



# Sun, Dec 22 • Practicing Together

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

## LIGHT

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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

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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

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- 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

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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.

Practicing Together

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Reading

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Digging

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Listening

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Seeing

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Doing



# Sun, Dec 22 • Practicing Together

## 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).

Practicing Together

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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.

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](https://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  
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Noel



## Sun, Dec 22 • Practicing Together

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.

*SEE WEDNESDAY FOR LIGHTING OF ADVENT WREATH ON CHRISTMAS DAY.*

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# Mon, Dec 23 • Devotion

## LUKE 1:26-38 ESV

**In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”**

**And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”**

**And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be borne will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.**

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### 1. HOPE

We come now to our final week of Advent reflections. Looking back, we can see how, in the first week, the word “hope” introduced us to a season of expectation and anticipation of deliverance from not only the darkness that too often invades our lives, but deliverance from all the darkness that pervades this fallen world. As the prophet Isaiah put it, “The people living in darkness have seen a great light” (Isaiah 9:2). Now, because we know who that true light is (John 1:9), we can rest with assurance of God’s great outcome even as the world, as it so often does, seems to fall apart.

### 2. PEACE

In week two, we were invited into “peace” by recognizing that our stories, with all of their fearful struggles and fleeting joys, are part of The Story. We can return again and again to that all-encompassing Story because the author and finisher of that story and our stories has promised an unimaginably good ending—peace for our souls, not as the world gives, but the true Shalom of God.



## Mon, Dec 23 • Devotion

### 3. JOY

In week three, we admitted that “joy” can sometimes be a struggle. Dismay over difficulties in our own lives, the wayward culture, or even the divisions surrounding a national election can rob us of joy. Our souls long for light and love in this world. Our somber reflection on that absence is an essential step in the Advent journey. In her book, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, theologian Fleming Rutledge reminds us that “Advent begins in the dark.” When it is dark, really dark, our souls shy away from rejoicing. But there is a way out of the darkness. Brandon Lake makes a persuasive case for the need to exercise the gift of exhortation—upon ourselves—as he sings,

“Come on my soul.  
 Don’t you get shy on me.  
 Lift up your song.  
 Cause you’ve got a lion inside of those lungs.  
 Get up and praise the Lord!”

The apostle Paul could not have said it better, but his words may be more familiar to many, “Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). Try it. You will discover that joy really is a choice.

### 4. LOVE

In the very first season of Advent, Israel was in an extremely dark place. It had been 400 years since anyone could have honestly said, “The word of the Lord came to me ...” During that time, they were a people in exile, living in Babylon. Then the Persians conquered the Babylonians and let Israel return home only to be overrun by Alexander the Great, followed by a period of imperial domination by Egypt, and another by the Seleucids (Syria). The Seleucids were overthrown in a revolt led by Judah Maccabee, and Israel had almost a century of independence—until the Romans showed up, 63 years before Jesus was born, and brought with them the “Pax Romana,” the peace of Rome. (See Week 2 and John 14:27 for a reminder of what Jesus thinks of “the peace the world gives.”)

Yes, it was dark. You could say the first Advent came at the darkest moment in Israel’s history—perhaps even the darkest moment in human history. Although the Lord always hears the cries of his people, and he is never late, he seldom does what we expect. Instead of a powerful Messiah and conquering hero who would overturn the Roman occupation and restore the greatness of the nation of Israel once and for all, he enters this world as ... a baby. The creator of the universe comes to humanity as the most helpless of human beings. He is born to the least powerful of human beings ... a young girl in a world that treated all women like property and

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would show very little grace, if any, toward a girl who, by all appearances, must have violated every kind of cultural and legal boundary. Worse than being pregnant out of matrimony, she was betrothed to an honorable man named Joseph. Mary was contractually obligated to become his wife and to live accordingly.

Contrary to the vicious rumors that followed Mary from that point, Scripture reveals her character, her courage, and her love of God. Against the pressures of law, culture, and religious tradition, with the full knowledge that she would be risking her own life and the life of her baby, she responded to the angel Gabriel, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Jesus was not yet conceived and Mary was already living into the truth of John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Like the child she would bear, motivated by the purest love, she moved willingly into her God-given destiny.

Whatever darkness we may experience in this life, Advent reminds us that the true light has come—and is coming—into the world. And the darkness has not now, nor will it ever, overcome it.

### PRAYER

Loving Father, we are thankful for your servant Mary who surrendered to your plan for her life. In her obedience, your eternal Word took on flesh and came as the Light of the world. You did not leave your people in darkness. Instead you sent a Light that could never be diminished. Open our minds to your Spirit as we prepare to celebrate Jesus coming as a baby to light up our world and as we look forward to his second coming. Amen.



## Tues, Dec 24 • Lectio Divina

### JOHN 3:16-21

**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.**

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John's Gospel is different from the other Gospels. He records Jesus having two very profound conversations, one with a Samaritan woman and one with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. With the Samaritan woman, Jesus tells her directly and simply that he is the Messiah and with his coming she will be able to worship wherever she is. With Nicodemus, Jesus tries to convey to him the gift of God and his Father's motivation. This is the passage to read for today.

### PREPARE

Find your quiet place, perhaps near the Christmas tree or your Advent candles, and take a few relaxed breaths. You are here to sit with Jesus. Offer a few words of gratitude for this time, and his word for you. Ask for his help in hearing what he would share with you in this passage.

### READ

Read John 3:16-21. Read the passage softly aloud. "Listen" for a thought or phrase, or "see" a word that catches your attention. Take your time with this.

## Tues, Dec 24 • Lectio Divina



### REFLECT

Read the passage again, noting that phrase or word that caught your attention. What about it attracts you? What thoughts are brought up? Is there a situation in your life this might address? Consider, why this phrase or word? Is there a reminder of something to be addressed in your life? Perhaps a sense of urgency of a spiritual nature, or a ray of hope?

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### REST

Read the passage a final time. Relax in the presence of the One who loves you most. Listen to his response to you.

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### RESPOND

Read through the passage again. Have a conversation with the Lord about what you're pondering. Let it be as if you are sharing a cup of coffee or tea with him at the beginning or end of the day. Tell him what is in your mind or on your heart. Let this be a conversational kind of prayer.

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### RESOLVE

Decide to live in the light of your conversation with the Lord. The light of his Word is a gift to us. Receive this gift of love in the spirit it has been given and be on the lookout for its effects in you and even in those around you.

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# Activity



## 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.

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# Sun, Dec 25 • Christmas Day: Christ Candle

## LIGHT

Light all three purple candles and the pink candle, then light the white candle.

## READ LUKE 2:1-20

The white candle represents Christ’s purity—and reminds us he was the spotless lamb of God. Traditionally, it is lit on Christmas Day (or Christmas Eve). The season for watching and waiting is over. Christ is here. God’s promises have been fulfilled. Light has entered a dark world desperately in need of his grace. The Savior has come ... and life will never be the same.

## WORSHIP (OPTIONAL)

Listen to these songs, and sing along in celebration of Jesus’ birth. Rejoice in the knowledge that God sent his Son as the light of the world to show us his glory and to give us new life.

### O COME, ALL YE FAITHFUL

[youtube.com/watch?v=InDEkPiUi2g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InDEkPiUi2g)

Oh, come, all ye faithful,  
Joyful and triumphant,  
Oh, come ye, oh, come ye, to Bethlehem  
Come and behold him,  
Born the King of angels;

*Refrain:*

Oh, come, let us adore him,  
Oh, come, let us adore him,  
Oh, come, let us adore him,  
Christ the Lord.

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation;  
Oh, sing, all ye citizens of heav’n above!  
Glory to God, all glory in the highest;

*Refrain*

Yea, Lord, we greet Thee,  
Born this happy morning;  
Jesus, to Thee be all glory giv’n;  
Word of the Father,  
Now in flesh appearing;

*Refrain x4*

### OH, HOLY NIGHT

[youtube.com/watch?v=xrWX2RzjYlw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrWX2RzjYlw)

Oh, holy night, the stars are brightly shining;  
It is the night of our dear Savior’s birth!

Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
‘Til he appeared and the soul felt its worth.

A thrill of hope, the weary soul rejoices,  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.

Fall on your knees, Oh, hear the angel voices!  
Oh, night divine, oh, night when Christ was born!  
Oh, night divine, oh, night, oh, night divine!

Truly he taught us to love one another;  
His law is love and His Gospel is peace.

Chains shall he break for the slave is our brother,  
And in his name all oppression shall cease.

Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,  
Let all within us praise his holy name!

Christ is the Lord! Oh, praise his name forever!  
His pow’r and glory evermore proclaim!  
His pow’r and glory evermore proclaim!

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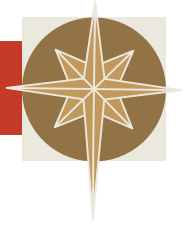
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# Sun, Dec 25 • Christmas Day



## PRAY

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God of light, you sent your Son, Jesus, to shine bright like the sun, lighting the way for all who walk in darkness. May the light of Christ's hope, peace, joy, and love shine bright in us, that we may be ready to welcome him today and every day. Amen.

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