



JOURNEY THROUGH
ADVENT
ADVENT DEVOTIONAL BOOKLET

Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas. It begins our journey to the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and then continues to Epiphany on January 6th.

Through this journey we encounter the people who foretold of our Lord's coming, those who met the baby Jesus, to the parents – Mary and Joseph who were chosen so carefully by God to help bring up Jesus as a human and be moulded in character and experiences. God had these plans since the world began and over Advent we see this journey unfold. In the devotions we also uncover some of the meanings behind the different traditions and actions we have over Christmas.

Each one of these devotionals focus on a different person or object that we have used traditionally to help us celebrate this wonderful and miraculous season. May you use these devotionals to strengthen your understanding of this season and through to the New Year. Each devotion contains a short thought, bible reading and prayer. I would encourage you to read the Bible readings along with the devotion as they lead you on the **Journey through Advent**.

***May your journey through the Advent Season
be a blessing to your life as we then celebrate
the birth of Jesus at Christmas!***



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What is Advent?

1st Sunday in Advent

Read: John 1:9-14

***“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”
John 1:14 (NIV)***

Advent, as we know it, is the season in the church year which leads up to Christmas. The meaning of the word Advent is that of a ‘coming’ or an ‘arrival’. The whole focus of the season of Advent is in the celebration of the birth of Christ (the First Advent), and the expectation of the return of Christ (the Second Advent). This season celebrates the truth about God in the coming of Christ as a baby. Through this, all of creation may be restored in their relationship with God.

The Advent season has the spirit of expectation, anticipation, preparation and longing. There is also the hope that the Messiah, the anointed one, will come to bring peace and righteousness to the world. Advent is a celebration, a time of joy and happiness as we await the coming of the King. The purpose of Jesus’ coming into the world is to reveal God and His grace through Jesus’ life and teaching, and also through His suffering, death and resurrection. To reflect this, Advent was originally a time of repentance similar to the season of Lent which is why the liturgical colour of Lent and Advent, purple, were historically the same to welcome the coming of the King. Royal blue is more typically used now to differentiate Lent from Advent. Advent is the beginning of the church year, beginning on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Eve.

We can be thankful for the many preparations which God made for the coming of the Saviour and for the records of these preparations which we have in the Old Testament. We can also be thankful that Christmas does not burst upon us suddenly, but that we have time to prepare in expectation the coming of our Saviour and Lord.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for preparing me for the coming of the King, our Lord and Saviour. Help me to use this time to prepare my heart, mind and home for His coming. Amen.

The Advent Wreath

1st Monday in Advent

Read: Isaiah 40:1-8

“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

The Advent wreath first appeared in Germany in 1839. A Lutheran minister working at a mission for children created a wreath out of the wheel of a cart. He placed twenty small red candles and four large white candles inside the ring. The red candles were lit on weekdays and the four white candles were lit on Sundays.

I remember making my first Advent wreath. I had joined a craft group at a local church and making an Advent wreath was one of the activities. Our family was just newly made into three and I wanted to have something visible in the home to help explain Advent. If you wish to make one, there are a few prerequisites to make the wreath.

It is decorated with evergreen representing renewal, a newness and hope that doesn't fade with our ultimate goal of eternal life. The circle reminds us of God's unending love and the eternal life He makes possible. I then added some pine cones and red ribbons to decorate it and even some gumnuts to give it an Australian feel. I finished it with four candles symbolizing the four Sundays in Advent as well as the 400 years of waiting that God's people had to endure between the prophet Malachi and the birth of Christ. Many of our Advent wreaths stop with the four candles, but then we are missing the most important – the central white candle being the **Christ candle** which is lit Christmas Eve or Christmas morning.

Knowing the symbolism and significance of the Advent wreath helps to bring the expectation of the coming Christ into our home. As each candle is lit, we uncover a bit more of the journey to the manger. On each of the four Sundays we tell the meaning of each candle. As a family you may wish to light the candles together with the church each Sunday. Blessings as you prepare for the Christ-child to enter our homes and hearts.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, be with me along this Advent journey. You came as a baby to live as I live, help me to understand the significance and the hope that you give me each Christmas. In your name, Amen.

1st Candle - The Candle of Hope

1st Tuesday in Advent

Read: Isaiah 11:1-5

“And again, Isaiah says, ‘The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope.’” Romans 15:12 (NIV)

The first candle we light on the Advent wreath is the **Candle of Hope**. Hope is what keeps our hearts alive to the endless possibility. When I was a child, I remember using the terms when waiting expectantly for a birthday – “I really hope I get what I have always wanted.” I’m sure you have had the same hopes and dreams for different stages of your lives. “I hope I pass the spelling test.” “I hope I get into the cricket/netball team.” “I hope I find someone who loves me for who I am.” “I hope my child is born strong and healthy.” And, we continue with our hopes... Does Jesus love and presence give you hope in the future? Can you see this hope making its way through your life? When troubles and pressures creep in on you, do you see the love and acceptance Jesus offers? Jesus came at Christmas to bring us hope in a hopeless world. Walk in this hope everyday with the confident expectation that Jesus knows and understands.

From the very beginning, God filled the people of Israel with hope for a coming Messiah. A Messiah who would save his people from slavery and persecution, from lost and wayward wandering. Isaiah foretold of this coming in saying that their hope was to come from the descendant of Jesse and the Spirit of the Lord will rest on them. He would be a person to save not only the Jews but also the non-Jews (Gentiles). This is truly someone to hope for.

Those in the Old Testament never saw their hope fulfilled, but we have been blessed with seeing our hope come in the form of a tiny baby born in a stable in Bethlehem. Jesus brings hope to a world searching for truth. In Hebrews 6:19a, Paul gives us confidence in Jesus: ***“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.”*** So, live in this assurance and live in this hope!

Prayer: Lord, teach me to wait in hopeful expectation of eternal life. I wait for you Lord Jesus to come. Amen.

Old Testament Promises

1st Wednesday in Advent

Read: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given... And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Isaiah 9:6 (NIV)

I have been reading some historical fiction books, lately, in particular ‘The Zion Chronicles’ by Brock and Bodie Thoene. They are set just after WW2 in the city of Jerusalem and the characters are mostly Orthodox Jews believing that the Messiah has not yet come. They are still waiting for the promised Messiah to come and free them from the bondage of the Arabs. That in itself is sad to think that the Jews do not believe that Jesus is God’s Son, who has already come and has already freed us from our sins. But, a part of the book that intrigued me was in the discovery of the ‘Dead Sea Scrolls’ and one of the scrolls being the book of Isaiah foretelling our Saviour. Reading that for himself, one of the characters, an orthodox Jew, was converted to being Christian (reading the above verse which had been omitted and changed in the Torah.)

The Book of Isaiah was written 700 BC. The foretelling by the prophets Isaiah and Micah and other prophets point to God having had a plan long ago to free his people (us) from the bondage of slavery (death) by forgiving all our sins and giving us freedom (eternal life). This plan of God began right from the beginning of creation when Adam and Eve sinned and separated themselves from God. God knew that the only way for us to be close to him again was through a Saviour. So God sent his only Son who would be born a human and die an innocent death.

The prophecies long ago tell of this act of salvation. As we journey through Advent, let us remember the plans of God from long ago to bring us to this tiny baby, God’s Son.

Prayer: Thank you Lord, for revealing your plan to me through the prophets in your Word. Open your Word to me and guide me to read more of your promises of life. Amen.

Elizabeth and Zechariah

1st Thursday in Advent

Read: Luke 1:5-25, 57-66

Zechariah prophesied: “And you my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins...” Luke 1:76-77 (NIV)

There are many times in the Bible that God sends a child to an older couple who have been childless: Abraham and Sarah (Isaac), Jacob and Rachel (Joseph), Hannah and Elkanah (Samuel). So when told that his elderly barren wife Elizabeth would conceive, her husband Zechariah was muted in disbelief. Not that God hadn't done it before, but why them? God had a plan, and in that plan Elizabeth was to have a son, named John, who was to baptise and prepare the way for God's Son. Whenever the Lord aimed to do something extraordinary for His people, He prepared them for it by prophecy and preliminary signs and wonders. It is not surprising, therefore, that the beginning of the New Testament era was signaled with miraculous events. Angels appeared to announce the birth of the Messiah's forerunner and of Christ Himself.

Elizabeth was a major character in God's plan. She was a relative of Mary – who being a virgin was to have the Son of God. Elizabeth, an older woman, was able to spend time with Mary who was still a teenager (read Luke 1:39-56) and help her through all the doubts and problems she was facing. Both having conceived by the Holy Spirit had something in common. Elizabeth was as much a help to Mary as their sons, John and Jesus, would be to each other.

God's plans are not always our plans, and God has the advantage in knowing the end of the story. We may often wonder why certain events happen and in the timing given, but know that God's plan and purpose is perfect and will always be for the good. Through strange events and uncertain times, at Christmas God still brings His Son to earth with the plan of our salvation.

Prayer: Heavenly Father. Your plans are always perfect and for my good. Help me to leave all my concerns and cares with you knowing that you see the whole picture. Amen.



Countdown to Christmas

1st Friday in Advent

Read: Malachi 3:1

“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.” Matthew 3:3b (NIV)

I love Christmas. I love preparing the house with decorations, manger scenes (of which I now have over 40) and little bits and pieces that make the house feel like something special is coming. When I was first married, I made my first advent calendar; a patchwork one with 24 pockets. I put a chocolate or lolly in each one and each day we could have something special to help us countdown the days to Christmas. Since that first one, I have a few more – one hanging handmade ornaments on a tree, another opening little boxes with surprises, another putting a sticker on a sheet each day building up the nativity scene. My children loved doing these calendars and used to rotate with who did which one each day. Even being older now they still have an eager expectation of what is to come.

So it is with us. As we decorate, we prepare our homes in eager expectation of our coming Saviour. Let us continue to share the excitement that each of the little parts of the Christmas story hold for us. Each little thing we do - baking honey biscuits, making a Christmas pudding, decorating the tree, lights on the house - each mean the special time of Christmas is coming. The special things we do to prepare can help tell and share this story of God's love. More than that, it is the time when we remember the love our God has for each of us in sending his only son to earth as a baby for us to love and welcome into our homes and hearts.

During this Advent season, focus your thoughts on that moment in time when God became one of us. This miracle of miracles—this most unlikely story—begins with the Christ Child—God in the flesh—who was born poorly, humbly, vulnerably into this world of sin and darkness, coming just for you!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give me the confidence and boldness to share the Good News of your coming to earth. Help me to be ready for your Second Coming. Amen.

World History

1st Saturday in Advent

Read: Luke 2:1-7

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.” Luke 2:1-3 (NIV)

History is fascinating. Many people enjoy looking into their own family histories. Looking back into the past can be a way to anticipate what may happen in the future and to also discover who your ancestors were and what they did. Many historical books refer to incidents in world history to place the book as a factual reference. References to people in history also dates the manuscript and give it authenticity as a historical reference. Have you ever wondered why Luke mentions the names Caesar Augustus, Quirinius and later Herod (Herod the Great) who is mentioned when the wise men looked for Jesus? Luke was wanting to give Jesus' birth a time period in history; to give it substance as a historical event and for those questioning the Bible giving it credence in the historical world.

The census was also mentioned as being the reason for Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem. This census ordered by Caesar Augustus was the first of its kind. It was done because the Roman government wanted to make sure that everyone in the empire were paying their taxes correctly and to keep a track of the population. In Australia, a census is taken every five years for similar reasons.

The Gospel writer Luke, wanted people to know that the story of Jesus birth is a fact – a historical event, not just a nice made-up story. Events in the Bible can be researched as world history. God is real and He loves the world so much to understand our need for facts. Jesus did come to earth for us and this then began God's plan for our salvation. Jesus, God's son came to earth as a baby in a manger as a gift to the world.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your gift of your son to be the plan for my salvation. Your Word, the Bible is also a gift. Help me to read and learn more about you and your love for me. Amen.

2nd Candle –The Candle of Peace

2nd Sunday in Advent

Read: Micah 5:2-5a

“And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.” Micah 5:4b-5a (NIV)

This 2nd candle, the candle of Peace is also referred to as the Bethlehem candle. In the hymn ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’ we sing about the stillness and peacefulness of this little town in the backblocks of Judea. In this little town, with the peacefulness of the hills surrounding it, the Saviour of the world was born. He was to be the ‘Prince of Peace’ and our Saviour. The Jews in Old Testament times were told of a coming Messiah who will bring peace and will rule this kingdom forever.

They were anticipating someone mighty and strong... not necessarily a little baby born in a manger in a tiny town. His birth was peaceful, in a stable surrounded by animals and had peaceful shepherds being his first visitors. When we are at peace, we are not stressed or distracted or anxious; we are just focussed on the one thing. Jesus’ ministry focussed on the one thing – to save us from all that is sinful and evil and bring us into the home of his loving Heavenly Father.

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!” (Luke 2:14 NRSV)

The angels sang this when they appeared to the shepherds. This peace is a deeper, lasting peace; a peace of mind and soul made possible by our Saviour. Our peace with God is received by faith in Christ. As a child of God, you can live at peace. Even when things seem crazy and out of control, God always provides and sees His children through. You don’t have to live in fear and anxiety. Jesus came to bring you peace. So focus on peace today. When you start getting worried or anxious, remind yourself that Jesus came to bring you peace! Rest in the peace that our Lord Jesus gives.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the gift of peace in knowing that I am loved by a loving God and Saviour. Amen.

Name of Jesus

2nd Monday in Advent

Read: *Philippians 2:1-11*

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Philippians 2:9-11 (NIV)

When you were born your parents gave you a name. Do you know why they gave you that name? More than likely there is a reason that name was chosen. Maybe it was for the meaning, maybe you were named after a relative or maybe your name was invented by your parents. Names usually have a meaning and most parents have a baby book full of names and their meanings: Anne means ‘grace’, Fiona means ‘fair one’, Richard means ‘rule hard’, Matthew means ‘gift of God’ and Lucy means ‘light’.

When the baby was born in Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph, his name had already been given to him by his Heavenly Father. God had told them before the baby was even born that he would be named ‘Jesus’. Then when the baby was eight days old, according to the Jewish custom he was presented at the temple to be officially given his name: ***“On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.” [Luke 2:21 NIV]***

Mary and Joseph were following God’s commands with the name of their son. Jesus is the Greek form of the Jewish name ‘Joshua’; which means ‘God is salvation’ (Saviour). So then, the name Jesus means Saviour, and he received that name from God knowing what he would be doing and who he would become – ‘Saviour of the World’. God knew Jesus’ name before he was born. In Isaiah 43:1b, God says: ***“Do not be afraid—I will save you. I have called you by name—you are mine.”*** (GNB) God knows each of us by name, and has promised to love and save us. Live in this love!

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for living up to your name as Saviour and that you love me so deeply. Amen.

Jesus, the Christ

2nd Tuesday in Advent

Read: John 20:24-31

“Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’” Matthew 16:16 (NIV)

A favourite comic book character of mine was ‘Superman’. He had an alter ego by the name of Clark Kent which kept his real identity a secret. In these superhero comics, which have now become movies, this character sometimes appears as an ordinary person with no special abilities; and at other times he appears as one who has super-human powers. It is revealed in the stories that some people know this character as Clark Kent, others know him as Superman, and still others know him as both. However, no one knows that Clark Kent is Superman. In other words, as far as other people are concerned they know two people, Clark Kent and Superman, and they never associate these two as being the same.

What about Jesus Christ? Is he sometimes Jesus the compassionate human being, and sometimes Christ who is the special representative of God? Can someone really know Jesus without knowing Christ, or can you know Christ without knowing Jesus? Can we divide up the life and work of Jesus Christ, and say that at one time he was Jesus and others he was Christ? Was it Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, and Christ who received the Holy Spirit at his baptism? Was it Jesus who taught the disciples and Christ who performed all the miracles? Can we divide Jesus into his humanity and deity?

The answer to all these questions is a resounding ‘NO!’ The one whose birth we celebrate at Christmas does not portray two different characters. At all times Jesus is the Christ, the son of God who came to earth as a human and to die for the sins of the world. Let us be able to say the same with Peter in the verse above from Matthew: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”.**

Prayer: Jesus Christ, thank you that I can understand and see you as both human and God. You bring me close to my heavenly Father to be able to experience his deep love for me. Amen.

Jesus Christ, God's Son

2nd Wednesday in Advent

Read: John 5:19-26

"...and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'" Luke 3:22 (NIV)

Who are your parents? Who are you related to? Stepping into an Australian Lutheran church these can be the first things asked. For me, when I mention that my maiden name was Gerhardy, many then pursue the conversation to find a point of reference. Then come the familiar comments: "I can see that you look like your mother!" We have inherited characteristics as well as having an inheritance one day given to us by our parents.

Jesus Christ is a son too – the Son of God. We have already heard that God foretold of His sending his son to earth in the Old Testament. Mary was told by the angel that she was to have the Son of God (Luke 1:35). Joseph was also visited by an angel and told that Mary's child was from God (Matthew 1:20-21). In both of these passages it mentions that this was the work of the Holy Spirit sent by God. At the baptism of Jesus, as we read in the above verse, God speaks through the Holy Spirit telling all that Jesus is God's Son – in case there was any doubt.

It is interesting to note that in the Bible the Holy Spirit descended as a dove only to Jesus at the time of his baptism; this is a display of God's special relationship with Jesus. The Spirit of God descended upon him and stayed with him. However, Jesus was not merely a special delegate of God. He was the Son of God, according to the words of God himself. Jesus fulfilled the expectations of God, and God showed his pleasure in his Son by raising him to the heights and giving him, ***"the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,"*** ***Philippians 2:9b-10a, 11a (NIV)***

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your own beloved Son to earth to live as a human, but who then brought me forgiveness, salvation and eternal life with you. Amen.

Jesus is the Mighty God

2nd Thursday in Advent

Read: Hebrews 1:1-6

“It is the Good News about his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who came as a human baby, born into King David’s royal family line; and by being raised from the dead he was proved to be the mighty Son of God, with the holy nature of God himself.” Romans 1:3-4 (TLB)

Having a child is one of the most wondrous times a parent can experience. Holding that precious child, touching the tiny hand, gazing into that serene face; one cannot help but wonder how this perfect child came into being. Then, we start to wonder, what will this child do when they’re older? Where will their passions lie? Will they become someone famous?

Now, go back 2000 years and we see the same scene. A new mother and father gazing upon their new child, but they already have been given glimpses into their child’s life. Their son Jesus, is God’s son, Saviour of the world, Prince of Peace and Mighty God. Imagine thinking through this all as you gaze upon your new child. The questions that we might have pondered as parents have already been answered for Mary and Joseph. Jesus, this little boy is the Mighty God!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way: ‘God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.’

How wonderful to know that Jesus is not just a human being, but also true God. He had to become a human being so that he could take our place and understand us and pay the debt our sins created, that are owed to the Father. At the same time, he had to be true God in order to be able to do what was required by his Heavenly Father. Jesus could live a perfect life, pay for our sins with his death, and be raised to the heights by God because he was God. Such a lot to see in a tiny baby in a manger in Bethlehem.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, I am so thankful that you are truly God as that means you can save me from my sins. Send your Holy Spirit into my life to strengthen my faith in you. Amen.

Jesus is Immanuel

2nd Friday in Advent

Read: Isaiah 7:14

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” – which means, ‘God with us’” Matthew 1:23 (NIV)

In this verse in Matthew, we are told that the name also given to Jesus was ‘Immanuel’. As it says in the verse it means – ‘God with us’. This is very significant when looking what Jesus came to do; He was God in a human body for us. He came to bring peace to our souls and at Easter bring salvation, where we can forever be with our Heavenly Father. Jesus took our sins upon himself to bring us into God’s presence.

There is a beautiful Advent Hymn:

O come, O come, Immanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear:
*Rejoice, rejoice! Immanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

~ From early sources ad. T. Helmore 1811-1890 (1854)

The Jews were looking for a promised saviour who would save them from Roman domination. They were looking for a political and military leader when they should have been looking for something much greater: the One who could rescue them from their sins. His name reveals **what** He came to do. Pointing to Isaiah 7:14, Matthew declared that the child would also be known as Immanuel. This title tells us **how** He would save us from our sins. The God of the universe, the Word who spoke creation into existence, became one of us so that He could deliver us from our sins. Our salvation is tied to His presence.

You and I are not capable of securing our own salvation. Even on our best day, we are not capable. The problem is you and I also carry another name that we have exceeded in living up to. That name is sinner. It is through Jesus’ presence, His righteousness, and His standing by us as our advocate before the Father that our salvation has been made secure.

Prayer: Lord, I praise you for your coming to earth to bring God to me. How amazing is your great love for me. Amen.

Our King of Kings

2nd Saturday in Advent

Read: 1 Timothy 6:11-16

“[God] seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God places all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,” Ephesians 1:20b-22 (NIV)

In every town and city we have buildings being constructed. In one large city, an architect buys a block of ground. He designs an apartment building to house many people, and hires a contractor to construct the building on the property. The contractor begins work. With every project like this there are also ‘footpath superintendents’ – those who have a particular interest in the building and feel that their opinions need to be considered by the contractor. The builder has many to listen to: the architect, contractor, ‘footpath superintendents’... to whom shall they listen? The builder in fact cares nothing for the ‘footpath superintendents’, they hold no power or ultimate approval. The builder is more concerned with the opinions of the architect, contractor and their subsequent satisfaction.

Jesus came into the world to save sinners. God is the architect of this plan of salvation. Jesus Christ is the builder, making this plan a reality. We are the ‘footpath superintendents’ who have an interest in the work of Jesus, but who know nothing of constructing a plan of salvation. Nevertheless, we may have our opinions about Jesus and his work. However, what we think really does not matter. We are only the ‘footpath superintendents’ who stand to benefit from the work of Jesus.

The more important question is whether Christ’s work is acceptable to God? He is the architect of the plan of salvation. He is the one who sent Christ. He is the one whose justice must be satisfied before we can be admitted to our Heavenly home. We read in the verse above in Ephesians that God was satisfied and crowned Jesus King of all Kings in the heavenly realms. The crown is our assurance that Jesus’ work was acceptable to God and that our salvation has been won.

Prayer: King Jesus, thank you for your perfect life and acceptable sacrifice on the cross for my sins. King of Kings, I ask you to come into my heart and rule there. Amen.

3rd Candle – The Candle of Joy

3rd Sunday in Advent

Read: Luke 2:9-18

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid for I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.’” Luke 2:10 (NIV)

This third candle that is lit on the third Sunday of Advent can also be called ‘The Shepherd’s Candle’. The shepherd’s hearing about the birth of Jesus from the angels were filled with great joy and rushed off to see the baby. We too can have great joy in the gift of the Christ-child, for he has been sent to be our Saviour from the power of death.

One of the things people love about Christmas is that it truly is a joyful season. All season long we celebrate with music, songs, lights, food and decorations. We celebrate by getting together with family and friends and by exchanging gifts. It is a time of the year when all celebrate with laughter and cherish our children, family and friends and food is in abundance. It is a joyful time of year.

But I can’t help feeling that sometimes the world hijacks our joy in the season from the true joy at the centre of Christmas. Because when you come right down to it, the real joy at Christmas comes not from the lights and the decorations and the music but from the birth of a small baby born in Bethlehem. At the very heart of Christmas is the astoundingly good news that Jesus Christ was born as a Saviour into this world. From beginning to end the Christmas story is punctuated with various outbursts and moments of joy, and they all centre on the birth of Christ. You can’t get away from it. You can’t get around it. You can’t spell Christmas without Christ, and you can’t enter into the true joy of the season without Jesus. So, with the shepherds we are also to go out with joy sharing the love and news of our Saviour’s birth.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me to find the same joy and boldness as the shepherds in telling the story of your Son’s birth. Thank you for this most incredible gift. Amen.



To have the Faith of Mary

3rd Monday in Advent

Read: Luke 1:46-55

“I am the Lord’s servant; Mary answered, ‘May it be to me as you have said.’ Then the angel left her.” Luke 1:38 (NIV)

When I was a child going to Sunday School, the Christmas Programme held in the Adelaide Town Hall at the end of the year – usually the week before Christmas – was the biggest event of the year. To be given the role of Mary was an honour, and I remember the year it was my turn. I had the blue dress and the white shawl over my head and I carried that precious doll as if it was the real baby Jesus. Even with no speaking role it felt such an honour to be chosen to be Jesus’ mother.

But what was so special about Mary? She was only young, 13 or 14 years old and yet God chose her for this singular honour above all others in Israel. What set her apart was her acceptance to the news from the angel and although I’m sure there were many doubts, she had faith in her God that this was His blessing to her. Her faith is especially apparent in the song she sang glorifying God, sometimes known as ‘The Magnificat’ – read it in Luke 1:46-55 in today’s reading.

Many times in the Bible we read how ***“...she treasured all these things in her heart.”***

What really must she have been thinking? Actually, there was nothing special about Mary. She was a sinner like you and me, and needed God’s grace and love just like we all do. The focus is upon God; He had chosen a simple person like her to be the mother of His Son.

Each of us who celebrate with joy our Saviour’s birth have been chosen by our God the same way as Mary. Like her, He showers His grace and forgiveness on us through the baby Jesus. And just as Mary was chosen to bring the Christ Child into the world, we are chosen to bring Christ Jesus to the nations.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for giving me faith like Mary in your son who came to save me from my sins. Help me now to share Jesus’ story with others. Amen.

Joseph was a Righteous Man

3rd Tuesday in Advent

Read: Matthew 1:18–25

“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.” Matthew 1:18 (NIV)

What does a first time father experience? Excitement! “I’m holding my baby.” In that same moment there is fear. “I’m holding my baby?!?” It doesn’t take long for dad to get used to it, but that first time is exhilarating and terrifying at the same time! Joseph was a new father. Can you imagine his excitement? “What child is this? This is our child, our son.” Can you imagine the terror? “What child is this? This is God’s Son! How did I end up in the middle of this?”

Joseph didn’t choose to be involved in this miraculous birth. He didn’t think he should be involved at all, especially when he found out that the woman to whom he was engaged, Mary, was pregnant. Was Joseph angry? Yes—his fiancée had obviously been with another man! Did he love Mary and want what was best for her? Yes. ***“Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.” (Matthew 1:19 NIV)***. We may not hear a word from Joseph, but his actions speak loudly! He didn’t want to see Mary disgraced, or even worse, stoned for her actions. Joseph was a good man.

While Joseph considered his next step, God gave him some clear direction: ***“But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’” (Matthew 1:20 NIV)***. Then, what did Joseph do? He didn’t question anything anymore, but took Mary as his wife and raised Jesus as his own child. He showed us love in action. Jesus had two wonderful Fathers to have as role-models. I pray that we may be God’s love in action this Christmas.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, let me follow the example you set for me in Joseph, being a loving, righteous person. Help me to always do what is right. Amen.

Angels Rejoice!

3rd Wednesday in Advent

Read: Luke 2:8-15

“Suddenly a great army of heaven’s angels appeared with the angel, singing praises to God: ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased!’” Luke 2:13-14 (GNB)

Ask a child to draw an angel and you will get a white-dressed person with wings and a halo. This angel is usually up in the sky with a big smile on its face. We read of angels throughout the Bible beginning with one guarding the Garden of Eden to angels appearing to John as he writes the book of Revelation.

Angels also fill the Christmas story. One appears to Mary. Another meets with Zechariah in the temple. Joseph sees an angel of the Lord in his dreams. Even the wise men presumably see an angel; at the very least, they hear the voice of God in a dream. Angels are everywhere, and yet they seem the most glorious and rejoicing when they appear to the shepherds. One angel appears, most likely the archangel Gabriel, who urges the shepherds to not be afraid. Really, who wouldn't be afraid when you were lowly shepherds out in the fields just looking after sheep? Then to have a whole host, a multitude appear in a bright light singing praises to God, afraid is the least they probably were.

These were angels bringing a message of love and hope to the world. They were celebrating the birth of God's Son and wanted the whole world to know this incredible news. We will never know why the angels in such a throng appeared to shepherds who were the lowest of low in society. All we know is that Jesus came for everyone, beginning with the humblest. The angels aren't mere messengers; the passage in Luke says they praise God. They glorify God for what has taken place – God has come to earth. We also get to join the angels in praising God this Advent season for his goodness and love to us.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to sing with the angels telling of your birth. Help me to grow in understanding of all that your coming means to me and the world. Amen.

Why Shepherds?

3rd Thursday in Advent

Read: Luke 2:15-20

“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen...” Luke 2:20 (NIV)

When something wonderful happens to me, the first people I want to tell are those closest to me, those most important in my life; my family and my friends. When God had the best news of the ages, whom did He tell first? Important religious people? The King? Wealthy folk? Educated men? Actually, no. God told shepherds.

The story takes us right from the manger to the fields nearby, where an angel appeared to some terrified shepherds telling them the news of the birth of God’s Son. It didn’t take long for the shepherds to pull themselves together after the heavenly crew left. Knowing the “town of David” meant Bethlehem, the shepherds hurried there, and arrived in time to see Jesus in the stable. The Bible says after seeing the baby, “... **they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them**” (Luke 2:17b-18 NIV).

This is a familiar and well-loved story. We treasure images of the nativity, and the humble nature of Christ’s birth. When delving deeper into who attended the birth, it can be surprising that God chose shepherds to reveal the truth about Jesus so quickly. Shepherds were rated very low on the social scale. They were not known for intelligence, but they were faithful and caring towards their sheep. These simple shepherds were humbled and amazed that God chose them to hear the news first. Imagine how unworthy they must have felt, but what an incredible honour God bestowed on them. God in His infinite wisdom chose just the right group of people to entrust the greatest news of eternity. Those humble men took the Good News of Jesus and did just what God wanted them to do – told others, and their lives were never the same.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I can rejoice with the shepherds over your Good News. Give me the courage to be as bold as the shepherds with sharing this news of your love. Amen.

Nativity Animals?

3rd Friday in Advent

Read: Genesis 1:20-28

“So [the shepherds] hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.” Luke 2:16 (NIV)

I really enjoy Nativity scenes and have added many to my collection over the years. Each Advent I love to decorate my house with the 40+ nativities I have. They are all different, but in many ways they are all similar. They have Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus in a manger, many have a stable background, at least one shepherd, three wise men and then an assortment of animals (donkey, camel, sheep, ox, goats...). Were there actually animals near when Jesus was born? The Bible doesn't actually say. We assume because Jesus was laid in a manger that there would have been animals around, but we are not even told it was a stable. Does it mean my nativities are all wrong? Does it matter?

Doing some research I found that the first time animals were added to the nativity was in 1223 in Greccio, Italy when St Francis of Assisi led a group of Christians through the cold snow with an ox, a donkey and a hay-filled trough to create the first re-enactment of the Nativity on a hill near the cathedral. This patron saint of animals and the first animal-rights activist, St. Francis tried to persuade the emperor to put into the laws of the land that men of means should provide for the poor and animals at Christmastime since they were the first ones to see the “blessed child” and witness the miracle of his birth.

There are many assumptions made to the Christmas story. We assume Mary rode a donkey; that the shepherds brought some sheep and goats; that the wise men rode on camels; that there were birds and oxen in the stable. But the Bible mentions none of these. The setting and those animals present do not matter. Rather, the fact that God's love and care extends to all beings. Because He loves all His creation, it's wonderful to think that animals were there too, welcoming the baby Jesus.

Prayer: Thank you Lord Jesus that you came for all people and all of your creation. May I worship and praise you with all creation joining in at your birth. Amen.

Finding room for Jesus

3rd Saturday in Advent

Read: *Colossians 3:15-17*

“[Mary] wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” Luke 2:7b (NIV)

Last Christmas, we had many visitors come to stay with us. How wonderful to have more family staying than beds in the house! When asked if we had room, I said, “Of course and we will find room!” I’m sure that this has happened for many of you also. The joy of the fellowship and family makes up for any inconvenience that may be suffered.

One of the pieces to the Christmas story that really saddens me is that of there being ‘no room’ anywhere for Mary and Joseph with the child of God soon to be born. I’m sure that the inns in Bethlehem were filled to capacity with the census taking place. But, was there really ‘no room’ or was the whole idea of moving people an inconvenience? I can imagine Joseph’s anxiety rushing about the town looking for a room, even a bed, but for our Saviour there was nothing. Finally they settled with a stable or cave where animals were kept as Jesus was coming – and quickly!

With the busyness of Christmas: family coming, food to make and prepare, house to decorate, presents to buy; will we find time and room for Jesus? Will he be welcomed into your hearts and lives with joy or given just a smattering of time? Is worshipping him at Christmas just an inconvenience? Jesus coming to earth as a baby, being God’s Son, is a world shattering event to be celebrated. So ***‘...whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.’ (Colossians 3:17 NIV)*** Love makes humans do some pretty amazing things—you’ve probably got your stories. But God has us all beat. He humbled Himself to become one of us, and then He died on purpose to take away the sin of the world. He died—we live.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me to find time and room in my life for you this Christmas. With my family and friends, let me celebrate your birth. Amen.

4th Candle – The Candle of Love

4th Sunday in Advent

Read: 1 Corinthians 13

“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.” John 3:16-17 (NIV)

This 4th candle in the Advent wreath is the candle of love or the angel’s candle. The angels announced the Good News of a Saviour! God wanted all of us to know of this event and sent His special messengers to share the news with everyone. As we read in an earlier devotion of the angels coming to the shepherds; the angels appeared to them as they had no problem sharing this Good News with all who would listen. God sent his only Son to earth to save us, because he loves us.

Through Jesus coming to earth, we have God’s promise of eternal life forever with Him in heaven. Now, that is love! Through the Holy Spirit we are led to respond to God’s love in Christ by opening our hearts to him, treasuring him as our Saviour and honouring him as our Lord. In this way the Lord Jesus comes into the lives of each of us personally. It was at our baptism that he claimed us as his own. Through His Word, the Bible and through Holy Communion he continually comes to us giving us his love and reminding us of His grace and promises. In all this we are prompted to share his love, grace and forgiveness with others.

The love that flows from God into us is not just an ordinary love, it is a love to bring about a renewal in our hearts, minds and souls and throughout our lives. The angels brought the news of God’s immense love coming to earth as a baby. How can we keep this great news to ourselves? Like the shepherds, let us share this Good News to all who have hearts to hear!

Prayer: Help me Lord Jesus to be a light for others to see your forgiveness and to know your love. Thank you for this incredible life-changing love! Amen.

The Charlie Brown Christmas Tree

4th Monday in Advent

Read: Psalm 93

***“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”
John 1:14 (NIV)***

By now I am sure that everyone has their Christmas trees up, lights hanging around the house (inside and out), gifts wrapped and under the tree and the ham, turkey and/or seafood bought. Family and/or friends have been invited. Biscuits and desserts have been made and all are waiting for the day to dawn on Christmas day. What really is all this hype about?

As a young child I loved reading the ‘Peanuts’ comics by Charles Schulz. The wisdom and knowledge of these young cartoon characters made me think deeply, while still laughing at their antics. Charlie Brown saw people and life through the gospel and gave grace and forgiveness to even those who humiliated him. (‘Maybe Lucy won’t pull the football away when I try to kick it!’) At the time of Christmas, Charlie Brown became despondent with all the hype of Christmas which seemingly held no meaning. When looking for a Christmas tree he chose a real, little spindly tree with hardly any pine needles or branches, rather than a huge, ornate artificial tree. Hanging a bauble on it, bent it over under the weight, and with this the dejected Charlie Brown seemed to lose all hope in mankind.

Then hope arrives! His friends and dog Snoopy come and bring joy to all that looked bleak and lost. They added some small lights and all agreed that this real tree, although small and weak, was great when surrounded by love and friends. It had been truly revealed that the love and friendship around this little wooden tree was the true meaning of Christmas. Singing: “Hark the Herald Angels sing, Glory to the newborn king...” Maybe in the simplicity of a small child born in Bethlehem, has true glory found its home.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for sending your Son to earth to save me. Help me to see your Son in the manger as the true meaning of Christmas. Amen.

God's Greatest Present

4th Tuesday in Advent

Read: Matthew 7:7-11

***“Every good gift and every perfect present comes from heaven; it comes down from God, the Creator of the heavenly lights, who does not change or cause darkness by turning.”
James 1:17 (GNB)***

Think back to Christmas time when you were a young child. Can you remember trying to manage the anticipation of receiving gifts until you thought you would burst? You knew that those beautifully wrapped presents had been carefully chosen just for you. When you were finally allowed to tear into the wrapping paper Christmas Eve or Christmas morning, remember the emotions and joy you felt over these gifts! There were some items from your list as well as some better-than-imagined surprises. The look on your parent's faces at the joy you had over the presents was just as great!

God also knows how to delight us. How even more perfect are the gifts that God showers on us every day. The gifts of food, clothing, family, friends, health, work and more are all from God and he delights greatly in giving these gifts. All the more though, at Christmas God gave His ultimate gift to us all – the gift of forgiveness, love, peace, hope, joy and eternal life – and it all came in the presence of a tiny baby born in the little town of Bethlehem over 2000 years ago.

God knows how to give good gifts to His children as we read in Matthew 7:11. Imagine his great joy as we celebrate His Son's birth each year and all the blessings that come with it. Just as we thank our parents for the gifts given to us, so also we need to thank God for all his love and His perfect gifts. Especially we thank Him for His son coming to earth to be one of us and then to take away our sin when He died on the cross. What incredible love! What an incredible gift! God's presence is the present!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your most incredible gift to me this Christmas. Your love amazes me. Amen.

The Lights on the Tree

4th Wednesday in Advent

Read: John 1:1-9; John 8:12

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.” Isaiah 9:2 (NIV)

Martin Luther was trying to compose a sermon as he walked home one night and he did not notice how dark it was getting. The German forests in those days were filled with wild animals (bears, boars and wolves) and Martin was getting a little afraid. As he looked up, he saw through the trees little pinpricks of twinkling lights. He was at first puzzled, then realized – they were stars, sent from heaven to guide and to comfort. This gave Martin peace as he looked up to see the love and guidance of His heavenly Father.

It was a star that guided the wise men to find the Christ-child in a stable on that first Christmas night. Stars are God’s lights sent to guide us through even the darkest night.

Martin liked this theme for his sermon and he now felt safe and secure knowing that he was in God’s hands. He then looked around for a small tree, pulled up a little fir tree and carried it home to his family. He then took this tree and rather than hanging it from the beams, as was the custom, he put it in a pot and set it on the table. He then took the candles from the triangular candelabra (used during the Christmas season as a symbol of the triune God) and fastened these little candles to the tree.

As you turn on the lights of your Christmas tree, may you be reminded again of the joy and promise that has been given to us in the light of the Christ-child sent from Heaven above. The light of Jesus offers comfort, joy and love in even the darkest night.

Martin Luther said, ‘God’s light shines through the darkest night for everyone, but sometimes we have to look up to see it.’

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you came to bring light into my dark life. Help me to look to you to see your promise and peace and that in you only is the light I need. Amen.

Little Town of Bethlehem

Christmas Eve

Read: Matthew 2:1-6

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” Micah 5:2 (NIV)

“O little town of Bethlehem” is one of the most loved Christmas Hymns. Bethlehem has become almost a mythological place: with a few ‘huts’ a few camels and the holy family. At the time of Jesus, Bethlehem was a little town of about 300 inhabitants. What people might not know is that the city of Bethlehem today is not in Israel but on the West Bank in Palestine, and that it is a bustling city of about 25,000 people. One third of them are Palestinian Christians.

But what happened in Bethlehem 2000 years ago was something real. Jesus was born as a refugee. His family was forced to leave Nazareth and go to Bethlehem. Later his family had to flee the brutality of King Herod and go into hiding in Egypt for two years. Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus was a besieged city of the Roman Empire. Today, Bethlehem is again a besieged city surrounded on three sides by a 25 foot high concrete wall. So what if Jesus were to be born today in Bethlehem? If Jesus were to be born this year, he would not be born in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph would not be allowed to enter from the Israeli checkpoint, and neither would the wise men. The shepherds would be stuck inside the walls, unable to leave their little town.

So where is the Gospel in all of this? The good news is this: God came into no other than this troubled, wounded and real world. He is real and wants to enter into our real world with all its complexities and fears. The Gospel is that God became one of us. He came as a child, vulnerable, and weak. And yet through his vulnerability was able to overcome the empire. Christmas is God's promise to us that we will have life, peace, and a future. Praise God that Jesus is the same: yesterday, today and forever.

Prayer: Jesus, Thank you that you came to be my hope and Saviour. You were born in a troubled world to help me in the troubles I face each day. Amen.

5th Candle – The Christ Candle

Christmas Day

Read: Revelation 5

“When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” John 8:12 (NIV)

Our 5th candle on the advent wreath is the white central one – the Christ Candle. This white candle reminds us that Jesus is the spotless Lamb of God, sent to wash away our sins. It is traditionally lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day to symbolize that Christ has come. The central location of this candle reminds us that Christ becoming man on earth is the heart of Christmas, giving light to the world.

Candles are used in worship to remind us that Jesus is the ‘light of the world’. Many people look on Jesus Christ in much the same way as they look on a candle. Candles are from a bygone era; they are nice if you want a soothing atmosphere. Others see them as no practical value – we have much better lights today. The only time a candle comes in handy is when the power goes off. Relating that to Jesus: yes, he was the light of the world, but that’s old fashioned! He is nice to have around to feel good about situations and when in trouble, but otherwise we can get our power elsewhere.

Jesus Christ says: ***“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness...”*** So, whenever we see a candle at church, whether given in baptism, on the altar, the paschal candle or lights on the Christmas tree, let us be reminded that Jesus Christ has come to be our light in a world of darkness and troubles. He is willing to offer grace, love and forgiveness to help us on our earthly journey until we finally stand in the presence of our Almighty God whose light will never go out. Blessed Christmas to you all!

Prayer: Thank you Jesus that you have come into the world to be my light in the world’s darkness. Help me to shine your light to others that they may also live in your light. Amen.



The 'real' Christmas Rose

26th December

Read: Hebrews 2:5-18

“For this reason he had to be made like his brothers, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.” Hebrews 2:17 (NIV)

The Christmas rose (helleborus niger) is actually a perennial herb and grows in the cold, snowy mountains and high valleys across Europe. The flowers are white and star-shaped and tipped with pink. It is also known as the Snow Rose and the Winter Rose as it blossoms in the mid-winter season when most other vegetation lies dormant and covered by snow. It is commonly called the Christmas rose, due to an old legend that it sprouted in the snow from the tears of a young girl who had no gift to give the Christ-child in Bethlehem. If you are like me, you may have never heard of this rose before, but it is 'real'.

The 'reality' of the Christmas rose can point to the 'realness' of Jesus. Jesus had a human mother (Luke 1:35), had human ancestors (Romans 9:5), and was himself a true man. He had a body consisting of flesh, and blood and bones (Luke 24:39). He called himself man (Matthew 9:6). He acted like a man in that he was born and increased in knowledge (Luke 2:7, 52), was hungry (Matthew 4:2), thirsty (John 19:28), ate and drank (Matthew 11:19), slept (Mark 4:38), and suffered and died (Matthew 20:18, 19). Jesus was a 'real' human being.

In everything that we experience in life, we can go to our Saviour Jesus, who, in his life on earth, experienced all we have and ever will. Tempted? Jesus was tempted by the devil and overcame this temptation. He can give you the strength to overcome. Afraid to show you are a Christian? Jesus was mocked and ridiculed, he can help you be strong and faithful. Suffering? Jesus suffered terribly; he can give you comfort and peace. As we learn at Christmas, Jesus began his life as a human. Let him be your friend and take all your worries and burdens to him for he understands.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to believe that you are truly my friend and understand all my concerns and cares. Let me lay them at your feet in prayer, knowing you love me no matter what. Amen.

Born in a Manger

27th December

Read: Luke 2:4-7

***“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”
Luke 2:12 (NIV)***

When the child Jesus was born, his mother Mary laid him in a manger (Lk 2:7). The word “manger” comes from the Latin word *munducare* which means “to eat.” A manger (or crib) is a wooden or stone feeding trough or food box that holds hay for larger farm animals like cattle, horses, and donkeys. Mangers were located wherever livestock were kept; places like stables, corrals, or caves. Farmers were sure to keep their mangers well-supplied with fodder at all times so the animals would never go hungry. The cattle can walk up to a manger at any time, and then spend long, leisurely hours chomping away, chewing and slowly re-chewing their cud.

When Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem there was no room for them at the inn, so they were forced to find lodging elsewhere, probably in a cave or stable where animals were staying. When Jesus was born, Mary would not have wanted to lay her infant on the hard, cold, stone floor. Instead, she had to make do with what was available and the manger proved to be a convenient alternative: the hay was soft, the box was up and off the ground, and the sides tall enough to keep her child safely inside.

Jesus was not laid in a manger by accident, it was a very lowly place for the King of Kings to be laid. But, just as animals go to the manger for physical food, we can go to the manger for spiritual food. Jesus has an infinite storehouse of nourishment available, and we can approach him any time and never go hungry. Jesus wants us to devour his word, chew on it, slowly ruminate on its meaning, swallow and digest it, and make it part of the fabric of our being. The manger is a momentous sign that Jesus is sustenance for us. The shepherds feasted first. Now it is our turn. Jesus, born on the first Christmas, is food for our souls.

Prayer: My dear Saviour, thank you for being the food for my soul. Help me to feast on your Word daily. Amen.

The Star of Creation

28th December

Read: Psalm 19:1-7

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Genesis 1:1 (NIV)

A fascinating thing to do on a dark night is to star-gaze. Even more amazing is to look at the stars and planets through a telescope. Looking at them using only our eyes we miss out on seeing so many. Using high-powered telescopes, astronomers have discovered galaxies never seen before. How many stars are in the universe? No one really knows! Every year astronomers discover more and more stars, most of them trillions of kilometres from the earth.

Do these stars just magically appear? No, they have existed for a long, long time; it is just that we have only been able to see them now. They have just been revealed. In fact, some of these may not exist today as the light from some of these distant stars take so long to reach the earth, we are actually seeing them today as they appeared many years previously. The universe is so very large; when we think of the heavens and the stars our minds are drawn to their Creator – as we read in the above text.

The six-pointed star is the ‘Star of Creation’. It reminds us that in 6 days God completed the work of creation. The star also reminds us of Jesus’ role in creation: ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” (John 1:1-2 NIV)*** The Word is another name for Jesus Christ. Like the distant stars which, although only recently discovered, have existed for many years; so Jesus Christ, although he was not revealed to us until his birth in Bethlehem, existed as true God long before that. Jesus was present when the world was created, and it was created through him. We thank God that he revealed His love to us at just the right time – God’s timing is always perfect!

Prayer: Dear Creator God, you created the heavens and the earth and revealed your Son and Saviour at the right time. Help me to worship and to always be thankful for your gifts of love. Amen.

The carol – Silent Night

29th December

Read: 1 John 4:7-16

“By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me – a prayer to the God of my life.” Psalm 42:8 (NIV)

The popular Christmas carol, Silent Night, was composed in 1818 by Joseph Mohr, a Roman Catholic priest of Austria. Joseph Mohr began his life in very humble circumstances. In 1792 he was born in Salzburg, Austria to a poor spinster knitter. His father, Franz Joseph Mohr deserted the family when Joseph was quite young. As a child Joseph developed a relationship with the local cathedral organ master who taught him music, art and history. This organ master, Johann Hiernle recognized Joseph’s musical talents and enrolled him in the famous grammar school in Kremsmunster, Upper Austria. He finally completed his education at the seminary in Salzburg and was ordained as a priest in 1815. He was 23 years old.

Joseph’s first parish was in the mountains of Austria where one morning he sat and wrote the poem: “Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!” (“Silent Night! Holy Night!”) Several years later Joseph met and became friends with Franz Xaver Gruber, who was the schoolmaster and organist of St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf, Austria.

On the evening of 24 December, 1818 – history itself is not clear, but it is said that the organ of St Nicholas was broken and could not be repaired in time for Christmas so Joseph came up with the idea of putting his poem to music so it could be sung by the choir. Franz Gruber wrote the melody and Joseph Mohr transcribed the words to one of the most popular Christmas carols that Christmas Eve. That night “Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!” was heard and sung for the first time in St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf, Austria. Every Christmas we also hear the same song and tune sung.

Christmas carols are so much a part of Christmas, and in them we hear the story of Jesus’ birth. What a blessing and gift they are to each of us to help spread the gospel.

Prayer: Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright, round yon virgin mother and child. Holy infant, so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace. Amen.

Hands up for Christmas

30th December

Read: Isaiah 55:8-12

***“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”
Psalm 19:1 (NIV)***

Hands can be very expressive. Having to learn sign language for songs to teach to children has shown me the incredible gift of expression God has given us in our hands. In the Christmas nativity story we see the hands of each character as they express their feelings. As you read through this devotion, meditate on the incredible gifts God has given us and remember the real reason we celebrate the Christmas season. You may like to move your hands to express each thought.

-  The **open hands** of the angel bringing the news of Mary's pregnancy
-  The **loving hands** of Mary hugging her unborn baby
-  The **caring hands** of Joseph as he cares for his young wife
-  The **tired hands** of the innkeeper having to usher new parents to a stable
-  The **gentle hands** of Mary and Joseph holding and caressing their new son – God's Son
-  The **tiny hands** of a newborn baby
-  The **uplifted hands** of the angels announcing Jesus birth to the shepherds
-  The **joyful hands** of the shepherds as they worship their Saviour
-  The **angry hands** of Herod not wanting to know about a new King
-  The **excited hands** of the wise men offering their gifts
-  The **amazed hands** of Mary and Joseph not fully understanding
-  **God's hands** reaching to us by becoming a human baby.

May your hands also be open to share this Christmas love, joy and peace with others.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, open my hands and heart to others around me and be willing to share the story of your coming to earth as a baby. Amen.

Simeon and Anna

New Year's Eve (31st December)

Read: Luke 2:21-40

Simeon praised God saying: “For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” Luke 2:30-32 (NIV)

In keeping with the Law of Moses, just forty days after Jesus' birth, Joseph and Mary made the five-to-six mile journey to Jerusalem for Mary's purification and to present their firstborn to God. When they arrived at the temple, the young family was approached by a “righteous and devout” man named Simeon. We know that Simeon was elderly, and the Spirit—the same one that revealed to him that he would see the Messiah before his death—was upon him and led him to the temple grounds that very day, into Jesus' presence. Simeon took the infant Jesus in his arms and praised God saying the above verses.

Simeon had waited for many years, patiently, to meet the Messiah. But undoubtedly he grew weary at times during his waiting. It's hard to miss his exuberant tone as he absorbed his current reality: the Messiah he had waited for, was finally there, in his own arms. What the Spirit revealed, the Spirit led him to see in the flesh. Mary and Joseph marvelled at Simeon's words (and his actions, no doubt!) and he blessed them (Luke 2:33-34). Having encountered Jesus, old Simeon was full of praise, was at peace, and was prepared to die.

Anna's reaction to recognizing Jesus as Messiah at the temple was a little different. According to Luke, she was an eighty-four year old widow, and unlike Simeon, she was not prepared to die. Rather she was a driven woman, ready to bear witness to what she had seen. Luke doesn't tell us much more about her aside from the names of her tribe and father, but we know the prophetess Anna was the first woman to understand fully and proclaim the good news. Having encountered Jesus, Anna was full of praise, was ready to speak, and was driven to make Jesus known in her community.

Prayer: Lord, the response of godly people encountering Jesus was praise. Let me also show praise to you for your love and mercy to me. Amen.

Jesus was a Refugee

New Year's Day (1st January)

Read: Matthew 2:13-23

An angel appeared to Joseph saying...“take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

Matthew 2:13b (NIV)

Our Australian Lutheran church was originally built on refugees – Germans, Prussians, and others from around the world. They braved the seas and the new country of Australia rather than be told how to worship in their ‘old’ country. Many of them were being persecuted due to their faith. I’m sure we all have family histories and stories of our forebears coming to Australia due to hardships in their own homelands, or just the thought of beginning a ‘new’ life.

Now, what about Joseph? He was told by an angel to leave his homeland due to King Herod wanting to kill the child ‘born to be king’. Joseph is portrayed as always ready to listen to the angel of the Lord. He listens as God speaks in his heart. Having been willing to take the pregnant Mary to his hometown of Bethlehem, he now takes her and the child she has borne on a difficult journey to the foreign land of Egypt. Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus become refugees.

We do not know what Joseph, Mary, and Jesus experienced in Egypt. In the Bible, Egypt not only provided sanctuary for God’s people during hardships, but more importantly, it was where God liberated the Hebrews in Exodus to become a distinct people. Yet Egypt was God’s provision – a gift of protection from the dastardly scheme of Herod. Herod the king in fact never hesitated to use violent means to protect his kingship from threats both real and imagined. Moreover, the angel of the Lord appeared again to Joseph in Egypt when it was safe to return to Israel. The return to the land of Israel is equally traumatic, since Joseph settles as a newcomer in Nazareth in the region of Galilee. Through this all, God was *not* far off. All of this was part of God’s plan to save the world.

Prayer: My loving Saviour, even you were displaced from your homeland and became a refugee. Help me to understand the plight of those suffering without a homeland. Amen.

Christmas Carols

2nd January

Read: Psalm 96

“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.” Isaiah 55:12 (NIV)

Christmas carols provide a rich form for God’s people to praise God. More than at any other time of the year, we love to sing at Christmas. Singing the hymns and carols of Christmas puts us in touch with our past, brightens our lives, and reminds us of God’s promises for the future.

It was a **silent night** in the **little town of Bethlehem**. Many would say it was **O Holy night**. But that first Christmas Eve brought **joy to the World**, as an **infant holy, infant lowly** was born as God’s gift to all humankind. **What child is this** who was born so far **away in a manger** in the town of Bethlehem? Shepherds heard of this birth and said, **“Angels we have heard on high.”** Saying then to each other; did you hear them say, **“Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn King?”**

Journeying also to Bethlehem, **we three kings** knew to tell all people to **come all ye faithful** and celebrate **the first noel**.

Read through those Christmas carols mentioned above in the little nativity story. How many do you know? How many could you sing the whole way through without ever looking at the words? These beautiful carols have wonderful stories and histories which you may want to research into, but in our world of no-religion or every-religion, isn’t it wonderful to know that these are still acceptable to sing at Christmas in our society? Take note when entering shopping centres or listening to the radio how many Christmas carols are used. More and more the Christmas Carols of religious content are being replaced by the secular Christmas songs. This gives us an even greater urgency to share God’s story of sending His Son to earth at Christmas to save his people from their sins. May we all be encouraged to share this story of God’s love.

Prayer: Lord, help me to sing of your love for me loud and strong so that everyone around me will know how much I love you. Amen.

Gold for a King

3rd January

Read: Psalm 19:7-10

“Then they [the wise men] opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” Matthew 2:11b (NIV)

When getting married or engaged, a gold ring is given to both people taking this big step. This gift to each other is of great value and implies a commitment to each other that will not tarnish or fade away. So also when the wise men presented their gifts to Jesus, the primary significance of the gifts lay in their great value and the foreshadowing of Jesus’ Kingdom that will never fade away.

As was customary for royal visits, the wise men came bearing treasured gifts intended to honour the newborn king. And as it is today, gold was valued in the ancient world. Among the types of assets listed in the Bible (e.g., precious metals, livestock, servants, gemstones, etc.), accumulation of gold was one of the chief measures of wealth. Because of its scarcity and immense value, gold was particularly associated with royalty and nobility, as we can read in 1 Kings 10 when the Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon bearing great quantities of gold as a gift. By bringing a gift of gold, the wise men showed that they did indeed consider Jesus a king.

In addition to gold signifying Jesus’ royalty, it has been thought that the wise men’s gift of gold may have foretold of another aspect of Jesus’ ministry. Under the old covenant, the Most Holy Place (also known as the Holy of Holies) was an inner sanctuary covered with gold within the Temple where the priest would encounter the presence of God and offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people. Similarly, Jesus who was the presence of God—Immanuel— would make a sacrifice on behalf of his people when he went to the cross. Gold does not tarnish or lose any of its qualities; our loving Saviour never changes and will forever be our King.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are so precious to me. Thank you for always loving and forgiving me and never changing so I can always rely on you. Amen.

Frankincense for God

4th January

Read: Exodus 30:34-37

“May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.” Psalm 141:2 (NIV)

The gifts that the wise men brought Jesus were the offerings of foreign dignitaries. Just as diplomats from other countries often brought gifts representing their cultures, these wise men brought the products specific to theirs. They honored the King of the Jews in a way that fit their nationality. In this way, they stood in as representatives of all the non-Jewish nations. Their acknowledgement foreshadowed the offer of grace to all the people of the earth, and their gifts hinted at the coming of Gentiles to offer themselves to Christ.

I enjoy burning candles. Any who know me can see them throughout my house. The fragrance of the candles and burners bring for me a peacefulness and calmness with which I can then work productively through the day. Aromas and smells are very powerful and can bring about deep mindfulness. Aromas in the Old Testament temple were used as an offering to God – fragrant offerings.

Frankincense is an aromatic gum resin that is still widely used in parts of the Middle East and Africa today. It is produced by scraping the bark of certain native species of trees and then harvesting the beads of resin after they have dried. When burned as incense, it creates a strong and beautiful aroma. In the ancient near east, the cost of frankincense excluded it from being used as a common household air freshener. Rather, the burning of frankincense was closely associated with ceremonial worship of a deity. In this way, the inclusion of frankincense as a gift for Jesus may have indicated that the wise men understood that the prophecy of the newborn king carried with it a claim of God. Jesus' life was pure and holy. He truly is the Son of God.

Prayer: Jesus, you truly are my God and King. May my life be a fragrant offering to you, so that all whom I meet will know you as my Saviour. Amen.

The Gift of Myrrh

5th January

Read: Psalm 45:6-8

“Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.” John 19:39b-40 (NIV)

Years ago I was given one of those house-hold hints books which tell of using natural remedies to cure colds, take stains out of clothes, make your refrigerator smell better, and many others. The interesting thing is that so many of the remedies use the same things but in different ways. I was amazed at how many ways baking soda and vinegar can be used for so many different things.

We also see the same in the Bible. Many of the spices and oils and aloes were used for so many different things. When the wise men presented myrrh to Jesus in Bethlehem they were not only indicating that he was a high priest, but also pointed to his death. Myrrh is a fragrant spice derived from the sap of a tree native to the Near East. Like frankincense, it can be used as incense, but in the ancient world it also had wider usage as a perfume, anointing oil, and was even swallowed as a medicinal tonic.

In the above bible verse we can see that myrrh was used as a key ingredient for the Jewish burial custom in the mixture of spices that were used to prepare bodies for burial, and was used in Jesus’ burial. Perhaps the wise men intended this gift as an indication of Jesus’ humanity and the manner in which he would save his people—namely, that he would die for them. Just like the first two gifts, there is a temple connection with myrrh as well. Exodus 30 tells us that liquid myrrh was a main ingredient in the anointing oil used to ceremonially prepare the priests, the instruments, the altar, and the temple itself before sacrifices could be made.

All three of the gifts from the wise men pointed to Jesus being a King, God and man and then tell of his life and ministry. Jesus is our true high priest who’s life, death and ascension was for our salvation.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, you lived and died with me in your mind and heart. Teach me more to see you as my King and God who came as a man. Amen.

ALL are Acceptable

Epiphany (6th January)

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” Matthew 2:11 (NIV)

While from some Bible passages we may get the idea that God is very selective in whom he invites, the events surrounding the birth of Christ should convince us otherwise. With all the priests, Jewish leaders, and devout Jews around, God chose to reveal his Son to the lowly shepherds on the Judean hills. Then God sent a star which wise men from the east followed, and ***“went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.” (Matthew 2:9b NIV)***

The wise men and their gifts may also be seen through the lens of global missions. Israel was never intended to be the stopping point of grace; God called them to be a light for all nations. Those wise men were not Jews. They did not live in Israel. They apparently were not even God fearing men. Yet God invited them to view the Christ Child. ‘Come to me’ is an invitation that Jesus extends to many different types of his people during his earthly ministry – the disciples, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the thief on the cross.

Many feel inadequate to be loved and accepted by Christ. But, we read in Acts 10 and 11 that through the revelation given to Peter, **ALL** are acceptable. We don't have to be a certain skin colour, speak a certain language, have a certain amount of education, or be in a certain social class to be acceptable to our Lord Jesus Christ. All we need to do is to recognise that we sin, be sorry for those sins and see a need for a Saviour. Come to our Saviour Jesus to find relief from our burdens, peace for our souls and strength to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In the birth of his Son, God brings love, peace and acceptance for all.

Prayer: Lord God, you accept me as I am and have brought your love and peace into my heart and life. Let me rest in your forgiveness and strength. Amen.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for being with me as I 'journeyed through Advent'. Bless me with the heart and soul knowledge that you have revealed to me during this time. I see your amazing love in sending your beloved Son to earth to be a human. In this you showed what it is to be an example of love, forgiveness and acceptance to all people. The Christmas and Advent season are a time of preparing my heart and life for you to enter in and change me to be stronger in my faith. Thank you for the promise of life eternal with you in heaven. Strengthen me daily so that in living out my faith I can always remain true and faithful to you. Bless me as I enter this New Year that all I do may be with the assurance of your presence in my life. In your precious Son's name, Amen.





An outreach
ministry of the LLL

Lutheran Tract Mission

175 Archer Street North Adelaide SA 5006

Phone: (08) 8360 7222

Web: www.ltm.org.au

Image: www.shutterstock.com

Written: Anne Hansen

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