way for the new vision that Jesus himself grants to us by his grace and through his sacrifice.

Four dreams, or visions, specifically surround the story of Jesus’ birth: Gabriel’s announcement to Mary, another angel’s visit to Joseph, the chorus of angels singing over the shepherds, and the dream given to the Magi as they left the presence of the newborn king.

These visions are more than just miracles attending the wondrous incarnation of God’s Son; they are early indicators of the kind of world Jesus came to make. In these four visions, we discover the promises of a world made new with possibility, made unified by loyal love, made glorious by the Father’s amazing grace, and made secure by the provisions of a good God who deeply desires our flourishing.

## **What Lies Ahead**

Join us on this four-week devotional, complete with readings and questions designed around individual times for reflection, family-oriented crafts, and a corporate prayer time that we encourage you to practice in your home or community. The prayer will take the general form of a “compline,” an evening prayer intended to help you take stock of your day through the liturgical rhythms of confession, praise, and petition. You can read it on your own, or you can read it among family and friends.

## **How to Use this Devotional**

This devotional is built around four visions recorded in the gospel accounts surrounding the birth of Jesus. Each week will begin with a reading from the gospels, and each day of that week will reflect further on that passage’s meaning for us in this season of advent. If possible, we encourage you to try practicing these devotionals at night—as a process of evening prayer meant to center your hearts on the nativity story.

## How to Use this Devotional as a Family

With the help of our City Kids Coordinator, Chelsey Omoregie, we have also developed questions and activities that will hopefully invite your entire family into this advent devotional. We encourage you to discuss “Questions for Little Ones” and, afterwards, invite your children to participate in the evening prayer, especially those prayers that involve a call and response.

Each week, we will also include a featured activity that will help children and families visualize the major themes of the nativity story, especially the way that God works through uncertain seasons to bring about healing for his people!

## A Note on “Compline”

Compline (kaam-pluhn) is a historical Christian prayer offered in the final hour (the ninth hour) of the day. These prayers are intended to be both worshipful for the provisions of the previous day and preparatory for the events of the day to come. In the monastic tradition, monks would often observe a strict silence between compline and the first morning prayer, known as terce. In the Anglican tradition, the compline prayer can be led by a layperson, meaning that it is a form of prayer that is open and inclusive to all; no formal training or certification is required. You can think of the compline as a call to peaceful preparation in an advent season all too often marked by full, hectic schedules. All prayers in this devotional, including Psalms and other special liturgies, are drawn from *The Book of Common Prayer* (Anglican Liturgy Press, 2019).

## A Note on the Advent Season at City Church

Please plan to join us in person or online each Sunday during Advent. We will have special guest artists at each service. On Sunday December 19, we will be having our Lessons and Carols service, a traditional Christmas service that tells the advent story with carols and scripture. This service is a great opportunity to invite others to join us for a time of favorite Christmas songs, readings, a short message and refreshments.

There are two other ways you can consider participating in advent rhythms at City Church. First, we encourage you to keep up with our blog ([citychurch.org/blog](http://citychurch.org/blog)), where each week a different writer will reflect on the devotional content you will be working through.

Secondly, we encourage you to attend our first “City Night” of the 2021–2022 ministry year, featuring professor and writer Dr. Matthew Mullins. His talk, on the literary beauty of scripture, will reflect on themes and ideas that are vital to this season.



“When we *study* the Bible, we approach it with an agenda. Perhaps it’s a question, a nagging doubt, a paradox presented to us by a skeptic, a historical inquiry, or a doctrinal problem. Or maybe we’re participating in a Bible study for church or a Sunday school book study ... We want the text to give us answers. We want it to meet *our* needs. *Reading* the Bible is different. When we *read* we’re looking to get in on the action in the text. We’re trying to join God’s story.”

*Matthew Mullins, Enjoying the Bible: Literary Approaches to Loving the Scriptures*

“The Lord is coming, always coming. When you have ears to hear and eyes to see, you will recognize him at any moment of your life. Life is Advent; life is recognizing the coming of the Lord.”

Henri Nouwen

“I want a Christmas that whispers ‘Jesus.’”

Ann Voskamp



# Week 1: A New Vision of Possibility | Luke 1:26–38

## The Birth of Jesus Foretold

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

<sup>34</sup> “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called[a] the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail.”

<sup>38</sup> “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

## Family Activity: Gift Wrap Me!

### Items Needed:

- Christmas wrapping paper
- Bows
- Ribbons
- Tape

1. Gather Christmas wrapping paper, bows, ribbons, and tape.
2. Choose one or more family members to be gift wrapped.
3. Set a time limit for wrapping the family member and judge the best wrapped family member.
4. Remind your family that giving and receiving gifts is fun, but God gave us the best gift of all! God gave us the gift of Jesus. Jesus was born as a baby, lived a sinless life, died for our sins, and rose again. Jesus gives us the gift of salvation and eternal life when we trust in Him.

### Christmas carols to sing together as a family:

- “Angels We Have Heard on High”
- “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear”



# Sunday, November 28

## Read & Reflect: Luke 1:26–38

Mary is, understandably, troubled by the sudden appearance of the angel Gabriel in her presence. Gabriel responds by not only calming her fears, but also calling her by name: “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God” (1:30). The Bible gives us no indication as to why or how Mary “found favor.” Perhaps this is the first indication of the new vision Jesus is coming to institute: one in which God’s favor is not earned so much as bestowed upon us out of the abundance of his love. At the same time, you can imagine that this “favor” might have felt like “unfavorable” news to Mary, whose character and reputation would be at stake once people found out about her pregnancy. In these moments, Gabriel does not provide all the answers to the questions on her heart. Instead, he directs all attention to the goodness and glory of God, whose “kingdom will never end” (1:33). The angel assures Mary, “No word from God will ever fail,” although the more literal translation reads, “Nothing will be impossible with God” (1:37). Gabriel helps Mary see the new vision of possibility given to us by Jesus, a vision in which his unfailing words will bring about unending transformation. Even the very first advent season was, like our own, filled with many conflicting emotions and anxieties. Yet, Gabriel helps Mary see the new vision of possibility given to us by Jesus, a vision in which his unfailing words will bring about unending transformation.

## Questions for Contemplation:

In your life, what do you think of as impossible to change? What situation or circumstance feels, for lack of a better word, unfixable? How does the story of Jesus speak to that feeling in your life, or does it?

## Questions for Your Little Ones:

What does “impossible” mean? Can you think of anything “impossible?”

Is anything “impossible” with God? Why or why not?

## Pray Together or with God:

Leader: Our help is in the Name of the Lord;

Everyone: The maker of heaven and earth

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## Monday, November 29

### **Read & Reflect: Luke 1:26–38**

What a twist the first chapter of Luke takes when redirecting our attention from Elizabeth to her cousin Mary. One miracle gives way to another, the second greater than the last. Too often in life we settle for the lesser of two promises. In the story of the gospel, we find—over and over again—that people prove tempted to accept salvation through works rather than the far greater miracle of salvation by grace through faith. The great wonder is that Mary is “favored,” not because of any recorded righteousness, but rather because of God’s divine knowledge. So, too, for us: we have done nothing to earn God’s “favor,” and thus the only possible response to his graciousness is to accept the blessing of his presence with us.

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

Do you believe, or trust, that you have found favor with God?

In what ways are you still tempted to try to earn or secure God’s favor?

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

What is “love?” How do you know that God loves you?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

You keep them in perfect peace whose minds are stayed on you, because they trust in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock. *Isaiah 26:3–4*

## Tuesday, November 30

### Read & Reflect: Luke 1:29–33

Fear: a present reality in our lives, whether we like it or not. Mary is “greatly troubled” by the miraculous news because despite the wonder of an angelic visitation, she is likely thinking about the imminent consequences. God’s word and truth so often confronts us with this kind of dilemma: we are shocked by the good news of his grace, but feel fear at the thought of what it might cost us to follow him. Indeed, even though he promises that his “yoke is easy and [his] burden is light” (Matt. 11:30), he also promises, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). We must decide if the trouble is worth this yoke: if these earthly trials are not, as Paul says, “worth comparing” to the glory we will find in the presence of our God and King (Rom. 8:18).

### Questions for Contemplation:

What fears most often steal your joy? Do you feel controlled by fear?

When you hear Jesus promise “trouble” in this life, how do you feel?

### Questions for Your Little Ones:

What are you most afraid of? What are you least afraid of?

Does God want you to be afraid? If so, what does he want you to fear?

### Pray Together or with God:

Almighty God, you gave such grace to your apostle Andrew that he readily obeyed the call of your Son Jesus Christ, and brought his brother with him: Give us, who are called by your holy Word, grace to follow him without delay, and to bring those near to us into his gracious presence; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

*Cf. John 1:35–42*

# Wednesday, December 1

## **Read & Reflect: Luke 1:34**

Mary asks a question we all might ask at points in our life: “How will this be?” We have all struggled to trust or understand God’s plan for our life. I know I have, at least! Mary’s question is genuine: she is struggling to wrap her mind around the wondrous words given to her by none other than the angel Gabriel. Gabriel does not answer her question, does not provide her with the practical details that might set her mind at ease. Instead, he reminds her only of God’s promise to “overshadow” and protect her.

## **Questions for Contemplation:**

Do you desire to know the details when God’s promises are already known to you? What must you do to have the kind of trust shown by Mary, confident and even joyful when facing the uncertainties of your future?

## **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

What does “trust” mean? Why should we trust God?

If you feel like you don’t trust God, why do you feel that way?

What do you think Mary would say to you about trusting God?

## **Pray Together or with God:**

Behold now, praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, You that stand by night in the house of the Lord, even in the courts of the house of our God. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and sing praises unto the Lord. The Lord who made heaven and earth give you blessing out of Zion. *Psalm 134.*

## Thursday, December 2

### **Read & Reflect: Luke 1:35–36**

Long before Jesus promises the Holy Spirit to his disciples (Luke 24:49), Gabriel promises the Spirit to come upon Mary, to oversee this miraculous incarnational moment where God becomes human. And to confirm the power of the “Most High,” the angel even informs Mary of Elizabeth’s own miracle. God will often give us evidence for his claims, though he does not have to do so. Moreover, God often puts people in our life to help us navigate difficult seasons—someone who might, in some way, understand what we are going through (like Elizabeth for Mary).

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

Who in your life confirms the power and truth of God’s word?

If you don’t have a friend like Elizabeth, where might you look to find such a person?

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

Who is your best friend, and what do you like doing together?

Why do you think God gives us friends who share our interests or problems?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. *Matthew 11:28–30.*

## Friday, December 3

### **Read & Reflect: Luke 1:37**

Seven little words worth reflecting on every day but especially in the season of advent: “No word from God will ever fail.” The whole of the Bible, from Genesis 3 onward, is the story of how God will make his people right with him, as he promises. The promise is coming into view with Gabriel’s announcement to Mary. And in case the readers miss the point here, he reminds us all—from Mary on down to us—that God makes all things possible through his love and provision.

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

What word from God do you still not trust to triumph?

What promise still seems beyond reach?

What are some strategies you could try to comfort yourself when you doubt?

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

What does it mean to “fail?” Have you ever failed? What did you learn from that moment?

Does God ever fail? Why or why not?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

O Loving Father, we commend to your gracious keeping all who are near and dear to us. Have mercy upon any who are sick, and comfort those who are in pain, anxiety, or sorrow. Awaken all who are careless about eternal things. Bless those who are young and in health, that they may give the days of their strength to you. Comfort the aged and infirm, that your peace may rest upon them. Hallow the ties of kindred, that we may help and not hinder one another in all the good works that you have prepared for us to walk in; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Saturday, December 4

### **Read & Reflect: Luke 1:38**

If we arrive to the point where we pray for God's word to be "fulfilled," how can we take on Mary's humility, saying, "I am the Lord's servant?" What a remarkable response to news that must have been not only hard to believe, but also hard to even understand. There will be times in our life when we do not intellectually understand our circumstances, whether blessings or trials. In those moments, we may be called to humble submission, but that step may be hard to take.

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

What do you find hard to believe? If you are skeptical about this thing, what would change your mind? In general, what does it normally take for you to change your mind?

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

The Jewish people expected Jesus to be a king, but instead he was "meek and mild?"

What does that mean? What does it tell us about who Jesus is?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

We give you thanks, O God, for revealing your Son Jesus Christ to us by the light of his resurrection: Grant that as we sing your glory at the close of this day, our joy may abound in the morning as we celebrate the Paschal mystery; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

# Week II: A New Vision of Loyalty | Matthew 1:18–25

## Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son

<sup>18</sup> This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

<sup>20</sup> But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

## Family Activity: Graham Cracker Nativity

### Items Needed:

- Graham crackers
- Icing
- Animal crackers
- Bear-shaped crackers
- Shredded coconut
- Paper plates
- Plastic knives

1. Use icing and graham crackers to create a Nativity scene.
2. Add animal crackers to represent animals that may have been present and shredded coconut for the manger.
3. Use bear-shaped crackers to represent Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and the shepherds.
4. Remind your family that Jesus came to the earth to share His love with people.

### Christmas carols to sing together as a family:

“O Come, All Ye Faithful”

“Away in a Manger”



# Sunday, December 5

## Read & Reflect: Matthew 1:18–25

The gospel accounts of Jesus' birth are almost all framed by one word that we see over and over again: "Behold." There is mystery and a message in this little word. This little boy who would be broken for our transgressions offers us grace and salvation if we only fix our eyes upon him. Ironically, the angels give these early witnesses the same formula that Jesus himself will give his followers years and years later, and which John the Baptist announced in the presence of his own followers: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Joseph reveals his character in not wanting to punish Mary, but he also reveals his commitment to the "law"—a law that his own son will come to dramatically fulfill. He has yet to imagine what God plans to do with the laws of Israel through the mission of Jesus. And yet Joseph forecasts the loyalty that Jesus shows to us in going to the cross despite our misunderstanding, sin, brokenness, and betrayal. Joseph's obedience to God, and love for Mary, highlights a radical new vision of loyalty that should define God's people as a response to the abundant mercy of Christ in and to us.

## Questions for Contemplation:

Have you ever stuck by someone when it cost you personally? Has anyone ever stuck with you even though it cost them? What have you learned about loyalty in your life?

## Questions for Your Little Ones:

Who is someone you would call "loyal?" What do you like about this person?  
Is God loyal? Why or why not?

## Pray Together or with God:

Leader: Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit;

All: For you have redeemed me, O Lord, O God of truth.

Leader: Keep me, O Lord, as the apple of your eye;

All: Hide me under the shadow of your wings.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

## Monday, December 6

### **Read & Reflect: Matthew 1:18–19**

Joseph is “faithful to the law,” a detail that reveals both his commitment to his religious upbringing and his need—like all of our need—for a grace that can free us from the crushing expectations of that law. Notice one other detail in this passage: the point of view is Mary’s (“her husband”). God is working miraculously through both Mary and Joseph, but Mary is the perspective through which we see the advent most clearly. Still, even Mary is not the protagonist of the gospel, of course. The gospel reminds us, always, how God is the center of all stories, all history.

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

Do you struggle to let go of “self?” Do you find it tempting to think that you are the main character of your life’s story?

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

Who is the main character of the Bible? How do we find this out?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

O Lord, support us all the day long through this trouble-filled life, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in your mercy grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last. Amen.

## Tuesday, December 7

### **Read & Reflect: Matthew 1:20**

Even though Joseph plans to “quietly” divorce Mary, God has other plans, which he makes known through a dream. The angel in this dream confirms what Gabriel first told Mary: that the conception of Jesus was the work of the “Holy Spirit.” While Mary is visited by Gabriel without any mention of a “dream,” Joseph receives this information through other means (his dream). Reading these accounts of Mary and Joseph might remind us that although God is constant, he can work in different ways—and through different miraculous means. The outcome in both cases is the same; Mary and Joseph leave their encounters with their angelic visitors trusting the God who sent them.

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

Have you ever felt as if your conscience led you to change a decision or belief?

How do we know when to regard our instincts as the leading of the Holy Spirit, or when to be suspicious of our instincts as potentially a product of our fallenness?

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

Have you ever done something and known it was probably wrong, even if no one told you it was wrong? What did you do about it?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

In you, O Lord, have I put my trust; let me never be put to confusion; deliver me in your righteousness. Bow down your ear to me, make haste to deliver me, And be my strong rock and house of defense, that you may save me. For you are my strong rock and my castle; be also my guide, and lead me for your Name's sake. Draw me out of the net that they have laid secretly for me, for you are my strength. Into your hands I commend my spirit, for you have redeemed me, O Lord, O God of truth. *Psalms 31.*

# Wednesday, December 8

## **Read & Reflect: Matthew 1:21**

Despite the advent story being centered around Mary's point of view, naturally Joseph still has a very important part to play. In his dream, he is told one vital piece of information: the name of the son he will raise. You can almost imagine Joseph running to Mary to tell him of his vision, and her responding with her own encounter with Gabriel. Both would know that Jesus is the promised Messiah, but Joseph will be able to give Mary the boy's name. In this way, they are able to validate one another's dramatic encounters with the emissaries of God's plan. God rarely uses people in isolation: he may have prophets, priests, kings, queens, and rulers of all variety, but he calls these people to work in and through community together.

## **Questions for Contemplation:**

Are you a person who struggles to find and keep community? Why or why not?

Do you believe God calls his people to live in deep human community? Why or why not?

## **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

Do you think it would be hard to live without friends? Why or why not?

What is hard about making friends? What is easy about making friends?

## **Pray Together or with God:**

Almighty God, we entrust all who are dear to us to your never-failing care and love, for this life and the life to come, knowing that you are doing for them better things than we can desire or pray for; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

# Thursday, December 9

## Read & Reflect: Matthew 1:22–23

At this moment in the brief account of Joseph’s dream we have an editorial addition from Matthew: a note to remind his readers of the prophecy that Jesus’ birth brings to fruition. The quote is from Isaiah 7:14, where the prophet reveals the name of the coming Messiah: “Immanuel, God with us.” The story of Jesus is all about fulfillment: fulfillment of prophecy, fulfillment of the redemption promised all the way back in Genesis, fulfillment of the law that, while commanded, could not secure salvation.

## Questions for Contemplation:

What does it mean that Jesus came to fulfill the law?

Does that mean we are free of the laws’ expectations? Why or why not?

## Questions for Your Little Ones:

Jesus was also known by the name Immanuel, which means “God with us.”

Why do you think he was called by this name? What does it mean to you?

## Pray Together or with God:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again.

He ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.

*The Apostles’ Creed*

## Friday, December 10

### **Read & Reflect: Matthew 1:24**

Joseph does something quite remarkable upon waking up from this dream. He didn't contemplate if he might have eaten a bad dinner, he didn't entertain doubts about his own sanity, and he didn't try to bargain with God as a result of this vision. No, instead "he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him." The language gives us the sense that he acted immediately, without delay. How do we acquire this kind of obedience, acting without fear of the world's opinion, but only fear of the Lord as we are commanded?

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

How do you think Joseph was able to act so quickly and faithfully?

Do you think you would act so obediently if you were in his position?

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

God tells Joseph to go take Mary as his wife, so he does it right away. Why do you think he acted so quickly?

When you are asked to do something, do you always act quickly?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: By the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Saturday, December 11

### **Read & Reflect: Matthew 1:25**

The narrative of Joseph's vision ends with a "But." Despite Joseph's obedience and despite his and Mary's marriage, he respects the work of the Lord by controlling his own passions for a time. Ironically, many around Mary and Joseph would have assumed that they couldn't control their passions long enough to wait for marriage. In reality, they are so controlled and faithful that they wait for months even after their marriage. In the face of judgmental people in their lives, Joseph and Mary worry only about the judgments and glory of their God. Joseph is not commanded to wait longer to consummate his and Mary's union, but he does so anyway. Joseph understands, it seems, both the letter and the spirit of God's expectations in this moment. And as a reward, he gets to carry out his role of naming his son, who will be the savior of all mankind.

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

Are you tempted only to follow the "letter of the law?" Are you tempted, more generally, to think of Christianity as a set of rules rather than a reset of your very life?

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

Where should we look to find out what God wants us to do?

What if we have a question that cannot be answered in the Bible? Then what do we do?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

O God, your unfailing providence sustains the world we live in and the life we live: Watch over those, both night and day, who work while others sleep, and grant that we may never forget that our common life depends upon each other's toil; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Week III: A New Vision of Glory | Luke 2:8–20

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

<sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

### Family Activity: Joy to the World

#### Items Needed:

- Black construction paper
- Chalk
- Cotton balls
- Gold sequins
- Glue

1. Create a scene from today’s Bible reading. Glue cotton balls to black paper to represent sheep and gold sequins for stars in the sky.
2. Draw the shepherds and angels with chalk.
3. Write JOY at the top of the scene.
4. Remind your family that Jesus’ birth was good news of great joy.

#### Christmas carols to sing together as a family:

- “Joy to the World”
- “The First Noel”



# Sunday, December 12

## **Read & Reflect: Luke 2:8–20**

Of all the characters in the nativity story, the shepherds might strike us as the most relatable. They are minding their own business, occupied by the daily responsibilities of a life where the miraculous rarely seems to break through. To them, it probably seemed to be a night like any other. One can't help but think of grace in the same terms—the light of Christ and the glory of his angelic hosts breaking into the ordinary moments of our everyday life. Rather than announce his birth, however, grace announces his life, death, and resurrection, through which he pays the penalty reserved for us and brings us into full union with himself and his kingdom. While the shepherds may be relatable, their inclusion should also strike us as surprising, as we will discuss in future devotionals. God's new vision of glory is one in which his marvelous presence is not limited to the select priests and rulers, but is made available to all people for all time, from great kings and queens to socially disregarded shepherds and laborers.

## **Questions for Contemplation:**

Have you ever experienced a disruption of grace or glory in your life—a moment that seemed to come out of the clear blue sky (or even a dark night sky)?

How do you think about that moment today?

## **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

Why do you think God revealed this miracle to simple shepherds on a hillside outside Bethlehem? Why does God notice them?

## **Pray Together or with God:**

Leader: O Lord, hear our prayer;

All: And let our cry come to you.

Leader: Let us pray.

All: Visit this place, O Lord, and drive far from it all snares of the enemy; let your holy angels dwell with us to preserve us in peace; and let your blessing be upon us always; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

# Monday, December 13

## **Read & Reflect: Luke 2:8**

Look back to the “Questions for Your Little Ones” in yesterday’s devotional. This same question is important for all ages to ask. One can understand why God revealed the birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph, and perhaps even to the distant “Magi,” who play an instrumental role in saving Jesus from Herod (as we will see next week!). But why disrupt these shepherds, who are simply “keeping watch over their flocks at night?” There are at least two reasons. For one thing, their role reminds us of the Good Shepherd, Jesus himself, who promises to guide and protect us. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this moment signals the open invitation of the gospel: the message of Jesus is not limited to the educated or socially important (by cultural standards). More than Magi are invited into the life of this story.

## **Questions for Contemplation:**

Compared with the majesty of God, we are all lowly shepherds in fields at night. Why does God choose to reveal himself to any of us? How do we know his truth at all?

## **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

If you were one of these shepherds out on the hill at night, how do you think you would respond to the music and noise of angels crying out in the night?

## **Pray Together or with God:**

Whoever dwells under the defense of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say unto the Lord, “You are my refuge and my stronghold, my God in whom I will trust.” For he shall deliver you from the snare of the hunter and from the deadly pestilence. He shall defend you under his wings, and you shall be safe under his feathers; his faithfulness and truth shall be your shield and buckler. You shall not be afraid of any terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day, Of the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the sickness that destroys at noonday. *Psalm 91.*

## Tuesday, December 14

### **Read & Reflect: Luke 2:9–10**

Like Mary, the shepherds greet the angelic hosts with a fairly reasonable reaction: fear. More specifically, they were “terrified.” God’s glory, rightfully understood, should fill us with fear were it not for the complementary truth that he also holds “plans to prosper [us] and not to harm [us]” (Jer. 29:11). Or, put another way, God’s representatives anticipate human fear and come prepared with three words that flow throughout the holy scriptures: “Do not fear.” (Ok, technically the NIV translation says, “Do not be afraid,” but you get the point!) God’s glory is “awful” in the historical sense (filling us with “awe”), but since his glory and his love are both necessary parts of his character, we need not fear that we will be measured against that glory on our own.

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

Where have you experienced what you would describe as “God’s glory?”

Did you feel anything akin to fear, or was some other emotion involved?

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

Jesus says, “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18), but we can experience God in other ways, like through his Holy Spirit. Would you say you have ever felt God in your heart?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

Be present, O merciful God, and protect us through the hours of this night, so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

# Wednesday, December 15

## **Read & Reflect: Luke 2:11–12**

In Luke 2:11, the angels get to the *content* of their proclamation: “a Savior has been born to you.” Notice the pronoun here: “you.” The heavenly host make the announcement deeply personal and individualized. They tell them not only who this child will become, but also where they can go and worship him. Now, imagine how the shepherds must have felt—or what they must have thought—when the angels tell them to find the Savior of the world in a Bethlehem manger! A God who would enter in such a place is a God who knows, loves, and sees those in lowly places of esteem or power. He is a God—just as Mary says in her great song of praise, the Magnificat—who has “lifted up the humble” (Luke 1:52). What phenomenal news for those of us who understand that, because of our sin and brokenness, our only chance at salvation is through submission to the only one who is due unqualified glory and praise.

## **Questions for Contemplation:**

C. S. Lewis writes, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.” Would you describe yourself as “humble?” Why or why not?

## **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

What does it mean to be “humble?” With that in mind, who would you describe as “humble?” How do you feel about that person?

## **Pray Together or with God:**

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. *Hebrews 13:20–21.*

# Thursday, December 16

## Read & Reflect: Luke 2:13–14

Yesterday's devotional might have led us astray—since the angels' "content" involves far more than directions to find the newborn king. More centrally, they erupt into the quiet night as a kind of overflow of God's glory, singing praises to God in the presence of these men on the hillside. The shepherds, once their fears were calmed, must feel that they have received God's "favor" in order to receive such a vision—and surely, they are not wrong. But attentive readers of the advent narrative will recognize that word "favor" from Gabriel's message to Mary, one whom "found favor with God" (Luke 1:30). The story of Jesus arriving to earth is the story of so many people finding "favor" through the gift of his sacrificial love, including those of us today who find our rest in his glory.

## Questions for Contemplation:

Since the word "favor" keeps coming up in these stories of advent, why don't we reflect on what "favor" means?

What does it mean to "find favor with God?"

How can we know that we have found favor ourselves?

## Questions for Your Little Ones:

What is your *favorite* thing? Why do you call it your favorite?

When God says that he "favors" us, what do you think he means by that?

## Pray Together or with God:

Almighty God and Father, we confess to you,  
to one another, and to the whole company of heaven,  
that we have sinned, through our own fault,  
in thought, and word, and deed,  
and in what we have left undone.

For the sake of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ,  
have mercy upon us, forgive us our sins,  
and by the power of your Holy Spirit  
raise us up to serve you in newness of life,  
to the glory of your Name. Amen.

## Friday, December 17

### Read & Reflect: Luke 2:16–18

Note, once more, the urgency of those who receive a vision from the hosts of heaven. These shepherds “hurried off” because, after the fear, their desire to worship follows. When we are delivered from our fears, we, too, will long to worship. And the gospel teaches us that, because of Jesus, we have been already delivered from the greatest fear: death and judgment. Of course, it doesn’t stop there for these shepherds from Bethlehem. They become, in a sense, the first evangelists, “spread[ing] the word concerning what had been told them about this child.” Such wonderful news inspires such sudden action from these men of the hillside. Drawn out of their ordinary, dark evening, they are sent out to be representatives of God’s glorious provision. Amazing, indeed.

### Questions for Contemplation:

Are you urgent in sharing the gospel? If not, why not?

Even though most of us have not experienced the kind of event seen by these shepherds, have we really experienced God’s glory if we don’t have a desire to talk about it?

### Questions for Your Little Ones:

What is the best news you have ever heard? When you heard it, did you want to tell people? Do you want to tell people the news about Jesus? Why or why not?

### Pray Together or with God:

Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness; you set me free when I was in trouble; have mercy upon me, and hear my prayer. O you children of men, how long will you blaspheme my honor, and have such pleasure in vanity, and seek after falsehood? Know this also, that the Lord has chosen for himself the one that is godly; when I call upon the Lord, he will hear me. Stand in awe, and sin not; commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. Offer the sacrifice of righteousness and put your trust in the Lord. There are many that say, “Who will show us any good?” Lord, lift up the light of your countenance upon us. You have put gladness in my heart, more than when others’ grain and wine and oil increased. I will lay me down in peace, and take my rest; for you, Lord, only, make me dwell in safety. *Psalm 4.*

## Saturday, December 18

### **Read & Reflect:** Luke 2:19–20

“Where your treasure is,” says Jesus, “there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). Mary’s treasure is the miracle of Jesus—and the amazement it inspires in those who get to share it with her. And like her son will one day say, her heart rests with this treasure, at least according to the gospel of Luke. Notice that this passage begins with the glorious praise of the angels on high and ends with the glorious praise of people upon the earth. God’s glory is compelling; it captures and animates our imaginations, spreading like wildfire. Of all the things the shepherds could reflect upon, their wonder lies in the fact that what they were told to expect was exactly what they found. God’s words never fail.

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

What is your treasure? Where is your heart?

What fills you with the deepest and most abiding sense of love?

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

What do you want most for Christmas? What would you do to get it?

What do we have to do to be showered with the love and glory of God?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love’s sake. Amen.

# Week IV: A New Vision of Security | Matthew 2:1–12

## The Magi Visit the Messiah

<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup> “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

<sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

<sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

## Family Activity: Bake Bethlehem Bread

### Items Needed:

- 4 cups all purpose flour
- 1 cup and 2 T whole milk
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1/4 cup shortening
- 1 package yeast
- Egg wash
- Coarse sea salt

1. Line a baking sheet with a baking mat or lightly grease and set aside.
2. Warm milk to room temperature. Mix sugar, salt, and yeast with milk. Whisk until all lumps are gone and the liquid is smooth.
3. Sift flour and pour into a large mixing bowl. Make a well in the center of the flour and pour the yeast mixture into the well. Begin mixing with a wooden spoon until the dough begins to incorporate. Gradually add shortening until it is thoroughly mixed. Knead dough with your hands until it is smooth and firm.
4. Remove the dough from the bowl and place on a prepared baking sheet. Cover with a kitchen towel and allow to rise approximately 45 minutes–1 hour.
5. After about an hour, cut dough into lemon-sized portions. You should have about 9–10 small portions of dough. Coat each piece of dough with a small amount of shortening to keep the dough moist.
6. Cut each piece of dough into two equal pieces and roll the dough with the palms of your hands into two ropes approximately 6 inches long. Press the ends of the two ropes together and braid one on top of the other.
7. Starting at one end of your twist, gently roll the dough into a circle. Tuck the ends into the bottom and press gently to mold.
8. Cover baking sheets with kitchen towels and allow dough to rise for 3 hours. Brush each roll with egg wash and sprinkle with coarse sea salt. Bake in a preheated oven at 350 degrees for 15–20 minutes until golden brown.
9. Remind your family that Bethlehem in Hebrew means “House of Bread.” Share the rolls with a neighbor or friend and pray for that person to experience the love of Jesus this Christmas.

### Christmas carols to sing together as a family:

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

“Silent Night”



## Sunday, December 19

### **Read & Reflect: Matthew 2:1–12**

Remember what Gabriel says to Mary? “No word from God will ever fail” (Luke 1:37). If this is true, then we never have to fear the loss of the security he promises to us. And for that reason, we—as readers—do not have to fear that Herod will succeed in killing Jesus. No, since God’s word must triumph, Jesus must live until his appointed time on the cross. Thus, it is not the Magi who “save” Jesus; rather, they are privileged to play a role that God ordains for them, not because he needs them, but because it is his desire to work through them. And so it is for all of us. God does not need us to secure the future he has planned, but he may work through us so that he will be glorified. The gospel presents us with a new vision of security in which, as the Apostle Paul will write later, we might “consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8).

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

What are you most afraid to give up, even if it means it fills you with momentary fear or anxiety? What is something you need to “have” in order to feel “secure?”

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

Where do you feel safest? Why do you think you feel safe there?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

Leader: O God, make speed to save us;

All: O Lord, make haste to help us.

Leader: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;

All: As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Leader: Alleluia.

God, create in us a deep and abiding sense of security,

## Monday, December 20

### **Read & Reflect: Matthew 2:1-2**

Clearly, faith is not a prerequisite to noticing the power of the Lord. The Magi come to investigate the fulfillment of a prophecy that they had learned; and, like so many, they arrive expecting a royal birth rather than one of such humble origins. What is remarkable is that upon seeking out Jesus, and discovering that he was no more than the child of working-class Jews, they are undeterred in their pursuit. Their hearts are filled with questions even though they are unfamiliar with many of the cultural and religious assumptions of the Jewish world they find themselves traveling through. They know only to ask for the “king of the Jews.” How sad for us to know that this very title will be mockingly affixed to the cross on which Jesus will be crucified (Matt. 27:37). His own people will crush him while distant men of science will come looking for truth. The gospel flips everything on its head, and we would be wise to follow the humble road of these “wise men,” seeking after the one, true king.

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

Is it hard to think of Jesus as your “king?” Why or why not?

When you feel like you “need” Jesus, what does that mean to you? Do you want a prophet, a priest, a king, or something else?

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

If Jesus is a king, what is he king over? What does this mean for us, his people?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

Lighten our darkness, we beseech you, O Lord; and by your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of your only Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Tuesday, December 21

### **Read & Reflect: Matthew 2:3–4**

Mary and the shepherds were filled with “fear” at the news of Jesus’ arrival, but Herod, the Roman king assigned to Judea, is simply “disturbed.” What he felt may have been something like fear, but clearly Matthew wants us to know that he is experiencing something different from those who experience God’s glory. No, Herod is in the grips of human, mortal fear—the fear of losing privilege and power. He, like many of us, seeks counsel to know how to anticipate and eliminate any threat to his personal kingdom. In the advent narrative, the news of Jesus is almost always met with a combination of anxiety and wonder. Herod’s response is devoid of any wonder, any curiosity. His only interest appears to be preserving his own place in the world.

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

What disturbs you? What troubles you? Try to distinguish this feeling from fear.

What leaves you feeling unsettled, and what does it reveal about your heart’s priorities?

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

Why do we throw fits? Why do we cry and stomp our feet and yell?

What should we do instead?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

Everliving God, you strengthened your apostle Thomas with firm and certain faith in your Son’s resurrection: Grant us so perfectly and without doubt to believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God, that our faith may never be found wanting in your sight; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

*Cf. John 20:24–29*

## Wednesday, December 22

### **Read & Reflect: Matthew 2:5–6**

The counsel of Herod's court draws from Micah 5:2, reporting that Bethlehem is the prophesied origin of the "ruler / who will shepherd my people Israel." For Herod, this news is decidedly inconvenient. Judea is his "territory," and his job is to make sure that the Jewish people are denied political autonomy. Like many, he imagines Jesus as a warrior-king, unable to imagine a king who will disrupt authority through his humility and self-sacrifice. Rather than ask further questions as to the nature of these prophecies—which might lead them to Isaiah, for instance—Herod plots political strategies. Attempting to counter God's plans is no recipe for success, but unfortunately for Herod, that counsel is spared him.

### **Questions for Contemplation:**

In what ways do you still hope for a warrior-king version of Jesus?

Put another way, how does the meekness and humbleness of Jesus challenge you?

### **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

When you feel scared, what is the first thing you do?

What is the first thing that Christians should do when we feel sad or afraid?

### **Pray Together or with God:**

Look down, O Lord, from your heavenly throne, illumine this night with your celestial brightness, and from the children of light banish the deeds of darkness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

# Thursday, December 23

## **Read & Reflect: Matthew 2:7–8**

Herod's plot involves the Magi. Can you imagine an entire alternative reality where the Magi report back to Herod, who carries out his intent to murder Jesus? Of course not. Once again, *God's word never fails*. In their situation, the Magi may have initially been leaning toward compliance with Herod's will, especially given the authority of the Roman government and their limited understanding of who Jesus was supposed to be. In their journey to Bethlehem, we might imagine the debates among these ancients as they decide how to complete their journey and safely return home—even if it means acting as spies for Herod. Little do they know, of course, that God has other plans.

## **Questions for Contemplation:**

The Magi may lack knowledge of the Torah but their hearts are open to the truth of God.  
You may know the Bible, but is your heart open to the movement of God in your life?  
Do you accept that faith requires far more than “book smarts?”

## **Questions for Your Little Ones:**

How do you think the Magi felt when Herod tells them to report back to him about Jesus?  
How would you have responded? Why?

## **Pray Together or with God:**

You keep them in perfect peace whose minds are stayed on you, because they trust in you. Trust in the Lord for ever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock. *Isaiah 26:3–4*.

# Friday, December 24

## Read & Reflect: Matthew 2:9–12

The fourth and final vision of our series is the second dream in these accounts. Joseph and the Magi are granted dreams, while Mary and the shepherds are informed through the eruptive presence of angels in their midst. The Magi are immediately “overjoyed” and led to worship the Christ child. They, therefore, take another route home and so risk their lives to protect the Savior of mankind. In this moment God secures his own Son’s life, but as we know, he also wills the Son to be crushed and pierced for our transgressions. The Magi help secure God’s plan in their own way, but God’s ultimate plan is one in which our final security is won for us by our crucified Lord. Lest we forget, we know no safety or security were it not for the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we are now made heirs to the coming kingdom, unified by his Spirit, awaiting the day when we will stand before the Father, our days completed.

## Questions for Contemplation:

Why does God use “outsiders”—these Magi—to protect Jesus from the wiles of Herod? Why not use a Jewish person in the story, or devise some other means?

## Questions for Your Little Ones:

In the story of Jesus, he welcomes anyone who loves him. All are welcome.

Do you know that Jesus loves you, and do you feel like he wants to be with you forever?

## Pray Together or with God:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. *1 Thessalonians 5:23.*

## Christmas Day Bonus Activity: The Light of Christmas

Drive around to look at Christmas lights and listen to Christmas music. (Bonus: Take along some hot chocolate!) On your drive, talk about how the lights at Christmas often bring peace and joy to the people who enjoy them. Remind your family that the Bible calls Jesus the Light of the world. Discuss ways your family can share with others the light and hope that Jesus brings this Christmas. Consider praying for the people who live in some of the homes you pass—that they would know the light and life of Jesus this Christmas.

















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