



WELCOME
TO ADVENT

If you are like most people, the holiday season brings a slight sense of anxiety. You may be wondering if you'll find the perfect gifts this year and when you will have time to wrap them between social gatherings requiring you to look your best; all of which means shopping, which means crowds, which means parking lots, which means an extra shot of espresso in your peppermint latte!

Before you get on with all of that, however, we'd like to invite you to slow down for a few minutes, and enter this space as a retreat. Each of the following banners represents a significant element of the Season of Advent. There is no need to rush because these banners will be displayed throughout the Christmas season, so feel free to return often. Consider taking a deep breath between each banner, and pause to ask God if he wants you to integrate these insights into your life right now. If not, great, but if something here resonates with you, receive it as a voice in the wilderness, "The King is coming! Straighten the way for his imminent arrival" (John 1:23).



GOD'S PRESENCE

Have you ever wondered what God wants for Christmas? God's deep desire has never changed; *he wants to be present with his people*. Genesis tells us he walked in the garden with Adam and Eve, but human sin fractured that easy relationship. From that moment, God began to work out a plan to be with his people once and for all. Throughout the Old Testament, God makes a few appearances in the form of a burning bush, or a cloud of smoke, but his desire to be deeply, personally present with his people would have to wait.

The word "advent" means coming or arrival and is woven into the fabric of the church to signify that the wait is over. God will be present with his people by becoming one of us! For this reason, pregnancy—the state of joyous expectation—is the perfect metaphor for Advent. We prepare our homes and our hearts ... and wait expectantly for the Christ Child.

Jesus' birth was his first advent, and we believe he will come again to reconcile all things to himself—that will be his second advent. How can we inhabit a sense of anticipation, expectation, and longing in our everyday lives?



GABRIEL

The Christmas story features many angels, but none as prominent as the angel Gabriel. The Greek word, *angelos*, simply means messenger. Throughout Israel's history, God often spoke through prophets and preachers, but sometimes he sent a very special messenger, a heavenly angel, to deliver his message. Gabriel was known in Jewish history as an archangel. His high rank was assumed because of his various appearances in both the Old and New Testaments, including twice to the prophet Daniel. However, it is clear his conversation with Mary, a teenage girl in the village of Nazareth, was by far his most important assignment. Gabriel was chosen among the angels to deliver God's invitation to Mary to play a key role in the story of salvation. This key event is known in church tradition as "the annunciation," or the announcement (Luke 1:26-38). It is the mysterious moment in which, as the apostle John describes it, "the Word became flesh" (1:14).

ZECHARIAH

The gospel of Luke opens with the story of Zechariah, a priest boldly described as *“righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord”* (1:6). One day, while he was in the temple performing his priestly duties, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and declared that God had heard Zechariah’s lifelong prayer for a child. The angel explained that even though they were too old to bear children, he and his wife Elizabeth would soon have a son, and they were to name him John. One can hardly blame Zechariah for being fearful and “deeply troubled,” but it was because of his unbelief that Gabriel declared Zechariah would be mute until the baby was born. Imagine having interacted with Gabriel, and then being denied the capacity to speak of it! Just as the angel had said, Zechariah’s ability to speak returned after the baby was born. Luke’s Jewish readers would have immediately recognized the biblical theme of barrenness as a signal to a miraculous and very important birth. This baby would become known as John the Baptist.





ELIZABETH

Luke's gospel tells us when Mary first understood that she was pregnant, she "hurried" to Elizabeth's house. Elizabeth was an older woman, part of Mary's own extended family, and wife of the priest Zechariah. But none of these things explain why Mary wanted to be with her. It was because the angel Gabriel had told Mary that Elizabeth, too, was "in her sixth month." She knew Elizabeth would understand. When Elizabeth heard Mary calling her, Luke tells us the baby in her womb "leaped for joy." Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months, likely long enough to help Elizabeth with her labor.

Luke ends this part of the story with the Magnificat, Mary's Song of Praise (1:46-55). We can imagine these lines composed over tea and hummus, as Mary and Elizabeth recounted the messianic prophecies from the Scriptures, feeling each other's bellies and shaking their heads with joy to be living out the ancient narratives. By giving birth to John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, Elizabeth participated, body and soul, in the arrival of the kingdom of God.

JOHN THE BAPTIST



During this era of the Roman Empire, when the emperor was traveling around his conquered lands, it was customary for workers to prepare the roads ahead of time. When the emperor finally arrived, he would be preceded by a professional herald, or a “cryer” who would literally announce the coming of the king. This is the prophetic role that John the Baptist played in the life of Jesus. The prophet Malachi predicted a special messenger would prepare the way (or road) and announce the Messiah’s arrival.

John was a preacher who called for repentance and made a practice of baptizing those who believed. He was known for his eccentric lifestyle, and his ministry setting was in the countryside, rather than the urban centers. His presentation style was harsh, filled with the zeal of a person who knows his calling. He had the privilege of baptizing Jesus himself, initiating Jesus’ earthly ministry. John’s prophetic mission was accomplished when he pointed at Jesus and declared, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me’” (John 1:29-30).

BETROTHAL

According to the customs of the time, Jewish parents selected their children's future spouses. They negotiated the terms of the union, and an official contract was finalized. When the time was right, the young bride and groom would enter the final phase of engagement: betrothal. During this one year period, the groom's job was to prepare a home for his bride, while she focused on mastering the skills required to run a household. This is the specific phase Joseph and Mary were in at the opening scene of the nativity story.

Even though they were not yet married, their betrothal was legal and binding; breaking it off would require a certificate of divorce. Marital laws of fidelity were strictly enforced. Couples did not live together before the wedding ceremony and consummation. If there was any evidence of sexual experience on the bride's part, not only would the marriage be annulled, but the bride could be severely punished, even to the point of execution by stoning. This is why Mary's pregnancy was not a small matter, and it weighed heavily on Joseph's heart. He had to make a difficult decision in light of Mary's unlikely story.





MARY

God chose this young woman to not only bear his son, but to nourish and protect him, to arrange for his education, and to teach him how to live in the world that he came to save. Everything about her seems ordinary, but Gabriel's words proclaim her great status: "Greetings, *O favored one*, the Lord is with you." When he saw she was "greatly troubled" he used that word again: "You have found favor with God." As the angel explained that she would give birth to the Son of God, she struggled to make sense of it. Her now famous response serves as the defining statement of surrender, "Behold, I am the Lord's servant. Let it be to me according to your word." Because she said yes, she would be the only human being who witnessed the first "breath of heaven" when Jesus was born, and the last, as he died on the cross. Because she said yes, she held the person of God within her body and in her arms.

It is noteworthy that the same word, "favored," here applied to Mary, is later applied to each one of us: "For it is by grace (favor) you have been saved." Mary's role is unique, never to be repeated. But you are also invited to surrender. Will you say yes?

JOSEPH

Matthew's gospel describes Joseph as a righteous man, a humble carpenter, who desperately wanted to do the right thing in a difficult situation. Mary's story was, simply and literally, incredible. Although the law permitted the harshest treatment, he was "unwilling to put her to shame." Having made the difficult decision to divorce her quietly, Joseph fell into a fitful sleep. That's when it happened.

The angel Gabriel appeared to him in a dream, saying "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21). As a result, Joseph courageously accepted the invitation to step into a bigger story, to be part of God's plan for redemption. Sometimes, the most unexpected callings come to ordinary people who respond with extraordinary faith and love.





NAZARETH

“Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?” Nathaniel said what everyone was thinking. Nazareth would never have amounted to anything had it not been the hometown of the virgin Mary, and her fiance, Joseph. Her untimely pregnancy probably raised some eyebrows in the community. However, since the baby was born while they were out of town—after which they fled to Egypt for a few years—when they returned with the toddler Jesus, no one seemed to think much of it. In fact, Jesus would live a quiet existence here in Nazareth for nearly thirty years, seemingly unremarkable among its inhabitants. He laughed with his friends, attended synagogue, and learned carpentry from his father. Maybe because of their familiarity, when the time came for Jesus to begin his itinerant preaching ministry, the people of Nazareth categorically rejected him: *“Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?’* And they took offense at him” (Matthew 13:55-57).

How often do we, too, overlook God’s activity because it doesn’t conform to our expectations?



KING HEROD

Herod the Great was king of Judea at the time of Jesus' birth. The Jewish people hated him mainly because of his blatant disregard of God's laws. Because he self-identified as a Jew, however, Rome found him adequate to fill the puppet role, "King of the Jews." On one hand, Herod sponsored impressive building projects still admired by tourists today, including the city of Caesarea, Herod's tribute to Roman culture, and several royal palaces of his own. On the other hand, he is well known for his tyrannical reign and frantic paranoia regarding the Jewish throne. After he ordered one of his wives and three of his own sons to be killed on the charges of conspiracy, the emperor Octavian is reported to have said, "It is better to be Herod's pig than his son."

Herod's fear took over when the Magi arrived from the East looking for the newborn Jewish king. He ordered Roman soldiers to kill all Jewish boys in Bethlehem under the age of two (Matthew 2:16-18). Herod thought his actions would eliminate the threat of a new king. Little did he know that this king would rule more than just Judea.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE



The Roman Empire dominated the Mediterranean world at this time in history. For all its evils, it created an unprecedented opportunity for the Good News of the Gospel to spread. First, while they stretched their borders by invasion and force, they managed to achieve an era of relative peace and prosperity, referred to as the Pax Romana. Second, in order to mobilize the vast Roman Army, they built an amazing system of paved roads connecting countries and cultures. The Roman Empire literally paved the way for the gospel to spread throughout the ancient world—the Apostle Paul and his missionary teams traveled these very roads. Finally, Rome leveraged the Greek language, spoken and understood throughout the empire, for their benefit. With these three elements in place, the message of the gospel was given wings.

Despite such progress, tension simmered between the Jewish people and their Roman occupiers. Taxes were crippling, discrimination was pervasive, and irreverence toward the Jewish religion created a constant sense of insult. The people longed for their Messiah to deliver them from Roman oppression, but God's plan was much bigger than that. He came to save them from the ultimate oppression of sin and death.

THE HOLY LAND

What we consider “The Holy Land”—not a first century term—is the stretch of land roughly located between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Throughout history, this area has acted as a gateway between the eastern world and the western world, which are not only geographic locations, but ideologies and ways of thinking. It has always been a place of profound historical, religious, and political significance whose rightful ownership has been, and continues to be, a source of constant and bitter dispute.

During the century before Jesus’ arrival, an unprecedented diversity of cultures, religious traditions, and political forces converged here, creating a political climate that was often turbulent, with local uprisings and religious tensions. In sharp relief, Jesus’ message of love, compassion, and the Kingdom of God resounded over the anger and rage of his day. As his followers who live in the context of our own clashes of culture and ideology, we should imitate not only his message, but his actions as the Prince of Peace.





BETHLEHEM

Nestled in the Judean countryside, about six miles south of Jerusalem sits the city of Bethlehem. Luke's gospel tells us Caesar Augustus issued a decree that an empire-wide census be taken, requiring every household to return to their ancestral hometown to register. Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, descended from the line of David, so he packed up the supplies needed for the journey, and along with a very pregnant Mary, began the four-day trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Bethlehem, which means "house of bread," had a rich biblical history long before Jesus' birth. Naomi's daughter-in-law, Ruth, left her homeland to accompany Naomi to Bethlehem, where she met and married Boaz. They were the great grandparents of Israel's iconic King David. Bethlehem was David's birthplace and where the great prophet Samuel discovered and anointed him as the future king.

Centuries later, God made his quiet entrance into the world. Here in the small town of Bethlehem, Jesus—the long-awaited King and Messiah—was born.

PROPHECIES

When thinking of prophets, it is easy to imagine gray-bearded men uttering predictions about the distant future. God, however, usually called a prophet to confront a current situation and challenge his own generation to turn back to the Lord.

The Messianic prophecies were unique because they did, indeed, point to a distant future. They were spoken hundreds of years before Jesus lived, creating a sense of hope and expectation for the coming of the Messiah as one who would establish his eternal kingdom on earth. Micah, Malachi, Zechariah, and Isaiah are prophets who described the birth, ministry, suffering, and death of Jesus, though they never used his name. New Testament writers quoted them, demonstrating that Jesus had fulfilled their prophecies. For example, Matthew cited this passage from Isaiah:

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him 'Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us'" (Matthew 1:22-23).

Scholars continue to discover connections to Jesus of Nazareth in the Hebrew Scriptures; some say he fulfilled over 300 prophecies relating to the Messiah. The prophets painted a portrait of the coming Messiah, and Jesus brought that portrait to life.



JESUS

Have you ever heard anyone ask, “Were you born in a barn?” Did you think they were talking about Jesus, who actually was? Jesus had a very humble beginning; most of his life was lived in obscurity. He was about thirty years old when he launched his public ministry, which lasted only three years—that means ninety percent of his life was, dare we say, *unremarkable*? Among all four Gospels, there are only three brief snapshots of Jesus’ life between his birth and his baptism at age thirty: 1) his circumcision when he was eight days old; 2) the visit of the Magi sometime in his first two years; and 3) the day, at the age of twelve, when he became so engrossed in conversation in the temple that he missed his family’s departure for home. Other than these interactions, his first thirty years are unrecorded. Does that mean they were wasted? It seems more likely that in these anonymous years, God was patiently working to form the human character of Jesus. Luke tells us he “grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (2:52).





SHEPHERDS

Shepherds in ancient Judea held a modest occupation. They spent days and nights in solitude, protecting their sheep from danger and leading them to fresh pastures. Known for their resilience, resourcefulness, and deep connection to the land and its rhythms, shepherds hold an important place in biblical literature. They are often used as a metaphor for the presence of God himself.

One quiet night in Bethlehem, while a group of shepherds were gathered on a hillside, a radiant angel suddenly appeared. According to Luke, “the glory of the Lord” illuminated the darkness, and the messenger proclaimed, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (2:10-11). Once their eyes adjusted to the light, they saw the sky filled with angels praising God!

When the angels left, they rushed to find the newborn Jesus. He was in a manger, just as the angel had described. For reasons we don’t fully understand, God opened the eyes of this unlikely group of friends, allowing them to be the first witnesses of the Messiah’s arrival and to be the first to declare the “good news” to others.



MAGI

Ancient kings employed Magi, or Wise Men, for guidance regarding world affairs. They believed the “movement of the stars” indicated significant events taking place on earth and that gods revealed themselves in the changing patterns of the night sky. Compelled by an unusual star that seemed to indicate the birth of a Jewish king, the Magi set off on a pilgrimage. A spiritual pilgrim has been defined as “one who goes on a journey in the hope of seeing God in a new way.” The Magi were searching for God’s activity in the world, and their journey led them to Jesus.

We don’t know how many were in the group or how far they traveled, but the investment of time and money reveals the extraordinary nature of their hope and expectations as they followed the star to Bethlehem. When they found the baby Jesus, they were overjoyed and immediately bowed down and worshiped him. They presented him with treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Warned in a dream not to report back to King Herod, they returned to their homes in the East. They were pilgrims on the way to Bethlehem ... but missionaries on the way home!

GIFTS OF THE MAGI

Because the Magi were in search of a king, they carried with them extravagant gifts to offer in his presence: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In addition to their costly and rare nature, the selected gifts were somewhat easy to pack and transport the long distance they would need to travel.

Gold was of such value that it was used as currency, as well as the material for crafting only the most precious objects, especially items of a sacred nature. Frankincense was a costly spice burned by priests in temple worship. Myrrh, an expensive resin, was harvested from tree bark. It was used in perfume because of its pleasant aroma and as an ingredient in holy anointing oils, like the incense used in Israel's tent of meeting (Exodus 30). Myrrh was also used medicinally to treat injuries. It was offered to Jesus at his birth and then again at his death. In his gospel, Mark records the gesture, "And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it" (15:23). When the Magi finally discovered Jesus, they bowed and worshiped him, then offered their treasures.





SIMEON & ANNA

Luke records evidence that the Holy Spirit had been preparing seekers for Jesus' arrival long before his birth. Two significant encounters occur the day Mary and Joseph took young Jesus to the temple as required by Mosaic Law. First, Simeon—a righteous and devout man who had been waiting for “Israel’s consolation”—saw Jesus, took the child into his arms, and quoted a song he may have written and memorized for this very occasion. “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel” (2:29-32). The Holy Spirit had revealed to a younger Simeon that he would not die before he saw God’s anointed one.

After Simeon’s declaration, an elderly prophet named Anna—who had been waiting decades for “the redemption of Jerusalem”—also recognized Jesus at first glance. She told everyone willing to listen who this child was. If Simeon and Anna were acquainted, and it is likely they were, they must have shared this moment with great joy! Both Simeon and Anna had grown old looking for the promised Messiah, and their vision was so trained that they recognized him even as an infant.



OUR JOURNEY

The birth of Jesus 2000 years ago defines the trajectory of our lives today. We're invited into a story bigger than our own, a story that began when Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden, the place of perfect peace and communion with God. Human history is the story of God bringing his people—bringing us—out of exile and back home again.

The nativity story opens among people who are waiting for and expecting a savior. Similar to those Israelites, our stories are lived in a state of longing and hoping. While we are already living in the kingdom Jesus established in his first advent, it is not the kingdom in its fullness. John paints a picture of that fullness in Revelation 21 when he describes the “new heaven and new earth” we will experience when Jesus returns to fully establish God’s dwelling place among his people. For now, we find ourselves in the middle of the story, in the “already, not yet.” Like the Magi, we search for God’s presence in our lives, and as Jesus said, “Seek and you will find.”

CANDLELIGHT SERVICES

A tradition at Crossings, the Christmas Candlelight service is the culmination of the Advent season in a moving display of light. From a solitary candle in a darkened sanctuary, the light is passed from one person to the next until the whole room is illuminated. This inspiring moment is almost always accompanied by the congregation singing “Silent Night.”

The expanding candlelight represents the coming of Jesus into the world and the spreading of the gospel. Matthew claimed that Jesus fulfilled the words of Isaiah, “The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, light has dawned” (4:16).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared that we are the light of the world. When we place our faith in him and share his love with the world around us, we are reflecting his light.

While the warm glow of candles may kindle happy moments with loved ones, this moment is meant to point us to something so much greater. It symbolizes the hope our Savior brings to even the darkest of places of our lives and our world.





ADVENT WREATH

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ADVENT WREATH CANDLES

*The four outer candles typically represent hope, peace, joy, and love;
the white candle in the center represents the purity of Christ.*

HOPE

(Purple) The first candle is a reminder of the prophets who foretold the birth of Jesus, inspiring hope in the Israelites long before his birth. With hope—best described as longing or expecting something to happen—we wait for the day Christ will come again.

PEACE

(Purple) The second candle calls to mind the angels proclaiming “peace and goodwill,” as well as Isaiah’s reference to the Messiah as the “Prince of Peace.” Jesus offers everlasting peace, regardless of our circumstances.

JOY

(Pink) The third candle represents the joy and gladness of the shepherds as they hurried to the manger to find the promised Savior. As Christians, we still rejoice in the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ!

LOVE

(Purple) The fourth candle reminds us God has not forgotten or abandoned the world. Without a Savior, there is no hope of redemption, but God, rich in mercy and grace, sent his Son as the ultimate act of love our world has ever known.

CHRIST CANDLE

(White) This candle symbolizes the light of Christ coming into the darkness of our world. The birth of Jesus changed everything; he sparked a light that no amount of darkness can overcome. This candle is usually lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.