











This Advent devotional was written by members of The Alliance Writers Collective, a group of C&MA writers dedicated to becoming more inspired together.

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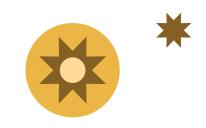
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"I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

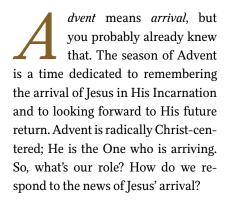
-LUKE 2:10b-11



INTRODUCTION

Prepare to Respond to God Joyfully

BY JAMES B. RUDD

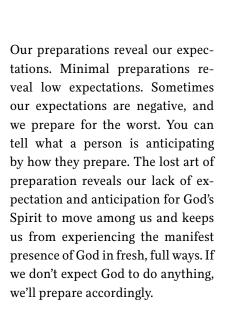


We prepare.

Look at how the arrival of Jesus impacted the lives of those around Him. It took multiple angelic visitations to get Joseph and Mary ready. With

only partial understanding, Zacharias and Elizabeth were preparing for Jesus by anticipating the birth of John the Baptist—whose own message would become "Prepare the way of the Lord!" (see Matt. 3:3). That's a lot of preparation!

When I proposed to my wife, I made preparations for months because I expected it to be a significant moment. When we were expecting each of our kids to be born, we made appropriate preparations to welcome them into our home. We prepare because we expect.



Our role in Advent is to prepare our hearts to joyfully receive the arrival

of Jesus. The busyness of the season can creep in and steal our joy, and the religious over-familiarity of Advent can dull our joy as well. We must resist these joy killers.

Be purposeful, not passive, about preparing to respond to Jesus joyfully this Advent season. Raise your expectations for how you will encounter Him. We must prepare with joy.













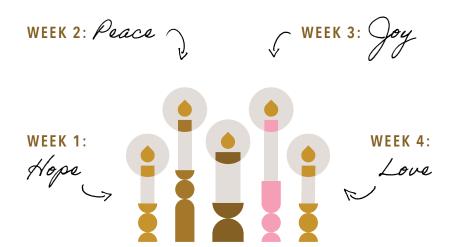


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How to Use This Guide



he Christian tradition of Advent is a season of remembrance, looking ahead, and joyful preparation. Advent spans the four weeks leading up to Christmas, and the passing of each week is represented by lighting a candle with a specific meaning each Sunday.



A fifth and final candle—the Christ candle—is lit on Christmas Eve.

The light of these candles is symbolic of the light of Christ, which pushes back the darkness.

Many churches use the Christ candle to light smaller candles, which are passed throughout the congregation during a candlelight service on Christmas Eve. This practice symbolizes the light of Christ filling the earth as all nations find their joy in Him.

Each devotional in this guide includes an invitation, Scripture readings, and a prayer prompt.

Every Sunday during Advent and on Christmas Eve, meditate on the passages listed, ponder the content provided, and discuss or pray through the prompt. Whether you use this devotional guide over the dinner table, with a small group, or individually, we pray it will enrich your life in Christ this Advent season.

May we lean in individually and collectively to experience all that the Lord has for us as we joyfully prepare to respond to His arrival.

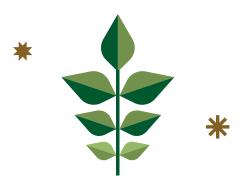




ADVENT WEEK ONE

The Candle of Hope

BY MARV NELSON



AN INVITATION

Prepare to respond to God by coming before the Lord with an expectation of meeting Him in His Word. Come in anticipation of receiving a word directly for you in this moment and in His sacred Scripture. Pray: "Holy Spirit, I invite You to illuminate Your Word to me, speak to me, and empower me to apply Your Word in my life."

READ

GENESIS 3:15; LUKE 1:30-33; JEREMIAH 33:14-16

fter the prophetic ministry of Malachi, silence fell over the Lord's people for 400 years. Tyranny became the norm in their lives. God had made a promise of a King to come, but no one had yet seen this fulfillment, and a hopeless pall began to fall upon the people of God. Yet, into this silence, the Lord brings a message to a young Mary. This message is one of hope.

God's messenger brings news from the Lord to a teenage woman that at last the promise the Lord had made is coming to fruition. The first promise in the Garden, and every promise in between of the One to come, is now unfolding before her eyes. This fulfilled promise also brings with it the hope of the fulfillment of all the other promises made to God's people.

She, Mary, is the one who will bear this great hope. She, highly favored and blessed, has the honor of carrying hope in her womb, delivering hope to the world, and watching hope grow in the souls of everyone who will encounter her Child. The advent of her young Son will be the spark of hope that will ignite a new hope—not just

for the Jews, but for the rest of the world as well.

God said hope would come, and hope has come, and hope's name is Jesus! We now have a new promise, the promise of His return! Let us walk in this expectant hope and wait with bated breath for the return of our hope: Jesus!

PRAYER PROMPT

May we put our hope in the One to come, the promised One who came and will come. Just as He fulfilled His promise then, we can have hope He will fulfill His promise again!

Lord, in a hopeless world, I need the hope only You can bring. Give me the ability to trust in You and Your promises today. Allow me to see the moments in my life where You are answering Your promises, and strengthen me to live a life of hope today. Amen.







ADVENT WEEK TWO

The Candle of Peace

BY JUSTIN THORNTON



AN INVITATION

Prepare to respond to God by identifying areas in your life where you need to experience God's peace. Are there any anxious thoughts robbing you of peace? Is there any tension that only His peace can resolve? Take a few moments and bring these things to God in confession, prayer, or by journaling.

READ

ISAIAH 9:6-7; JOHN 16:33

ur peace should separate us—like a tree still standing after a hurricane, with rubble and chaos strewn about, our peace should draw the focus of those looking on. It should create questions in the disorder and offer us opportunities to point to the One who orders it all. However, that testimony is not easily obtained.

There are times when you can see all the reasons that your life is in disarray. Like blocks on a Jenga tower, a single block is pulled out, and you await the structure's inevitable collapse. You ask God, "Where are you?" You can't help but wonder what resources God offers you in this vulnerable season. Have you ever been this raw?

I have good news. We have intimate access to the Prince of Peace. We actually have peace Himself (Eph. 2:14a)! And as vulnerable as we are, we can turn to peace and beg Him to stand us up in the storm. We can plead that He gives us the miracle of peace in the darkness and chaos. And as He overwhelms us with a peace we have not yet seen, people will take notice. This is one of our greatest testimonies.

PRAYER PROMPT

Lord, as David claimed, will You lie me down in green pastures and lead me by still waters? Will You be my peace? Will You make me a testimony of peace in the conflict of the world around me? Amen.







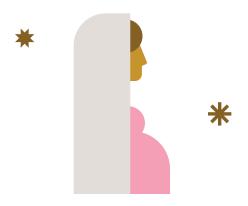




ADVENT WEEK THREE

The Candle of Joy

BY MICHELLE S. LAZUREK



AN INVITATION

Prepare to respond to God by asking Him to make joy the default setting of your soul. Ask Him for joy that goes beyond circumstances and seasons and to help you draw your strength from the joy that He provides (Neh. 8:10).

READ

JAMES 1:2-4

ary's pregnancy was far from comfortable. First, she had to tell Joseph she was pregnant by God. This angered Joseph and caused him to consider divorce. Society targeted her as a promiscuous woman through gossip, ridicule, and shame. The inn-keeper rejected her, claiming there was no room in the inn. This forced Mary to give birth to Jesus in a dirty, cold stable made for farm animals.

Far from ideal circumstances for a King.

Mary then had to endure a long, painful journey as she traveled on the back of a donkey. Yet, she didn't complain. She faced each trial head-on, knowing she was fulfilling her God-given purpose. Mary persevered and gave birth to the Savior, who ultimately granted access to salvation to us all—even those who ridiculed her. Her example is not just for her time but for all times, for all of us who must joyfully face trials and tribulations.

What trials are you facing? Are you facing uncertainty in your finances? Are you facing a health crisis where you're unsure what will happen? Are

you facing ridicule or shame from the people around you? Are you waiting for God to do a miracle in your life?

In this season of waiting, let's demonstrate the same perseverance Mary showed us. Let us joyfully embrace our trials, knowing they are refining us into the people who emulate the Savior of the world.

PRAYER PROMPT

Read Romans 5:3–5 and take a moment to thank God for your trials. Practice gratitude and remind yourself that God works everything for good, even suffering.

Father, may You produce perseverance within us. Let us consider our trials with great joy so we can demonstrate the Christlikeness You desire for us. Amen.









ADVENT WEEK FOUR

The Candle of Love

BY WIL DEL VALLE



AN INVITATION

Prepare to respond to God by reflecting on some of the most loving experiences you've ever had. Who was present? What were the circumstances? What made the experience so memorable and transformative? What do those experiences teach you about the God who is love?

READ

JOHN 3:16-18; LUKE 15:2-7; 1 JOHN 4:7-21

ove—a simple word, yet one of the most meaningful words that can ever truly matter. Love—the subject of many songs, whether celebratory or heartbreaking. Love—a messy emotion that confuses us—hard to understand, hard to grasp. Love—something more than just a word, but a Someone who runs to the lost son and daughter. Love—One who relentlessly desires, hopes, and pursues. Love—the joy of all people.

During this season, so many thoughts fill our minds—from gifts, to-do lists, and prep work to trying to enjoy everything the season has to offer. We remember different moments and ponder how we should spend our time. But do we stop and think, "God loves me"? I mean, really stop and think: God—the Creator of all things, the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End—not only created you and sees you but loves you.

Love is the driving force, the desire, the hope of all people in every nation and tribe, searching to be known and loved. Do we reflect on the fact that there was a moment when love stepped into time? Not only are we searching for love, but like a Shepherd in search of His sheep, love is searching for us—searching for you. To not only love our Savior but to know that He loves us—what a privilege. Jesus was born into our world, into our mess, in love, to live in love, to die in love, and to rise in love.

There is no greater joy than finding true, everlasting, unconditional love. But how much more inexpressible and glorious is the joy of realizing that love has found you? Oh, the joy to be loved, to love, and to love others because He loved us first. God is love.

PRAYER PROMPT

Read 1 John 4:7–21 again. Take a moment. Take a deep breath. Consider for a moment—God loves *you*. Say that out loud: "God loves me."

God, You are love, and You love me. Help me to know the inexpressible, glorious joy of being known and loved by You. May I love others because You have loved me, and may that love truly bring me to the joy of my salvation. In Jesus' name, amen.

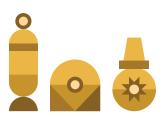




CHRISTMAS EVE

The Candle of Christ

BY CHRISTIAN BALLENGER



AN INVITATION

Prepare to respond to God with this question: "Is my life radically Christ-centered?" Journal through your response and/or talk it over with a trusted friend.

READ

MATTHEW 1:22-23; JOHN 1:14

dvent culminates in the most joyful day in human history. While many were not privy to the events happening in Bethlehem on the first Christmas, those privileged with inclusion in Christ's birth narrative knew they were a part of something special.

Perhaps, though, they did not realize just how amazing this day was. Yes, Israel had finally received a Messiah (King) suitable for the throne. It is also true that the marginalized would be gathered from the margins, as evidenced by the shepherds' angelic visitation. Even still, Mary and Joseph re-

ceiving a miracle baby is what anyone, besides a skeptic, would have concluded was at the heart of the celebration.

These things are precious aspects of the story, yet the full picture is even bigger still. As we contemplate the spiritual significance to Christmas, could it be that we have yet to unwrap the biggest gift? Yes, embedded into this special day is God's desire to address the broken systems of the world, welcome the overlooked, and work miracles; may these things yield in us much rejoicing. Ultimately, though, what we have been anticipating for the last 23 days is a fulfillment of the greatest longing of God's heart: to dwell among His people.

God, from the very beginning, had purposed for humankind to enjoy His presence. The estrangement caused by original sin would need a remedy if God's longing would be fulfilled. After generations of types, shadows, and temporary shelters, God showed up, Himself, to remedy this separation in the person of Jesus Christ.

Now, all those who are His not only have the hope of salvation but also the joyful expectation of God's presence (see Psalm 16:11), now and forever. As we share Jesus with neighbors and celebrate His coming with family, let's make sure to enjoy this special gift.

PRAYER PROMPT

Read Hebrews 10:19–22 and note the use of the word "confidence." Recognize that God wants you to have the expectation of meeting Him in His Throne Room. This access is based not upon merit, but by the blood of Jesus and His desire for you to experience His presence. Start each day by setting aside time to meet with Him.

Lord, thank You for making a way for me to have access to You. Grant my heart the joyful expectation of encountering You and knowing You more. May my heart always esteem Your presence over all other dwellings. There is no place I would rather be than with You. I love You. Amen.







