

Sun, Dec 15 • Practicing Together



On this third Sunday of Advent, gather your people around the Advent wreath, and ...

LIGHT

Light two purple candles and the pink candle on the Advent wreath. You will relight the past two week's candles representing hope and peace, as well as the pink candle which represents joy.

PRAY

God of joy, as we light this candle, we celebrate the good news we have received because of Jesus' birth. Fill our hearts with the joy that comes from knowing your love. Open our hearts to you this Advent season, so when Christ arrives, we are ready to receive him. Amen.

DISCUSS

- What kind of things bring you joy?
- How do you distinguish happiness from joy?

READ LUKE 2:8-18

Do you remember a time when you had to wait for something? Do you recall that thrill of excitement when it finally happened?

Picture the shepherds on the dark, lonely hills outside of Bethlehem—a group of men on the margins of society—suddenly awakened by the brilliant presence of an angel with a special message for them. While they were still dumbfounded, a multitude of angels appeared praising God! Can you even imagine that kind of scene? These men would have never expected to be the first to hear such amazing news, let alone being told in such a magnificent way.

Think about the Magi who traveled a great distance following a star. They had no assurance they would find anything at the end of their journey or if it would all be in vain. They must have felt a thrill of excitement, an uncontrollable joy, when their hope became reality.

Have you ever wondered what it will be like to finally see Jesus? Can you even begin to fathom the joy that will fill your heart?

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WORSHIP

Sing along to this familiar Christmas carol. Let the music fill you with joy as you celebrate the birth of Jesus.

JOY TO THE WORLD

[youtube.com/watch?v=TX6ThHbts5Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TX6ThHbts5Y)

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
and heav'n and nature sing,
And heav'n and nature sing,
and heav'n, and heav'n, and nature sing.

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

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
far as, far as, the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
and wonders, wonders, of His love.

READ - ISAIAH 55:12

These words are part of Isaiah's prophetic invitation to enter the kingdom of heaven. One day, everything broken by the fall, all of creation, will feel with God's children the overwhelming joy that flows into spontaneous praise.

WORSHIP

Listen to or read the words of this song. The music and lyrics create a sense of joy and anticipation.

HOW GREAT OUR JOY

[youtube.com/watch?v=twj7dRA_ONM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twj7dRA_ONM)

While by the sheep we watched at night,
Glad tidings brought an angel bright.

Refrain:

How great our joy! Great our joy!
Joy, joy, joy! Joy, joy, joy!
Praise we the Lord in heav'n on high!
Praise we the Lord in heav'n on high!

There shall be born, so He did say,
in Bethlehem a Child today.

Refrain

Joy, joy, joy!
Praise we the Lord in heav'n on high!

There shall the Child lie in a stall,
this Child who shall redeem us all.

Refrain

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PRAY

God of joy, keep us from seeking happiness in things that do not last. Teach us instead to seek your Son, knowing that he is the source of lasting joy. He came into this world with nothing, yet gave us everything. As we rejoice in the good news of salvation, show us how we can share that joy with others during this season of Advent. Amen.

ACTIVITY FOR THE WEEK

MAKE A GRATITUDE JAR

Decorate a mason jar and leave it on your counter, along with a pen and a stack of small papers. Throughout the remainder of Advent, write your blessings—or things you are thankful for—on the slips of paper then place them in the jar. Try to fill the jar with all of your blessings. Include people you are grateful for and why you're thankful for each person. Read the blessings from the jar on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

If you have kids, you could do a gratitude paper chain instead of a jar. Keep it in a prominent place where it will be seen every day. Make it a game to see how long you can get the chain before Christmas.

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Before you close today, ask everyone in your group if there is anyone they could invite to the Candlelight services. Make a list of these people and pray that God will open the door for these invitations to be received.

Note: the Practicing Together guide for December 22 is included at the end of this PDF, so you can prepare for next week's gathering.

Mon, Dec 16 • Devotion



LUKE 2:10

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”

ISAIAH 55:12

You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

As we approach the third week of Advent, we light the pink candle on the Advent wreath. The color is officially called “rose,” and it represents joy in the liturgical calendar. The third Sunday is called Gaudete (Gow-DEH-tay) Sunday. That is the Latin word “rejoice,” which is the first word of the Sunday prayers. Try it! Gau (sounds like cow) DE (emphasis here) te (sounds like day). Now try it with an Italian accent: “Gaudete!” You got it! “Rejoice!”

As I sat down to prepare this devotion on the topic of joy, I must admit that I stared at a blinking cursor for a long time. Come on, joy ... why am I not inspired? Why aren't the words just bubbling onto the screen? It is not because I am an unhappy person. I simply was not coming up with a compelling argument for joy in the world we inhabit. I'm not sure if it's the discord of the recent election cycle that seems to be clinging to the public atmosphere. Or could it be the media has succeeded in their concerted efforts (from both sides) to make us fear and dread the future?

So, I reached for a book I bought soon after it was published in 1992 entitled *Laugh Again* by Charles Swindoll. He used Paul's letter to the Philippians, sometimes called, “The Letter of Joy,” to restore joy to the center of the Christian life. Dr. Swindoll is, like most great preachers, a master of observation. From Paul's letter to the Philippians, he sketched Paul's character, and inspired me to not only write this devotion, but to cheer up, have some fun, and laugh again! Paul, he argued, was confident in the face of real struggles, like being arrested on false charges and held in prison for two years before being sent to Rome to face the Emperor Nero. He was shipwrecked on the way, and wrote the letter to the Philippians from a Roman prison with no way of knowing what the outcome would be. Nonetheless, he comforted his friends in Philippi, saying that his “circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel” because his imprisonment has made others even more bold to share the good news. Rather than whimpering in the corner of his cell, he made friends with guards who were chained to him and told them stories about Jesus. Paul's contentment was in Christ, not his circumstances, writing, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” This short letter

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contains 16 repetitions of the word *joy*, or its verbal form, *rejoice* (*gaudete*). In Philippians 4:4, we find Paul's secret to joy, even in tough circumstances: "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice!"

The folks in Philippi recognized this pattern in Paul's life. He had been thrown in jail when he preached in their town many years before (see Acts 16). Paul and Silas must have been sore from the beating they had taken that day, but they were rejoicing—*gaudete*—in their cell that night! You could hear them singing all over town! Obviously heaven heard it, too, because in the middle of the night, the earth began to rumble. Earthquakes were not unusual for the people of Philippi, so I imagine they were bracing for a big one. Oddly, the only damage was to the jail house where the walls had shifted enough to break the gates open, and—so weird—the prisoner's shackles were broken, effectively setting prisoners free. The Roman soldier who had been put in charge of the jail house knew he was doomed. If he lost track of the prisoners under his watch, well ... he might as well end his own life, which he prepared to do on the spot. But Paul and Silas stopped him, "No don't harm yourself, all of us are here. No one is going anywhere!" That soldier brought Paul and Silas home to meet his family the next day, and everyone in the household gave their lives to Jesus! I imagine they were still part of the First Church of Philippi when they received this letter of joy, hand delivered from Rome. Imagine their joy when they received Paul's letter. He's in jail again for sharing the Good News of Jesus. Imagine the prayer meetings they held on his behalf, with their ears to the ground, just waiting for the rumble.

While happiness comes and goes with circumstances, joy is a choice. Read and receive Paul's challenge found in Philippians 4:4-5. The paraphrase found in *The Message* is helpful. Notice that Advent is the reason for our joy; the Master, our King, is coming!

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-5

Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute!

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, fill our hearts with joy that transcends our circumstances and anchors us in your presence. Help us to rejoice always, just as Paul did, trusting in your goodness and celebrating the hope we have in Christ. May our joy be a testimony to your love and a light to those around us. Amen.

Tues, Dec 17 • Bible Study



Let's dig into Scripture to discover its rich, biblical nature. As always, let's begin with prayer.

PRAYER: *Oh God of Joy, give me the grace of seeing and feeling the joy you desire for your people. Amen.*

DEFINITION: Biblical joy is a deep, inner gladness that persists regardless of circumstances. It is more substantial than happiness, being rooted in the goodness and faithfulness of God rather than external conditions or possessions.

I've chosen a few different passages to flesh out the nature of joy, according to Scripture.

JAMES 1:1-5, 12

Let's begin with a well-known New Testament passage that mentions joy. James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, wrote a letter to Christians who had been scattered. Scholars think they had fled Jerusalem during times of persecution and were now settling in other places in the empire. So, to religious refugees, he writes the following.

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Read the passage several times, and then answer the following questions.

- What do we learn about joy from this passage?
- Think about how you handled a trial in your life. If James were your pastor or counselor, would he have advised you to do things differently?

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Tues, Dec 17 • Bible Study



JOHN 15:9-11

Now let's turn to a Gospel passage. In this scene, Jesus is in the upper room on the night before the crucifixion, preparing his disciples for his departure. He did a lot of teaching that night, and he touched briefly on the nature of joy. Let's listen in ...

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

After you read this passage a couple of times, answer these questions:

- What is the nature of the joy Jesus is talking about?
- How is this joy achieved?

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NEHEMIAH 8:9-12

Finally, let's have a look at a passage from the prophet, Nehemiah. Just before these words, the people had been at an all-day Bible study. They listened to Scripture being read and explained, and this was their response.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.”

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Now re-read the definition of biblical joy at the beginning of this study. Is there anything you would add or amend based on your study today?

After you have read the passage a few times, answer the following.

- Nehemiah's people had been deep in God's Word. What part did joy play in the scene?
- What do you learn about joy from their example?

Wed, Dec 18 • Imaginative Prayer



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PREPARE

Go to your place of prayer or study and make yourself comfortable. As always, when we use our imagination in prayer, we stay within the boundaries of Scripture. We are seeking to use our memories and our own experiences to fill in the white spaces of the narrative. (Think the “color commentary” of sports announcers.) Adding these details brings the Scriptures to life.

This week our reading is in the book of Isaiah. When Adam and Eve rebelled in the garden, three foundational relationships were disrupted. The relationship between God and humankind, between individual human beings, and between mankind and creation. God’s redemptive plan from the beginning was to restore these relationships. Isaiah is prophesying to a people about to be conquered and taken into exile. But even in the midst of that, a future is promised. In the face of coming hardship, God offers a message of hope and joy! One day, even redeemed creation will leap for joy!

Take a moment to relax; ask the Lord to guide and direct your imagination so that you might see and hear what he has for you in this passage.

READ

Read Isaiah 55:12 silently or aloud.

ISAIAH 55:12

You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

REFLECT

Remember the times of joy in your life. Perhaps you recall a particularly joyful Christmas or birthday when you were little. Maybe it’s a high point in your life, like your wedding day, graduation, or the birth of a child. Let the joy of that moment stir in you. Feel the smile on your face, the filling of your chest, and perhaps tears of gratitude. This is what you bring to the moment. What will it be like when the earth is redeemed? When the trees “clap their hands”? When you “go out in joy”? Fill in some details, what comes to mind? What do you hear? Spend some time in this joyous moment. Take the experience of that joy and allow it to lift you up.

Wed, Dec 18 • Imaginative Prayer



REST

Sit still if you can and allow that joy to build and effervesce within you.

RESPOND

Sing! Perhaps the phrase “Joy to the World!” bubbles out of you. Maybe your own song to the Lord comes at the thought of what he has accomplished and will continue to do. Take a walk and notice the tree branches leafless and naked now adorned with Christmas lights. Delight in the change of the seasons. Feel the joyful anticipation of Advent.

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Thurs, Dec 19 • Visio Divina



Created in 1920, Norman Rockwell's painting for the cover of *Life* magazine, "Is He Coming?" despite its seemingly secular holiday theme, captures something profound about the season of Advent—the joy of anticipation. For so many of us in 20th/21st century America, the wide-eyed and breathless expectation of the coming of Santa Claus is a fond childhood memory. In fact, the very idea of Santa Claus likely had a significant influence on our conception of God.

Each Christmas season, we were reminded that we must "believe that Santa is, and that he is a rewarder of those who stay off the naughty list, leave him milk and cookies by the fireplace, and earnestly try to stay up all night to catch a glimpse of him."

As we get older, we would expect our theology of Santa Claus to change. At some point, we discover our relationship with God is not dependent on our performance. God does not need to be bribed with milk and cookies, or sacrifices, or tithes, or good deeds, in order to love us. But he is indeed a rewarder of those who diligently seek him. And he is still willing to walk through fire to bring us the gift of his love. Perhaps we see a hint of that in Santa's willingness to climb into a hot chimney in the middle of winter—for the joy set before him of seeing those he loves celebrate his presence.

In John 15, Jesus tells his disciples to remain attached to him like a branch to a vine, so that his joy will remain in them. Soon they would experience the greatest loss of their lives as Jesus went to his death on the cross. They learned that their Messiah would die, and that they themselves would be persecuted, tortured, and killed. Yet Jesus tells them all this in order that their joy may be full. Seriously? For their joy? Characteristically slow to understand, after Jesus' arrest, all the disciples deserted him and fled.

It is hard to imagine that "joy" was the reason the disciples fled, and it is not at all difficult to understand their fear. But we know the rest of the story. On the cross Jesus accomplished what he had come for. He rose from the grave. And he sent the Holy Spirit to lead us, to guide us into truth, to advocate for us, and to comfort us. Surely our joy ought to be full. We are reminded of that each year as we celebrate—even in our anticipation—the coming of the light of Christ into this dark world.

In this week's *visio divina* ask yourself if your idea of God truly brings you joy. Perhaps it is time to let go of some of the ways we have confused God with Santa Claus.

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"IS HE COMING" 1920 This work is in the public domain in the United States because it was published (or registered with the U.S. Copyright Office) before January 1, 1929.



Thurs, Dec 19 • Visio Divina

1. PREPARE

Find a quiet space. Take several deep breaths as you quiet yourself. Ask God to open your heart to his presence.

PROMPTS

- How am I feeling as I enter this time of prayer?
- What distractions do I need to release to the Holy Spirit?

2. FIRST LOOK

Observe the image silently, uncritically. Take in the whole image without analyzing. Let your eyes rest on the entire piece. Notice light and dark contrasts, lines, colors, shapes, and figures.

PROMPTS

- What is my first reaction to the whole image?
- Is my eye drawn to any specific part or parts of the image? Which parts?
- Am I responding physically to any aspect of the image (faster or slower pulse, excitement or displeasure, etc.)

3. MEDITATE

Focus prayerfully on particular aspects that draw your attention, asking God to teach you in this moment. What might God be saying through these elements.

PROMPTS

- What emotions or thoughts arise?
- What symbols or elements seem meaningful to me?
- Which figure or part of the image draws me most strongly? Why?
- What tensions or contrasts do I notice?
- Do I identify with one or more of the characters in the painting?
- Can I place myself in the image? Maybe as one of the children.
- How does imagining myself in the scene make me feel?
- What does the image of a child with a candle say about my role as a bearer of Christ's light into the world?

4. PRAY

Enter into a dialogue with God about what you see. Share with him your feelings, questions, and insights. Listen for God's response in your heart. Connect the image and this exercise to your life and faith journey.

PROMPTS

- What questions arise in my heart?
- What invitation might God be extending to me through this image?

5. CONTEMPLATE

Take your time and rest quietly in God's presence. For the moment, let go of words and analysis. Simply sit with the insights received and allow them to deepen your relationship with God.

PROMPTS

- Is any truth or wisdom emerging in me?
- What gift am I receiving through this image?
- How is it that the secular story told by this image can tell us his story at the same time?

6. ACT

Once you have completed the steps above, consider how this experience is calling you to respond. Think about ways to embody the insights you have gained. Plan concrete steps to live out what you've learned.

PROMPTS

- How might this image influence my daily life?
- Who needs to hear what I've learned?
- How can I embody the truth I've discovered?
- What practice might help me remember this insight?

For more about the background and details on the steps of visio divina, as well as a sample, visit crossings.church/visio-divina.

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Fri, Dec 20 • Activity



MAKE A GRATITUDE JAR

Decorate a mason jar and leave it on your counter, along with a pen and a stack of small papers. Throughout the remainder of Advent, write your blessings—or things you are thankful for—on the slips of paper then place them in the jar. Try to fill the jar with all of your blessings. Include people you are grateful for and why you're thankful for each person. Read the blessings from the jar on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

If you have kids, you could do a gratitude paper chain instead of a jar. Keep it in a prominent place where it will be seen every day. Make it a game to see how long you can get the chain before Christmas.

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Sun, Dec 22 • Practicing Together

On this final Sunday of Advent, gather your people around the Advent wreath, and ...

LIGHT

Light two purple candles, the pink candle, then the third purple candle on the Advent wreath. You will relight the past week's purple candles representing hope and peace, the pink candle for joy, and the final purple candle which represents love.

PRAY

God of love, as we light this candle and approach the celebration of Jesus' birth, fill us with your perfect love. Teach us to see others as you see them. Awaken our hearts to you this Advent season, so when Christ arrives, we are ready to receive him. Amen.

DISCUSS

- Spend a few minutes making a list of things you love. (Have everyone share a few things from their lists.)
- What do you think of when you hear the word "love"?

Love is one of those words in English that is capable of a variety of nuances. We say we love pizza or ice cream, but we also say we love our spouse, parent, or child. Although we use the same word, the meaning is different based on the object of our love.

The New Testament was originally written in Greek, a language with distinct words for different kinds of love, including *philia* (brotherly love), *eros* (sexual love), and *agape* which is associated with the divine love God has for us. It is a pure, sacrificial, unconditional love that prioritizes the good of the other and expects nothing in return.

READ JEREMIAH 31:3 & JOHN 3:16-21

Through this week's focus on love, we are reminded that God did not leave or forsake his people. On the contrary, he loved us so much he sent his son to live among us—Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus loves us so much he gave up his heavenly home to become human and do what humankind was incapable of doing. In the ultimate act of love, he sacrificed his own life to save us and reconcile us to God. Our response must be one of awe and wonder at such great love.

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WORSHIP

Read or listen to these songs. Praise God for his love and care for you. Cry out, like the Psalmist, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits” (Psalm 103:1-2).

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MARY, DID YOU KNOW

[youtube.com/watch?v=UVsGNAYfFe0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVsGNAYfFe0)

Mary, did you know that your baby boy
would one day walk on water?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy
would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy has
come to make you new?
And this child that you delivered, will
soon deliver you.

Mary, did you know that your baby boy
would give sight to a blind man?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy
would calm the storm with his hand?
Did you know that your baby boy has
walked where angels trod?
When you kiss your little baby, you kiss
the face of God.
Mary, did you know?

The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the
dead will live again.
The lame will leap, the dumb will speak
the praises of the Lamb.

The praises of the Lamb.

Mary, did you know that your baby boy
is Lord of all creation?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy
would one day rule the nations?
Did you know that your baby boy is
heaven's perfect Lamb?
And that sleeping child you're holding
is the great, I Am.
Did you know?

NOEL

youtu.be/aBZ6Lqx1OHk

Love incarnate, love divine
Star and angels gave the sign
Bow to babe on bended knee
The Savior of humanity
Unto us a Child is born
He shall reign forevermore

Noel, Noel
Come and see what God has done
Noel, Noel
The story of amazing love!
The light of the world, given for us
Noel

Son of God and Son of man
There before the world began
Born to suffer, born to save
Born to raise us from the grave
Christ the everlasting Lord
He shall reign forevermore

Noel, Noel
Come and see what God has done
Noel, Noel
The story of amazing love!
The light of the world, given for us
Noel

Noel, Noel
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Noel

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Let's return to John 3:16 and focus on the last two words of the verse: *eternal life*. What do these words bring to mind? If you are like most people, you think about heaven. However, what Jesus came to bring us is much more than a very, very long life at some point in the future. Rather, it is a quality of life that is available to us now. It is life with God now, the capacity to live in step with Jesus in this life. This gift of love was costly: it cost Jesus his life. Rejecting the gift is costly for us. As Dallas Willard so eloquently wrote, the cost is "... abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God's overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10)."

The love that motivated Jesus to come to us in human form is illustrated by light during Advent and in the beginning of John's gospel: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4-5). Whenever you see Christmas lights shining brightly at night, let them remind you of God's great love for you.

PRAY

Heavenly Father, the whole meaning of Christmas can be explained in one little four-letter word ... LOVE. Jesus, you came and showed us how to live and how to love, at great cost to yourself. May we be inspired to love one another as you have loved us. Amen.

Consider going to look at Christmas lights together as a group!

ACTIVITY FOR THE WEEK

BE A SECRET ADMIRER

Choose someone you will pray for every day this week, and find at least one thing you can do secretly for that person each day. (Do a chore they don't like doing, leave a sticky note with words of encouragement, give a gift, send a card, etc.) expecting nothing in return.

Note: An optional practicing guide for December 25 is included in this PDF