
bethany
COMMUNITY CHURCH
Light of the World
ADVENT 2026 DEVOTIONAL

Light *of the* World

INTRODUCTION TO ADVENT & OVERVIEW OF DEVOTIONAL

As the rains grow heavier and the days grow shorter, we find ourselves at the threshold of winter, looking forward to Christmas. This is a big season every year, and Christmastime often holds so much for each of us. Traditions, family gatherings, decorations, movies, food, presents, there is so much! In this, the expectations of this season can feel overwhelming. And while, for many of us, this season is often one of joy, it can also be one where our grief and aches come closer to the surface.

Yet none of this encompasses the full reality of Christmas. For Christians, Advent reminds us that Christ invites us into a much fuller, truer, and more beautiful story amid the busyness, expectation, and longing of the holidays. Advent means arrival or coming and has long been a meaningful season for the church. This season leading up to Christmas is one of preparation and anticipation and begins four Sundays before Christmas. In this season, followers of Christ both remember the story of Christ's coming into the world and hold hope for his promised return.

One of the ways that Christians have traditionally embraced the season of Advent is through the practice of lighting candles on an Advent wreath. This tradition has a long and rich history in the Church. While the exact origins of the tradition are largely unknown, we do know that Advent wreaths and candles date back as far as the sixth century and formally began to be used to tell the Christmas story in 1800s Germany. Nowadays, the practice of lighting Advent candles spans various Christian denominations and traditions, and as we light candles this season, we do so with followers of Christ around the world.

Advent candles are lit throughout the four Sundays of Advent and on Christmas Eve, symbolizing the light growing in the darkness as we lead up to the coming of Christ, the Light who entered the world all those Christmases ago. The candles themselves hold meaning too, each one representing a theme of the gospel: hope, peace, joy, and love, all things that find their truest expression in Christ. Each week as a candle is lit and the wreath grows brighter, our anticipation is sharpened. God is with us in the waiting. Christ is coming near. Hope, peace, joy, and love are ours to experience. The light shines in the darkness.

This Advent you are invited to carve out some space each week to dwell in the Christmas story as you read Scripture, reflect, pray, and light candles. Whether you do this alone as a contemplative moment or gather with family and friends, we remember the Light who came into the world all those years ago. And as we do so, we remember this story isn't over. We hold close the words of Jesus, remembering that this Light continues and we too are called to be lights in the world, shining brightly as we point people to Christ.

ADVENT WEEK 1

Hope



READ: JOHN 1:1-18

Reflection

As people who live in the Pacific Northwest, this time of year we are all too aware of the darkness. With only about 8.5 hours of sunlight a day, most of us go about our daily lives with at least some of our important activities happening in the dark. Yet not only does this literal darkness mark our days, we experience darkness all around us, with conflict, division, uncertainty, and fear that plague both our nation and world. It's no wonder that we reach for our SAD lamps and dream about tropical vacations this time of year.

The opening chapter of John's gospel does not shy away from this darkness, but it does boldly proclaim that darkness is not the final reality. In some of the most beautiful, poetic words we have of creation, we hear the gospel writer announce that there is a light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

In our world, we receive promises of hope in the darkness from many places, like political leaders, cultural movements, or even personal achievements. Yet as darkness persists, we find over and over again that all of these options leave us wanting. In the midst of this, however, John's gospel reminds us that God's answer to a broken and hurting world isn't just an idea, philosophy, or new practice, but a person: Christ, the true Light who gives light to everything.

As we begin our journey through Advent, our invitation is to place our hope not in the changing circumstances of our world, but in Christ, the Light of the world, who became flesh and made his dwelling among us.



Light the first candle and reflect on these questions

Where do you need Jesus to bring hope in this season?

How might you reflect the light of Christ to those around you?

Prayer

Jesus, Light of the world, thank You for the hope You bring. You shine light in the darkest places, both in our lives and in our world. In this season of Advent, help us to notice the growing light of Your presence with us, and be people who carry Your hope into all the places we go. Amen.

ADVENT WEEK 2

Peace



READ: ISAIAH 9:2-7

Reflection

Peace is something we all long for. We desire to feel safe, loved, and free from pain or struggle. This longing is a common human experience, shared throughout history and across cultures. In this passage, the prophet was writing to people experiencing fear and military conflict. They felt surrounded by darkness, desperate for hope. Throughout the first twelve chapters, hope flickers in this darkness, but in chapter 9, it bursts into a brilliant light. The prophet tells of a new king who is coming, one who will bring real and lasting peace.

When Jesus came onto the scene, the Jewish people had been waiting for centuries, living under oppression from one empire after another. Many hoped for a powerful leader who would defeat their enemies and restore their nation. They were longing for the peace promised in Isaiah 9. But Jesus didn't come to replace one empire with another. He came to establish a new kingdom that looks nothing like the kingdoms of the world. He is a king that restores rather than destroys, serves rather than dominates, brings reconciliation rather than retaliation, and offers his own blood rather than the blood of his enemies.

What kind of peace are we longing for? Is it simply the absence of conflict, defeating those who stand against us, feeling personally at ease, or gaining the outcome we hoped for? Or are we open to a peace that confronts injustice, rejects violence, listens instead of asserts, and makes room for restoration and love? The peace of Christ isn't just something we wait for someday. It's something we are invited to practice daily. It's a posture we take on as we walk in a world longing for real and enduring peace.



Light the first and second candles and reflect on these questions

Where might God be inviting you to lay down the pursuit of power, control, or being right in order to become a person who makes peace?

Does a particular person or group come to mind that you need to make peace with?

Prayer

Jesus, Prince of Peace, thank You for bringing a new kind of kingdom. As we walk in a world filled with violence and struggle, help us carry Your Spirit of peace. Meet us in our longings for a different kind of world and help us meet the longings of others as they encounter Your peace through us. Amen.

ADVENT WEEK 3

Joy



READ: LUKE 2:8-20

Reflection

On an ordinary night, in the midst of ordinary life and work, joy broke into the world in extraordinary fashion. A brilliant light, an angel of the Lord, a message of good news and great joy, a multitude of angels praising God, and a fulfillment of the angel's message that very night. This was a moment of joy that would be impossible to miss, a dramatic and undeniable glimpse of Heaven breaking into earth. As we revisit this story, year after year, it can feel deeply familiar and at the same time strangely distant. In the midst of our ordinary lives, it can be difficult to know where joy like this might be found.

But the good news of this story does not ultimately rest in the spectacle of angelic visions and heavenly messengers. It rests in the reality to which they point: that God has come near. The Creator of the universe stepped into our humanity, not merely to offer a miraculous moment, but to change the trajectory of creation itself: from darkness to light, from destruction to restoration, from death to life. This is our joy! It extends beyond the songs of angels on one extraordinary night to the song of eternal praise found in Revelation: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

The same God who broke into the ordinary lives of shepherds that night is present in the ordinary moments of our lives today. And even when the heavens seem silent, the good news remains: God is with us.



Light the first, second, and third candles and reflect on this question

How might the story of Jesus' birth, of God becoming human, bring joy in moments where God feels close or where He feels distant?

Prayer

Jesus, thank You for the gift of joy. As we journey through Advent, prepare our hearts to receive You more fully. Fill us with Your Spirit and shape us into people who reflect joy to the world around us. Amen.

ADVENT WEEK 4

Love



READ: MATTHEW 1:18-25

Reflection

I know this is going to sound like it comes straight out of a Hallmark movie so forgive me, but the Christmas story, at its heart, is about love. Of course I don't mean in the sense of hometown sweethearts reconnecting at the family Christmas tree farm upstate. I mean it in the sense of God's love for us made manifest in a baby boy born in a manger. In this way, Christmas is not about some abstract love that remains but a concept, instead it is about a love that became embodied in a person. It's a story that affirms that even when it feels impossible for us to find God's love, God's love will come down and find us.

Within this great love story, again, not too unlike Hallmark movies, names are of particular importance (who could have guessed Noelle would end up with Nicholas?). In Matthew's Gospel we're told that Mary and Joseph were given the name of this baby who would be love incarnate for us all: Joshua. Or, as we know it in its Greek translation, Jesus. This name, which literally means 'God saves,' reminds us that God's love doesn't simply overlook our brokenness; it meets us in the midst of it and works to redeem us. Further, the name reminds us of Joshua in the Old Testament, who led the Israelites into the long awaited Promised Land. In a similar way, this miraculous baby boy, Jesus, would live a story that creates a way for us to enter into the Promised Land of God's eternal love and salvation. Hopefully you can see it too, Christmas is a love story for the ages.



Light the first, second, third, and fourth candles and reflect on this question

How might God help you become a person who not only receives and experiences His great love, but carries it into the world, sharing it with everyone around you?

Prayer

Jesus, thank You for your saving love. Help us grasp just how wide and long and high and deep Your love for us truly is. Thank You for making a way for us to enter the Promised Land of life with You and gives us the courage to step into that life, trusting that all we need to do is follow where You lead. Amen.



ADVENT WEEK 5

Christ

READ: MATTHEW 2:1-12

Reflection

The story of Christ's birth in Matthew is, in many ways, a tale of two hearts. And to borrow Charles Dickens' famous opening line (no, not the one about Marley, although I admit that would have been timely), it felt like the best of times and the worst of times.

For the Magi, it was the best of times. Led by a bright light in the form of a star, this group of unspecified size journeyed through the night to find the Messiah. In this true King, they discovered the one who embodies hope, peace, joy, and love for all who are weary of the darkness. For them, this was good news of great joy for all people, and they responded with urgency, bringing their very best to honor this King, a response which shows hearts overflowing with joy!

For Herod, it felt like the worst of times. It should have been the best of times. It was the arrival of the true King, the one who would bring light into the darkness. And yet, we hear that Herod is "disturbed" by the news of Jesus' birth, threatened by the arrival of this new King. Why? Because he couldn't surrender his desire to be king. His heart is overgrown with a thorny appetite for the power and wealth afforded to him by his position. It was because of this that he responded not with joy, but with fear, deception, and ultimately violence, seeking to extinguish the light before it could shine.

The difference between these two hearts is found in one simple but life-changing truth: we are not the king. And it's better that way. We don't have to carry the weight of the world or exhaust ourselves trying to create the perfect life. Instead, we can trust the one who truly deserves the throne, the true King who has come to us this season. When we learn to recognize Christ as King like the Magi did, to borrow the last line from Dickens, we'll find a far, far better rest that we have ever known.



Light all the candles and reflect on these questions

Where might you be holding too tightly to control, power, or the desire to rule on your own?

What would it look like to lay those things down and receive the freedom of being loved by a King who came not to grasp for power, but to give himself for the world?

Prayer

Jesus, thank You for coming to be our true King. Forgive us for the ways we cling to our desire to rule our lives. Help us do the hard yet important work of surrendering our hearts to You. Fill our hearts with the joy and wonder of the Magi, that we might receive Your love freely and share it generously with the world around us. Amen.

Notes

Behind the Design

Rooted in feelings of warmth, comfort, and inclusivity, the theme of this year's Advent art is inspired by parts coming together to form a whole (similar to how centuries of prophecy, geopolitics, faithfulness, and exile culminated in the birth of Christ). Visually, the motifs are inspired by two elements:

STAINED GLASS–During the Middle Ages, stained glass pieces told Bible stories to the largely illiterate population and transformed natural light into something divine.

THE QUILTS OF GEE'S BEND–A community of formerly enslaved Black quilters from Boykin, Alabama, made quilts from recycled materials to stay warm during the colder months. Skills passed down through generations transformed what began as a practical solution into an influential contribution to modern art. During the Civil Rights Era, the quiltmakers of Gee's Bend formed the Freedom Quilting Bee, one of the first Black women's cooperatives aimed towards economic freedom. The quiltmakers' participation in the Civil Rights Movement led white county officials to close local ferry access, suppressing the voting access of Gee's Bend residents.

Functioning as both aesthetic and utilitarian, the transformative nature of both visual references highlight the importance of the individual and the communal. Individual elements--glass pieces, quilt squares and thread--that are significant in their own uniqueness intertwine into something larger and interdependent. The end result is a transformation that impacts and changes both the individual and the community.

If you look closely, each panel in the designs utilizes photos of natural elements to symbolize all of creation being reconciled through the birth of Christ. You can see parrot feathers, pine needles, poinsettia leaves, and rock from Utah--all parts of creation waiting to be reconciled.

The candle will grow larger each week as we approach Christmas Eve, culminating in a full stained glass image symbolizing the Light of the World.