

A *Jesus* Advent Celebration

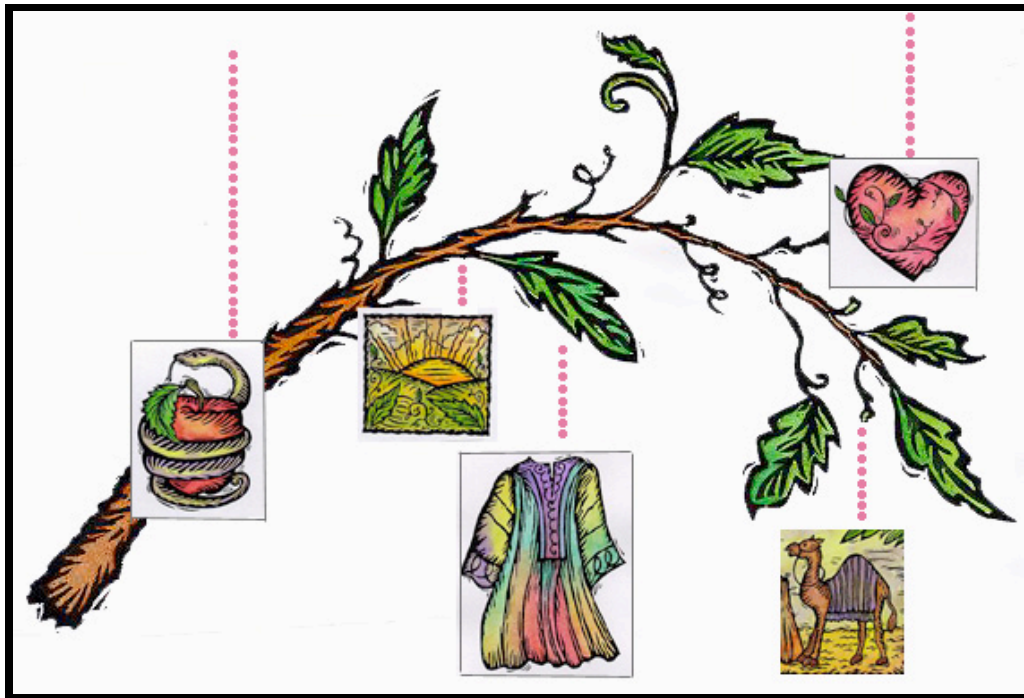


... every day unwraps more of His *love*



Jesse Tree  Journey
Ann Voskamp • Nancy Rodden

A *Jesus* Advent Celebration



A Jesse Tree Journey

By Ann Voskamp

www.aholyexperience.com

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Your Invitation to Unwrap More of His *Lane*



The snow may be soundlessly falling in piles of white all around you as you read these words.

Or waves may be lapping up outside your door, a steady rhythm under palm trees.

Or rain may be coursing in slow and silent rivulets down your windowpanes.

But wherever you are on this tilted, spinning globe as you read these words, each of us, the whole planet, we are all sitting close — waiting.

Waiting for Christ's coming.

For this is the season of Advent, the four weeks before Christmas.

The word, advent, it comes from a Latin word. And it means “coming.”

Aren't we, the whole of the globe, aren't we waiting for the coming of Christ? For the God in the manger who makes Himself bread? The Saviour in swaddlings who makes Himself our robe of righteousness? The Christ who makes precisely what none of us can — Christmas.

It is only Christ alone who can make Christmas.

We are waiting for the glorious coming of Christ. Sometimes the heart yearning for the gift— is part of the gift!

Wherever your home perches on this orbiting world as you read these words, you may have seen an advent calendar hanging somewhere today, one of those calendars with 25 little door flaps to peek under, a way of counting down the days until Christmas, a way of opening the door every day and saying, “Come in, Jesus!” This opening of doors can be a way of opening doors and eyes and heart to Him.

But maybe you want to wait like Zacchaeus? Zacchaeus up in that tree, he who'd climbed the highest and squinted eyes the tightest and hoped the brightest — so he could be the first to see Jesus coming round the bend.



Then this is what you need: you need a Jesse Tree. A tree with roots deep into the past, that finger right out through the stories of the Old Testament, back to the very beginning, and with branches that stretch so high and wide you can see the whole grand panorama of God's story from the very first blink of the first star over Eden to the blinding light over Bethlehem.

Now this Jesse Tree where our hearts climb high in this season of waiting, it's named after the Jesse who was the father of David, the first royal branch in the tree of the Messiah to come, David to whom God promised that his line and his sons and his family would be King forever. And when his sons and grandsons and great grandsons turned from God and loved sin more than their Father and their kingdoms fell, and it seemed as though the whole royal family tree of Jesse had been chopped right off at the roots, our covenant, promise-keeping God, He vowed, "Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot— yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root... In that day the heir to David's throne will be a banner of salvation to all the world. The nations will rally to him, and the land where he lives will be a glorious place." (Isa 11:1,10)

So instead of tucking back Advent calendar flaps, we'll do it this way: we'll wait for the Christ like Zacchaeus on the top limb, and we'll read the stories of the Old Testament, the whole pageantry of mankind, from Adam to the Messiah, each story pointing to the coming promise, the incredibly impossible gift, the Glorious Christ. After each reading of another promise fulfilled, we'll hang the ornament of each story on the branches of a tree, our very own Jesse Tree, a testament to our covenant-keeping, people-passionate God, whose love unfolds like an endless gift down through thousands of years.

And come Christmas Day, at the end of the waiting and the beginning of the flooding light, we'll wave wonder like Zacchaeus, we'll celebrate wildly that "All of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding 'Yes!' And through Christ, our 'Amen' (which means 'Yes') ascends to God for his glory" (2 Cor 1:20 NLT).

Can you hear it now? Our voices crescendoing on Christmas morning with the angels,
"Yes! Glory to God, yes! Yes! Yes!"

Lean out long on your Jesse Tree Limb and look for Him — doesn't seeking Him make your heart yearn more?



Jesse Tree Invitation and Instructions

So. It's late November and you'll need your Jesse Tree to wait for Jesus coming.

Your Jesse Tree may take on a number of wondrous forms: A silhouette of a tree may be sewn or painted, cut out of felt, quilted, hung from the fridge, a wall, a door, a window.

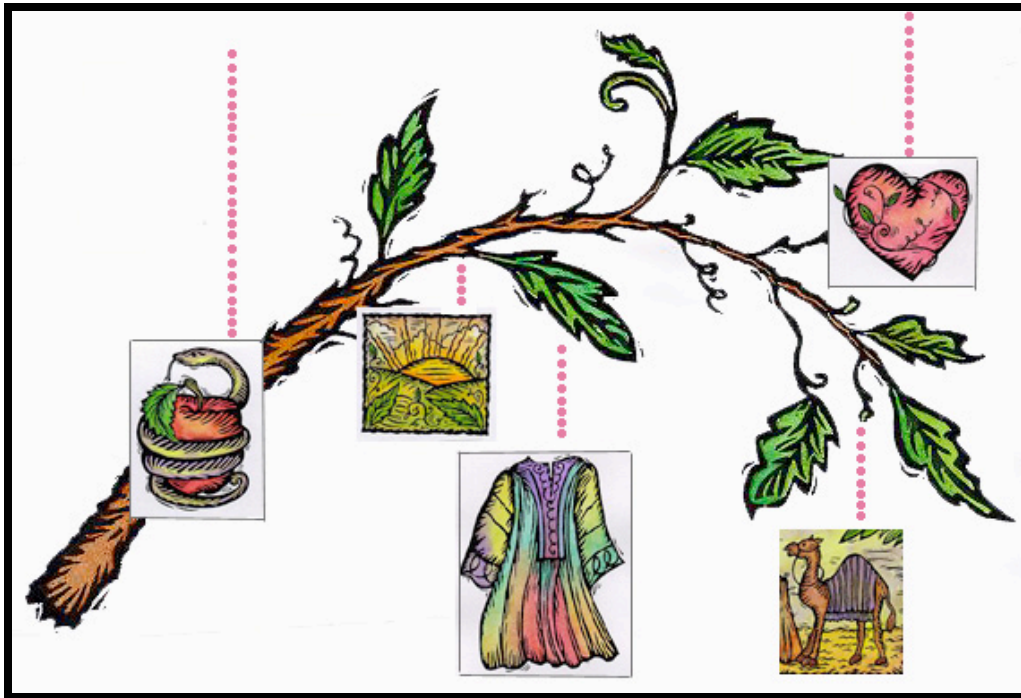
Or you may hang the ornaments on a small evergreen tree, a cluster of red dogwood branches, a pot of hemlock, pine, spruce, sticks or holly.

You may print out the ornaments on the end pages onto card stock, cut and laminate them and string them up, tape the ornaments, fasten them, button them, hang them on any tree of your own imagining or envisioning. Just whatever you do?

Anticipate Christ ... and celebrate Christmas, His Coming.

And all this Jesse Tree making? It's a bit like making your own family tree — a family tree with its arching branches of grandfathers and grandmothers, its sheltering leaves of aunts and uncles. Your making of a Jesse Tree is to trace the family line and heritage of your own forever family, the family of God.

This Jesse Tree, this stump with a sprout — this is your story.





It is Advent. Come

Today's Reading: Isaiah 11:1-2 (NIV)

- 1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
- 2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD

One bite of a fruit right there in the Garden and our tree of life fell.

Our hopes all crashed to the earth and the whole planet groaned and we've lived our whole lives like stumps. Cut off from God.

And then out of our fallenness, out of our cut-down tree, springs this singular fragile shoot. It's the only hope we've got.

Out of a family line of obscurity, poverty and small account, comes a King. **God is in the business of clothing the neglected and unexpected in royal robes.**

And out of the last and forgotten son of Jesse, comes forth one tender branch that will grow into a crown of thorns... a rugged cross.... our ladder back to God. **Jesus will go to impossible lengths to rescue us.**

It's out of the stump of that fallen tree, watered with the living waters that flow from His grace, that a twig sprouts that will be the sceptre that defeats sin... and lets us grow again.

Today we begin Advent. Today we begin the season of waiting... yearning. Today we can feel it coming already – this new life stirring.

Lord God, let there come forth out of this fallen tree New Life, and cause me to see it today – new growth in people all around me, even in the dead of winter.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Plant wheat or grass seeds today for every act of love and kindness you do today. Continue planting seeds for kindnesses throughout the Jesse Tree Journey. Keep watering the sprouts until Christmas Eve. You're growing straw for the manger of the coming King! Love and New Life are coming!

Life begins as a Love Story**Today's Reading: Genesis 1:24-31 (NCV)**

24 Then God said, "Let the earth be filled with animals, each producing more of its own kind. Let there be tame animals and small crawling animals and wild animals, and let each produce more of its kind." And it happened.

25 So God made the wild animals, the tame animals, and all the small crawling animals to produce more of their own kind. God saw that this was good.

26 Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image and likeness. And let them rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the tame animals, over all the earth, and over all the small crawling animals on the earth."

27 So God created human beings in his image. In the image of God he created them. He created them male and female.

28 God blessed them and said, "Have many children and grow in number. Fill the earth and be its master. Rule over the fish in the sea and over the birds in the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

29 God said, "Look, I have given you all the plants that have grain for seeds and all the trees whose fruits have seeds in them. They will be food for you.

30 I have given all the green plants as food for every wild animal, every bird of the air, and every small crawling animal." And it happened.

31 God looked at everything he had made, and it was very good. Evening passed, and morning came. This was the sixth day.

The Christmas story, it begins in the beginning. And in the beginning...there was no life. No breath. No warmth. No wind or light or laughter or stars or waves. Just cold, empty nothingness. Like life before Christ.

Close your eyes. Cover your ears. Now try to imagine that — all that nothingness everywhere.

And then, just as a branch came forth out of a deadened stump, out of the darkness came forth His Voice, an echo in the emptiness. Out of the black nothingness — glorious something!

The commanding word of His mouth made all the light and the land and the living creatures — *Let there be* — .

But we, His children? We alone were formed by a huddle of hearts — *Let us* make human beings.

The three persons of the Trinity, Father God, Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit, they gathered close together to imagine us. And God in three persons, all full of affection, knelt down and kissed warm life into us with the breath of His love.

And we are made of the dust of this earth and we are made of the happiness of heaven and we are flesh and we are spirit and we are of two worlds longing for the home of His world. The authority of God made all of creation. **But it was the *affection* of God that made all of His children.** (Prov 8:31)

We were made by Love! *For love!* Made in the image of God to *look* like His love!

The Christmas story is a love story, the whole blue marble of the world spinning on the axis of His love... Could anything be better?

Lord God, cause us to see it everywhere today, that everything You made is very good. Because Love is at the heart of everything You made.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: What could you create today with a gentle heart of love that would be good (a letter, a treat, a surprise)? Create something out of your love!



Where are you?**Today's Reading: Genesis 3:1-21 (NIV)**

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,

3 but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you

must not touch it, or you will die.'"

4 "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman.

5 "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

9 But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

10 He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

11 And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

12 The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

14 So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this,



“Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.

15 And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

16 To the woman he said, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

17 To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life.

18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.

19 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

20 Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.

21 The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

We’re only two chapters in. And the whole story falls apart.

The curtain has just opened, the first man and woman have only stepped onto the stage of creation, their first lines hardly out of their God-breathed mouths, and already the story’s an almost impossible mess with this, perhaps the very saddest story in all the Bible.

It is the part of our history referred to as **The Fall** — when we swallowed the fruit of sin and stumbled away from God. Tempted by that snake flashing scales of deception, Adam and Eve ate of the tree God had forbidden. The juice of the fruit barely on their tongues, they could taste it: the sourness of death. Their bones shivered cold. They drew up fig leaves to hide their shame. And they knelt low to hide from God. And then it came, not in the beating noonday heat, nor in the shadowy pitch of night, but in the gracious cool of the day: the gentle walking of God.

The Voice that spoke the cosmos to life, He now calls to us, a whisper in wind: **Where are you?**

God’s love longs for us.



When we are lost, God will go looking and when we are hiding, God keeps hunting, and it's when we have fallen and sin's fangs have pierced our naked hearts straight through, death pulsing hot through our veins like a poison, that God comes calling.... **Where are you?**

We're only freshly wounded by sin when **love** drives God to come walking, to kneel down and reveal our remedy. God offers to forever heal us with this: a distant descendant of Eve will crush the sinful head of Satan.

Can you hear the whisper in the wind: *Jesus!* Christmas has been coming right from the very beginning! We who are fallen and messy and bitten by sin will be bandaged and washed and made whole.

We who ate from the tree and tasted death, we will feed on Jesus, bread from heaven, who came to die on a tree so that we can taste life. And we who in our sin are exposed and naked and ashamed and afraid of God, will have a lamb, Jesus, who will clothe us in clean skin, drape us in purity, let us wear Himself, so we might run right home again, into the arms of God.

And this saddest part of our story? **It sings with greatest passion of our Saviour!**

Lord God, "The Fall" says it all, our life in two words. But You have so much more to write in our story — for You wrote Jesus into our story, who keeps whispering to us all of Advent — "Where are you? Please let me come to you..."



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Jesus is calling for you: Where are you? Sing a worship song or Christmas Carol (or two or three) and invite Him to come be with you...

Saved**Today's Reading: Genesis 6:5-8 (NCV)**

5 The Lord saw that the human beings on the earth were very wicked and that everything they thought about was evil.

6 He was sorry he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. **7** So the Lord said, "I will destroy all human beings that I made on the earth. And I will destroy every animal and everything that

crawls on the earth and the birds of the air, because I am sorry I have made them." **8** But Noah pleased the Lord.

The God of the universe, He carries the heart of a tender father. And when the earth filled with people and the land filled with sin, the heart of God filled with pain, his snake-bitten children now wounding Him deep. Eve, the mother of mankind, saw the tree was beautiful and she had eaten. And God who is the Beautiful, saw all mankind sinning ugly and He ached sorrow.

Did the earth flood with the tears of His broken heart, a torrent of grief to wipe away the sin-filth of this world? God's heart for His people never changes — it's always the heart of the people towards God that does the changing.

But it is the eyes of God that never stop searching for the one heart still in love with Him. Everywhere He looked, He saw the backs of His children, all hearts turned away... but Noah. A man who didn't care if he pleased man because he pleased God, a humble man raised up higher than any giants who walked the land, a man who picked up nails and wood to make an ark for two of every beast, this raft of wood to save everyone turned towards God.

And when Noah and his family and all the animals again walked the dry, sin-cleansed land, **God arched his Father heart right across the sky**, a rainbow to shoot an arrow of His forever love straight across all time. Because the Father was sending His Son Jesus on another piece of wood, and we cling to that Son for dear life.

Lord God, even in the storms and the rain, the bow of Your love writes Jesus Hope all across the skies...



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Do one thing today just to please God.



Living by Faith



Today's Reading: Genesis 12:1-7 (NIV)

1 The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

2 "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

5 He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

6 Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

7 The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

Abram, he lives in Ur, the place that sounds like a hesitation, a mistake, and the very God of the planets, the One who nudges the sun awake every morning and threads it like a blazing bead on a string across the sky, God, He just happens to stop by.

He hands Abram no map. He just tells him to go to a land that He'll show Abram. Would you go? There's only mention of getting a glimpse of the land, no mention of actually getting it.

While He's there, God tells Abram he will be the father of a great nation — even though he and his wife Sarai are old and withered and they don't have even one child! Would you believe?

But Abram of Ur believes without hesitation in the God who doesn't make mistakes, the God who can make a man out of the dust of the ground, who “out of stones raises up children,” who can multiply one into a thousand and knows the names of all the stars.

And when God said that, through Abram, He would bless all the families of the world, God was talking about you, me, all the families on this rotating globe right now. God was talking about our Christmas gift right there and Abram believed the unimaginable, that through his promised family, **God would send the crowning blessing of all the earth, that Jesus, that blessing God promised right from the beginning,** that baby as small as a seed who would one day crush Satan and free us from the disease of sin.

By faith, we believe!

The Lord God's about to appear to us...

Lord God, we so need faith, trusting that You — always— will take us to good places. Cause us today to go wherever You call us.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Go to a new place today, to a neighbor's place you've never been before. Be a blessing and bring them a blessing of some sort. Leave them a Christmas card telling about Jesus, the blessing God gives to all peoples on earth!



Laugh!**Today's Reading: Genesis 21:1-7 (NCV)**

1 The Lord cared for Sarah as he had said and did for her what he had promised.

2 Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to a son for Abraham in his old age. Everything happened at the time God had said it would.

3 Abraham named his son Isaac, the son Sarah gave birth to.

4 He circumcised Isaac when he was eight days old as God had commanded.

5 Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born.

6 And Sarah said, "God has made me laugh. Everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.

7 No one thought that I would be able to have Abraham's child, but even though Abraham is old I have given him a son."

The promise-keeping God who lets no word of His fall to the ground

forgotten, He does everything in perfect time, and He sends a son to Abraham and Sarah, the couple renamed father and mother of many nations, just as He promised. And they name him exactly what God tells them: Isaac, **laughter**.

The impossible! The old people rock a cradle and they rock with laughter! Abraham, he laughs for joy (17:17), and Sarah, she laughs relief, and we who hear the story, we laugh too, for who would have thought that God would make this improbable impossible happen too? That God would send a promised child, a King, to be born in a barn feed trough! That He would crush Satan by laying out His own hand for a nail! **That the Babe born under a star in Bethlehem would make us laugh wonder at amazing grace made into flesh and forever love that sets us free!**

God has made us the happiest people, and all the world sings: fa-la-la-la, la, la, la, la.

Lord God, we can laugh at the impossible, that You gave us Your Son. Thank you for giving us Jesus and making us the happiest, most joy-filled people of all!



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Try keeping a smile on your face all day. Today, look for three opportunities to make three different people laugh with you. We are the joy-filled people! We've been given the Son!



God Provides**Today's Reading: Genesis 22:1-14 (NIV)**

1 After these things God tested Abraham's faith. God said to him, "Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am."

2 Then God said, "Take your only son, Isaac, the son you love, and go to the land of Moriah. Kill him there and offer him as a whole burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

3 Abraham got up early in the morning and saddled his donkey. He took Isaac and two servants with him. After he cut the wood for the sacrifice, they went to the place God had told them to go.

4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.

5 He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey. My son and I will go over there and worship, and then we will come back to you."

6 Abraham took the wood for the sacrifice and gave it to his son to carry, but he himself took the knife and the fire. So he and his son went on together.

7 Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" Abraham answered, "Yes, my son." Isaac said, "We have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb we will burn as a sacrifice?"

8 Abraham answered, "God will give us the lamb for the sacrifice, my son."

So Abraham and his son went on together

9 and came to the place God had told him about. Abraham built an altar there. He laid the wood on it and then tied up his son Isaac and laid him on the wood on the altar.

10 Then Abraham took his knife and was about to kill his son.

11 But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham! Abraham!" Abraham answered, "Yes."

12 The angel said, "Don't kill your son or hurt him in any way. Now I can see that you trust God and that you have not kept your son, your only son, from me."



13 Then Abraham looked up and saw a male sheep caught in a bush by its horns. So Abraham went and took the sheep and killed it. He offered it as a whole burnt offering to God, and his son was saved.

14 So Abraham named that place The Lord Provides. Even today people say, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided."

“Take your only son,” says God. “Take your Isaac, the only true son of yours, the son whom you love, and do you love me more?” says the God who did not take but gave the Greatest Gift of His Son, His only begotten Son, the Son whom He loved. And again, Abraham, who left his country without a map but with a heart directed towards God, he rises first thing the next morning and, without hesitation, he heads towards Moriah.

And Isaac carries the wood, like Jesus would one day carry the Cross, and the son lies down on the altar, the boy named laughter now still, and again God keeps His word and **God provides a lamb. Isn't that the gift we always need?**

The promised Christmas Child who is the lamb sacrificed instead of us, and this Mount Moriah of Isaac's sacrifice, which would later be the building ground of God's temple, which would one day be in sight of Jesus' Cross, it's renamed the place **the Lord Provides, Jehovah-Jireh.**

Ours is the God who always provides a ram in the thicket, whatever we need today, whatever is best for us, that even today the people might say, “The Father who tenderly loves His children provides us with grace upon grace, love upon love, gift upon extravagant gift.”

Even His own Son.

Lord Jesus, Abraham called that place “The Lord will Provide.” And we call this moment in time “The Lord has Provided.” Provision for our salvation has been made — because love made You come.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Write down ten different ways that God has provided for you today, like gift upon gift... Slip your piece of paper under your Jesse Tree. Thank God for being our Jehovah-Jireh — in all ways.



The House of God**Today's Reading: Genesis 28:10-22 (NCV)**

10 Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran.

11 When he came to a place, he spent the night there because the sun had set. He found a stone and laid his head on it to go to sleep.

12 Jacob dreamed that there was a ladder resting on the earth and reaching up into heaven, and he saw angels of God going up and coming down the ladder.

13 Then Jacob saw the Lord standing above the ladder, and he said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your grandfather, and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are now sleeping.

14 Your descendants will be as many as the dust of the earth. They will spread west and east, north and south, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants.

15 I am with you and will protect you everywhere you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it."

17 He was afraid and said, "This place frightens me! It is surely the house of God and the gate of heaven."

18 Jacob rose early in the morning and took the stone he had slept on and set it up on its end. Then he poured olive oil on the top of it.

19 At first, the name of that city was Luz, but Jacob named it Bethel.

20 Then Jacob made a promise. He said, "I want God to be with me and to protect me on this journey. I want him to give me food to eat and clothes to wear

21 so I will be able to return in peace to my father's house. If the Lord does these things, he will be my God.

22 This stone which I have set up on its end will be the house of God. And I will give God one-tenth of all he gives me."

'Tis the season to be going! Banquets and reunions, concerts and plays, caroling and

parties. The calendar squares nearly bulge with dates and times, people and places, and we read of a man headed home who slept on a stone and had the best sleep of his life.

Jacob saw the ladder, and Jesus, that Christmas Child coming to us, He alone is our ladder and **we have no way to heaven but by the rungs of Christ.**

And God, He whispers to us this best gift of all: "I am with you and will protect you everywhere you go.... I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

God is with us in this season of coming and going and God is with us in these places, though we know it not, at our tables and in our cars and down our street and in the unlikely, unexpected places, even in a place like the manger of a barn and **we meet God today in a thousand places. Who knows it?**

In this season of coming and going, perhaps we really do just go to one place again and again: **the house of God.**

Lord God, there is a ladder even to this place here. You, in the person of Jesus, descend it. You are with us wherever we go. You are in this place — all places. And You make every place a house of God.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Draw a ladder on a piece of paper. Stick it in your pocket today. Now and then pull it out and remember: Everywhere you go is the house of God and surely the Lord is in this place. How does that change your day and make everything a wonder and a miracle and holy?



The Colors of Love



Today's Reading: Genesis 37:31-33 and Genesis 50:15-20 (NIV)

31 Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood.

32 They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe."

33 He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces."

.....

15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"

16 So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died:

17 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

18 His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

19 But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?"

20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

From the wool of a lamb, there was this coat woven into a tapestry of flaming colors, brilliant hues, rich tones, and the father Jacob gives it as a gift to one of his sons, slips the coat of rainbow colors onto Joseph, and the boy, he spins. **He believes all God's promises!**

And one day God would make His Son like a lamb and His robe would drip with blood and because of Him, God would take all the ugly things we've done that hurt and harmed His heart, and He'd forgive our sins and all the wrongs we have committed in treating each other so badly. Jesus will save many lives and **God gives us the most shimmering love gift of all, a robe of righteousness.**

The Babe in the manger, through Him, God would turn our evil into good and because of Jesus our Christmas Child, God gives us all this, a clean heart as our coat, all the promises fulfilled.

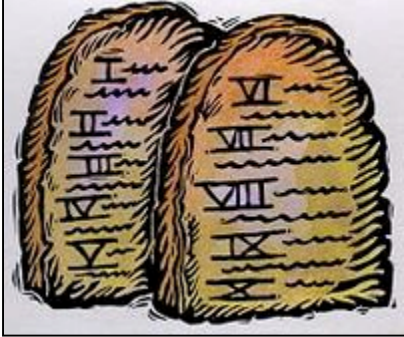
Is that why this time of year the whole world spins, all alight in these blinking, beautiful colors?

Lord God, because You sent Jesus, we can be transformed into good, attired in the richly woven robe of righteousness. That You would let us wear the colors of love!



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: As Joseph forgave his brothers, think of one person you can forgive today. Write their name down on a piece of paper. Then write out your thanks to God for somehow taking that evil and making it good. Can you give that person a gift today? Today, dress your heart in the colors of love.



Engraved on His hands**Today's Reading: Deuteronomy 5:1-22 (NCV)**

1 Moses called all the people of Israel together and said: Listen, Israel, to the commands and laws I am giving you today. Learn them and obey them carefully.

2 The Lord our God made an Agreement with us at Mount Sinai.

3 He did not make this Agreement with our ancestors, but he made it with us, with all of us who are alive here today.

4 The Lord spoke to you face to face from the fire on the mountain.

5 (At that time I stood between you and the Lord in order to tell you what the Lord said; you were afraid of the fire, so you would not go up on the mountain.) The Lord said:

6 "I am the Lord your God; I brought you out of the land of Egypt where you were slaves.

7 "You must not have any other gods except me.

8 "You must not make for yourselves any idols or anything to worship that looks like something in the sky above or on the earth below or in the water below the land.

9 You must not worship or serve any idol, because I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. If people sin against me and hate me, I will punish their children, even their grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

10 But I will be very kind for a thousand lifetimes to those who love me and obey my commands.

11 "You must not use the name of the Lord your God thoughtlessly, because the Lord will punish anyone who uses his name in this way.

12 "Keep the Sabbath as a holy day, as the Lord your God has commanded you.

13 You may work and get everything done during six days each week,

14 but the seventh day is a day of rest to honor the Lord your God. On that day no one may do any work: not you, your son or daughter, your male or female slaves, your ox, your donkey, or any of your animals, or the foreigners living in your cities. That way your servants may rest as you do.

15 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there by his great power and strength. So the Lord your God has commanded you to rest on the Sabbath day.



16 "Honor your father and your mother as the Lord your God has commanded you. Then you will live a long time, and things will go well for you in the land that the Lord your God is going to give you.

17 "You must not murder anyone.

18 "You must not be guilty of adultery.

19 "You must not steal.

20 "You must not tell lies about your neighbor.

21 "You must not want to take your neighbor's wife. You must not want to take your neighbor's house or land, his male or female slaves, his ox or his donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

22 The Lord spoke these commands to all of you on the mountain in a loud voice out of the fire, the cloud, and the deep darkness; he did not say anything else. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets, and he gave them to me.

Hold up your hands and wiggle your fingers and yes, that's all God gave us — just ten commandments to keep — as many as we have fingers. That is all. Wouldn't you think we could keep just ten commandments?

But no, the poison of that sin we first contracted in the Garden of Eden, it courses through our thoughts and our hearts and our desires and it makes it impossible for us to keep even one of God's commandments. And if we break even one of the commandments, even just once, God, perfect and holy and pure, He considers that we have broken all of the commandments — which breaks His heart. And our relationship with Him.

God knew we could never keep these ten commandments, but He gave them to us, ten perfect gifts of pure holiness, given for our best happiness, for He knew they would be like a kind teacher for us, each commandment teaching us how much we need Jesus. Jesus to help us, Jesus to cleanse us from our sins, Jesus who is like a Moses to us, more, who stands between God and the people, to be the actual Word of the Lord, that we may never be afraid again in approaching God.

Right into stone, God wrote the law of ten commandments and Jesus came and wrote our names right on His hands, (Isa 49:19) to free us from the law and save us by grace.

It's those ten commandments that drive us into the two open arms of Christ.

Lord God, You gave the law to be our tutor, to bring us to Christ. Oh, what if there was only Law and You had never come? Thank you for engraving our names on Your hands.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Pick the hardest commandment for you to keep. Try to keep it all day long. When you fail, thank Jesus for amazing grace. And your name engraved on His hands.



Loving the Family of God

Today's Reading: Ruth 1:1-2:3 and Matthew 1:5 & 16 (NCV)

Ruth 1

1 Long ago when the judges ruled Israel, there was a shortage of food in the land.

2 So a man named Elimelech left the town of Bethlehem in Judah to live in the country of Moab with his wife and his two sons. His wife

was named Naomi, and his two sons were named Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathahites from Bethlehem in Judah. When they came to Moab, they settled there.

3 Then Naomi's husband, Elimelech, died, and she was left with her two sons.

4 These sons married women from Moab. One was named Orpah, and the other was named Ruth. Naomi and her sons had lived in Moab about ten years

5 when Mahlon and Kilion also died. So Naomi was left alone without her husband or her two sons.

6 While Naomi was in Moab, she heard that the Lord had come to help his people and had given them food again. So she and her daughters-in-law got ready to leave Moab and return home.

7 Naomi and her daughters-in-law left the place where they had lived and started back to the land of Judah.

8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back home, each of you to your own mother's house. May the Lord be as kind to you as you have been to me and my sons who are now dead.

9 May the Lord give you another happy home and a new husband." When Naomi kissed the women good-bye, they began to cry out loud.

10 They said to her, "No, we want to go with you to your people."

11 But Naomi said, "My daughters, return to your own homes. Why do you want to go with me? I cannot give birth to more sons to give you new husbands;



12 go back, my daughters, to your own homes. I am too old to have another husband. Even if I told myself, 'I still have hope' and had another husband tonight, and even if I had more sons,
13 should you wait until they were grown into men? Should you live for so many years without husbands? Don't do that, my daughters. My life is much too sad for you to share, because the Lord has been against me!"
14 The women cried together out loud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law Naomi good-bye, but Ruth held on to her tightly.
15 Naomi said to Ruth, "Look, your sister-in-law is going back to her own people and her own gods. Go back with her."

16 But Ruth said, "Don't beg me to leave you or to stop following you. Where you go, I will go. Where you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.**17** And where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. I ask the Lord to punish me terribly if I do not keep this promise: Not even death will separate us."

18 When Naomi saw that Ruth had firmly made up her mind to go with her, she stopped arguing with her.

19 So Naomi and Ruth went on until they came to the town of Bethlehem. When they entered Bethlehem, all the people became very excited. The women of the town said, "Is this really Naomi?"

20 Naomi answered the people, "Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very sad.

21 When I left, I had all I wanted, but now, the Lord has brought me home with nothing. Why should you call me Naomi when the Lord has spoken against me and the Almighty has given me so much trouble?"

22 So Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth, the Moabite, returned from Moab and arrived at Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Ruth 2

1 Now Naomi had a rich relative named Boaz, from Elimelech's family.

2 One day Ruth, the Moabite, said to Naomi, "I am going to the fields. Maybe someone will be kind enough to let me gather the grain he leaves behind." Naomi said, "Go, my daughter."

3 So Ruth went to the fields and gathered the grain that the workers cutting the grain had left behind. It just so happened that the field belonged to Boaz, from Elimelech's family.



Matthew 1:5,16

5 Salmon was the father of Boaz. (Boaz's mother was Rahab.) Boaz was the father of Obed. (Obed's mother was Ruth.) Obed was the father of Jesse.

16 Jacob was the father of Joseph. Joseph was the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus. Jesus is called the Christ.

Famine and their gnawing, hungry stomachs drove the family of Naomi out of Bethlehem, that place with the name meaning “House of Bread.” And when her husband dies and both her sons die in Moab, it is Naomi’s sad, hungry heart that drives her back to Bethlehem. And her daughter-in-law Ruth, without husband, without blood relatives, without children, stands at a cross-roads — will she go back to her home or will she go with Naomi? And Ruth decides to go with Naomi and make a mother-in-law with a broken heart her only family.

When God is our God, we take His people as our people, and we take a vow of forever love and loyalty, and when Jesus Christ is our Lord of Lords, not even death will separate us from Him. **Nothing can ever separate us from Christ! Isn’t this the gift that always mends our hearts?**

Though Naomi felt the Lord was against her, that she had returned home with nothing but trouble, feelings can lie. Because God loved her tender and had given her a daughter-in-law who went to the fields to gather the grain to make into bread. And one day this Ruth would marry kind Boaz and God would bless them with a son wrapped close named Obed, and Naomi who wanted to be called bitter would be made a laughing delighted grandmother. And Ruth who had been an outsider was made part of the family of God.

And that little boy Obed? He would be in the family line of Jesus, the Baby born generations later also in Bethlehem, the Baby Who would be Bread to make sure our hearts would never be hungry again.

Lord Jesus, You came so that when we who feel lost and hungry and alone, we always have a home to come home to, a family to belong to, and a hand to hold on to — Who gives us real bread.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: “When God is our God, we take His people as our people and we take a vow of forever love and loyalty.”

Write a card of thanks to someone in your church family today, or pick up the phone and give a lonely person in your faith community a call. How can you feed a hungry heart in the family of God today?



Venturing Big for God**Today's Reading: Joshua 2:1-21 (NIV)**

1 Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. “Go, look over the land,” he said, “especially Jericho.” So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.

2 The king of Jericho was told, “Look, some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land.”

3 So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: “Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land.”

4 But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, “Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from.

5 At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, they left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them.”

6 (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.)

7 So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

8 Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof
9 and said to them, “I know that the LORD has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you.

10 We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed.

11 When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage

failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

12 “Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign

13 that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them—and that you will save us from death.”

14 “Our lives for your lives!” the men assured her. “If you don’t tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the LORD gives us the land.”

15 So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall.

16 She said to them, “Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way.”

17 Now the men had said to her, “This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us

18 unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house.

19 If any of them go outside your house into the street, their blood will be on their own heads; we will not be responsible. As for those who are in the house with you, their blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on them.

20 But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear.”

21 “Agreed,” she replied. “Let it be as you say.” So she sent them away, and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window.



She had a reputation as a bad girl, this Rahab, a girl looking for love in all the wrong places. But if you run your fingers along the names recorded in Hebrews 11, that Great Hall of Faith chapter, there you read of... Abraham... and Joseph... and Moses... and... There *she* is: Rahab.

“By faith Rahab...”

By faith in God, Rahab welcomed into her own home the very spies against her own country. By faith in God she risked the wrath of her king, the revenge of her neighbors, and her very own life. And by faith in a God Whom she had never seen yet in Whom she believed — oh such faith! — Rahab proclaimed that the Lord God rules the heavens above and the earth below.

True believers in God venture big for God, and our bigger God returns with gifts more than we can ask or think or ever imagine. God saves Rahab and her family. And many years later Rahab, that girl with the shady background, God makes her into a princess, the wife of a Jewish Prince, Salmon. They have a baby. A baby boy, named *Boaz* — the Boaz who was the father of Obed!

Ruth, the foreigner who found love with the kinsman-redeemer Boaz, her mother-in-law is Rahab, the foreigner who tied the red rope in the window — the girl with the reputation as a bad girl, lovingly adopted into Jesus’ family line. (Isn’t this too the gift God gives to each of us this Christmas? Grace!)

Like the Israelites in Egypt sprinkling the blood of the lamb on their doorframes so that the angel of death might pass over them, Rahab has the faith to hang a red rope from her window, to spare her whole household And we too look to the blood of Jesus Christ and whisper Rahab words: **Save us!**

Our Christmas gift is coming just for that...

Lord Jesus, You come to save us — Your blood is the lifeline that we wrap around ourselves. And by that rope made scarlet with Your blood, we are rescued. Lord, by faith, we are holding on.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Do just one thing today that is venturing big for God. (Share the gospel, make a hard phone call, do one thing you are scared to do but know Jesus is calling you to.) Hold on to God and do that one big thing *all by faith!* Our God is bigger!



Looking on Hearts**Today's Reading: 1 Samuel 16:1-13 (NCV)**

1 The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you continue to feel sorry for Saul? I have rejected him as king of Israel. Fill your container with olive oil and go. I am sending you to Jesse who lives in Bethlehem, because I have chosen one of his sons to be king."

2 But Samuel said, "If I go, Saul will hear the news and will try to kill me." The Lord said, "Take a young calf with you. Say, 'I have come to offer a sacrifice to the Lord.'"

3 Invite Jesse to the sacrifice. Then I will tell you what to do. You must appoint the one I show you."

4 Samuel did what the Lord told him to do. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of Bethlehem shook with fear. They met him and asked, "Are you coming in peace?"

5 Samuel answered, "Yes, I come in peace. I have come to make a sacrifice to the Lord. Set yourselves apart to the Lord and come to the sacrifice with me." Then he set Jesse and his sons apart to the Lord, and he invited them to come to the sacrifice.

6 When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab, and he thought, "Surely the Lord has appointed this person standing here before him."

7 But the Lord said to Samuel, "Don't look at how handsome Eliab is or how tall he is, because I have not chosen him. God does not see the same way people see. People look at the outside of a person, but the Lord looks at the heart."

8 Then Jesse called Abinadab and told him to pass by Samuel. But Samuel said, "The Lord has not chosen this man either."

9 Then Jesse had Shammah pass by. But Samuel said, "No, the Lord has not chosen this one."

10 Jesse had seven of his sons pass by Samuel. But Samuel said to him, "The Lord has not chosen any of these."

11 Then he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" Jesse answered, "I still have the youngest son. He is out taking care of the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him. We will not sit down to eat until he arrives."



12 So Jesse sent and had his youngest son brought in. He was a fine boy, tanned, and handsome. The Lord said to Samuel, "Go, appoint him, because he is the one."

13 So Samuel took the container of olive oil and poured it on Jesse's youngest son to appoint him in front of his brothers. From that day on, the Lord's Spirit worked in David. Samuel then went back to Ramah.

So this is the page in God's Grand Plan, when we turn the leaf and find the Jesse of the Jesse Tree. And this is where Samuel goes to Bethlehem looking for a king. And now is when all our hearts are strained towards Bethlehem, looking for Our Heart's True King.

And in Bethlehem, the elders trembled in fear and wondered if this Samuel looking for a king had come in peace? "Yes, peace," he said, "for I bring a sacrifice."

And on the night when the King of Kings and Lord of Lords came to Bethlehem, the shepherds shook sore afraid and wondered if the angels came to bring peace and they said, "Do not be afraid, yes, we bring you good news." The Prince of Peace had come! No need to knee-knock in fear, for this Appointed King, Jesus, comes *as* Peace, for He brings His own offering along with him: *Himself* as the sacrifice.

But Samuel was seduced by the beauty of Jesse's sons and this Christmas season entices with the shimmer and sparkle of the season, and yet God whispers how He sees: "God does not see the same way people see. **People look at the outside... but the Lord looks at the heart.**" (1 Sam 16:7)

So we deck out the Christmas tree and we make the cookies and we light the candles, and Jesus whispers quiet, "But do not forget what I really came for..."

Jesus comes looking for hearts...

Lord Jesus, in this season of looking for that perfect something, may You find that which You seek: our open hearts.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Seek out one person today who doesn't look on the outside like one of your friends. Take a few moments, sit down with them, and ask them how their day is. Look on their inside and really, lovingly, listen to their heart.



The Shepherd King who lays down His life



Today's Reading: 2 Samuel 5:1-5 (NIV)

1 All the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "We are your own flesh and blood."

2 In the past, while Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel on their military campaigns. And the LORD said to you, "You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler."

3 When all the elders of Israel had come to King David at Hebron, the king made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel.

4 David was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned forty years.

5 In Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months, and in Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years.

For seven perfect years, David has been the king of Judah when all the tribes of Israel came looking for him, to make him their king, because, they said, “We are your own family.”

True leaders love their lambs, and David, who had long been a shepherd boy all his life, leading the flock to lush pastures and carrying home the lost lambs, is now called by God to gently protect, serve and shepherd his people, be the king of his own family. Because a king on a throne needs the same wisdom, the same vigilance, the same I-will-do-everything-to-always-keep-safe attitude as that lone shepherd keeping watch out on the hills.

The King of the universe who is coming to Bethlehem to be the king of our lives, Jesus, He is made to be part of our family, made to be like us, His brothers and sisters, so that He'd *know* what it is like to feel all the things you feel deep inside, the tears and the pain, the temptation and the struggles. Jesus knows what it's like to be you. Only so He might be a tender and understanding shepherd to all us wandering ones. (Heb 2:17)

That Jesus might be our shepherd who leads us to rest in the green pastures, guide us in the best direction, and we need never be afraid again because He walks by our side, His shepherd's staff really the sceptre that rules and directs all the world.

And when Jesus had been an earthly King but 33 years, He would be the shepherd King who'd save us from the enemy wolf, who loved each of His lambs to the point of a Cross, who would lay His life down for the sheep — and make us part of His family.

Lord Jesus, You come as our shepherd and find us, lost lambs. What better expresses our love for You who laid down Your life for Your sheep, than for us to lay down our lives in worship to our King of Kings?



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: As a shepherd cares and feeds his flock, care for someone today — the postal carrier, a police officer, a teacher, a neighbor child. Offer them a sweet treat. Lay down your life in some small way today for our Shepherd King.



Light to Warm Us**Today's Reading: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 (NCV)**

2 Before those people lived in darkness, but now they have seen a great light. They lived in a dark land, but a light has shined on them...

6 A child has been born to us; God has given a son to us. He will be responsible for leading the people. His name will be Wonderful Counselor, Powerful God, Father Who Lives Forever, Prince of Peace.

7 Power and peace will be in his kingdom and will continue to grow forever. He will rule as king on David's throne and over David's kingdom. He will make it strong by ruling with justice and goodness from now on and forever. The Lord All-Powerful will do this because of his strong love for his people.

Looking out our windows this time of year, we can see it, the whole world bedecked in strands of lights, twinkling and blinking awake. Because we once lived in a dark land, a time before the warming hope of Christ, but now we celebrate the Light of the World who now shines the brilliance of grace upon us. We wake to wonder!

The Child to be born in the barn is our mighty God; the ancient of days, The Father who lives forever, who is without beginning or end, coming to us in the fresh pink skin of a baby, the Word made flesh. The Everlasting Father, He becomes the Son given. The Son given to *us!* God makes Himself His *gift* to us — *Love born to us!* Who can help being over the moon with this gift of such a Friend?

He is Wonderful, wonders following Him everywhere, the wonder of His birth, His miracles, His resurrection, His wondrous gift of salvation, and He is our Counselor, the very wisdom of God telling us how to walk in the light, and He is our Prince of Peace whose kingdom grows larger and larger right in our hearts.

We wake to wonder! The light of God's Son blazes sure and bright, His light a strong love warming all our faces in the land of the dark.

Lord Jesus, You Come and Light has dawned! We step out of cold shadows of death and bask in the radiant warmth of You, luminous Lord and the strong rays of love.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Bring someone a candle today and light it for them. Tell them that you pray the light of Christ may warm their hearts today. Fear not — don't hide His light under a bushel!



Fire God**Today's Reading: 1 Kings 18:17-39 (NIV)**

17 When he saw Elijah, he said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?”

18 “I have not made trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “But you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the LORD’s

commands and have followed the Baals.

19 Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

20 So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. **21** Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”

But the people said nothing.

22 Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the LORD’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets.

23 Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it.

24 Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God.”

Then all the people said, “What you say is good.”

25 Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.”



26 So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

27 At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.”

28 So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.

29 Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

30 Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which had been torn down.

31 Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.”

32 With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed.

33 He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.”

34 “Do it again,” he said, and they did it again. “Do it a third time,” he ordered, and they did it the third time.

35 The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

36 At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command.

37 Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

38 Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood,



the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

39 When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!”

Four times they drench the altar with water, pouring twelve barrels of water over wood and the twelve stones for twelve tribes, till all the timber’s soaked. Not exactly the way you’d think to prepare a fire. But our God is a holy fire and He forks the sky with lightning and ignites the sun into flame and our God, He answers with fire and drops fireballs straight out of heaven and the waterlogged altar bursts into fire and this is not a flame like earth’s but the white heat of heaven, and those twelve stones of the altar are now but the flakes of papery ashes. Our God is the Lord God!

And God will do it again, He’ll light the sky again with a starry fire over a Bethlehem barn **and all wise men will make their choice and turn their hearts to the one true God and follow Him.**

And there is yet a day still coming in our future when the sky will combust with the glory of God and Christ will come again all ablaze in the sky with all His mighty angels (2 Thess 1:7) and all the world will fall to the ground and murmur worship: **“The Lord – he is God, the Lord – he is God and He is Here!”**

Wise men are always worshipping, men and women, boys and girls, who keep their eyes turned towards the heavens for the blazing glory of God to come down... sometimes even a gift of a Baby come down from the Father of heavenly lights can make our hearts burn with love.

Lord God, You alone are God. Ignite our hearts!



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Think of one impossible situation you know of right now. Pray fervently for God to show you that He is the blazing God of miracles. Believe He is the Lord God and worship Him today — even in that difficult situation...



New Kingdom Coming



Today's Reading: Isaiah 11:1-9 (NCV)

- 1** A new branch will grow
from a stump of a tree;
so a new king will come
from the family of Jesse.
- 2** The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon that king.
The Spirit will give him wisdom and
understanding, guidance and power.
The Spirit will teach him to know and respect
the Lord.
- 3** This king will be glad to obey the Lord.
He will not judge by the way things look
or decide by what he hears.
- 4** But he will judge the poor honestly;
he will be fair in his decisions for the poor people of the land.
At his command evil people will be punished,
and by his words the wicked will be put to death.
- 5** Goodness and fairness will give him strength,
like a belt around his waist.
- 6** Then wolves will live in peace with lambs,
and leopards will lie down to rest with goats.
Calves, lions, and young bulls will eat together,
and a little child will lead them.
- 7** Cows and bears will eat together in peace.
Their young will lie down to rest together.
Lions will eat hay as oxen do.
- 8** A baby will be able to play near a cobra's hole,
and a child will be able to put his hand into the nest of a poisonous
snake.
- 9** They will not hurt or destroy each other
on all my holy mountain,
because the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord,
as the sea is full of water.

Can't you feel it in the air this time of year? Can't you hear it in the wind, the whispering rumors of a new kingdom coming?

A world of peace, where a leopard lies quiet with a goat, and the ravenous hunger of the lion is completely satisfied by a handful of straw — a lion just like a harmless cow!

Do you believe the good news of a new paradise coming, where a toddler plays happy at the hole of the cobra and a child will dangle his hand in the nest of the asp, and the enemy snake that once bit us with the poison of sin in the Garden of Eden will be nothing more than a playmate to the laughing? **This time of year sings with hope!**

But how do we go up this holy mountain where no one hurts another and perfect peace reigns?

He who is the Christ Child will lead us. The little Christ Child coming to Bethlehem will lead us in the way of Peace and into the new Kingdom coming and Christ Who is our peace, Who wears goodness and fairness like a belt, He will be the King that looks not on the outside but upon our hearts and He will free all the poor and never again will man be wolf to man.

Because Christ became our lamb.

Can't you hear it everywhere? **Joy to the World!**

Lord Jesus, come to the world and bring the new Kingdom of God to our hearts.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Think of one relationship in your life where you feel a bit wolfish toward someone. Give that person a gift of peace today. Do one thing to reach out to that person in peace. Make the new Kingdom of God begin in us today.



Staggering Extremes**Today's Reading: Jonah 3:1-4:4, 11 (NIV)**

1 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:

2 “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

3 Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it

took three days to go through it.

4 Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

5 The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

6 When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.

7 This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.

8 But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

9 Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened...

Jonah 4:1 But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.

2 He prayed to the LORD, “Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

3 Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

4 But the LORD replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

11 And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”



Sometimes we say no and we run hard and God say yes and He scoops us up gentle, rocks us quiet, like a man rocking in the belly of a fish, and we finally turn right around — and go God's way. And Jonah, spewed out of the depths of the aquatic gut, he now obeys God and he goes marching to Nineveh.

Jonah is one prophet, not many, and he preaches in Nineveh but one sermon, not many, and all the many people of Nineveh turn from their many false gods to worship the One God Alone.

Had they repented because they heard the miracle story of the stormy sea and the fish that swallowed up the man who ran from God? Had they heard that this God is the God of second chances, the God who can raise men dead in the dark of a whale tomb back to life, the God who rescues a man even from the stinking stomach of a fish?

This the merciful more-loving-than-you-can-imagine God the Ninevites cast themselves upon and cry out to. And the Ninevites do not eat for days but hunger for forgiveness and they offer no bull as a sacrifice but they rock themselves in grief for their sins and turn themselves around and turn their faces towards the face of God. And God sees!

God sees who turns from sins and He changes his mind and when God forgives, God forgets and He does more: He gives the sorry sinner the great and wondrous and is-anything-better-than-this gift: a new heart and a new spirit and whole brand-spanking-new life!

There is one who is greater than three-days-in-a-fish Jonah who is here, and His name is three-days-in-the-tomb Jesus. And our Jesus asks to bring only one sacrifice, the only gift that wise men ever bring: *the sacrifice of God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart.*

Who brings this gift to Jesus this Christmas?

Lord Jesus, show us what we need to repent of, how in our lives we need to turn around to face You. Will you help us make the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart?



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Write down one thing you repent of today. Draw a heart around it. Tuck it under the Jesse Tree as your gift to Jesus of a contrite heart — pray that Jesus would help you give up this sin.



Lifting up the Little and Small



Today's Reading: Micah 5:2-5 (NCV)

2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrata,
though you are too small to be among the
army groups from Judah,
from you will come one who will rule Israel
for me.

He comes from very old times,

from days long ago."

3 The Lord will give up his people
until the one who is having a baby gives birth;
then the rest of his relatives will return
to the people of Israel.

4 At that time the ruler of Israel will stand
and take care of his people
with the Lord's strength
and with the power of the name of the Lord his God.
The Israelites will live in safety,
because his greatness will reach all over the earth.

5 He will bring peace.
Assyria will surely come into our country
and walk over our large buildings.
We will set up seven shepherds,
eight leaders of the people.

O Little Town of Bethlehem, little town that means a house of Bread, little backwater town that was little among the thousands of Judah, you were meant to be the birthplace of Christ who is our Bread of Life.

Bethlehem, the hometown of that long-ago King David, you would welcome the King of Kings and, though you were the least, she who was having a baby gave birth in one of your barns, because **this is always how God works: to come to the poor and forgotten and exalt those of no degree.**

Little Town of Bethlehem, around the world they still sing of you because you were graced with the God come in the flesh, and **Christ makes the last first, and the little of this world great, and when related to Christ, one is always lifted up.**

Tonight, how still we see you lie, little town of Bethlehem, the hopes and fears of all these years met in you tonight — in the arms of your Bethlehem Babe ...

Lord Jesus, You come — to a little backwater town like Bethlehem, out of love for the likes of us. The Hopes and Fears of all our hearts are held in Thee, Lord ... always.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Look for someone today doing some little, good thing that is likely to go unnoticed. Slip them a happy note to tell them that they are making a difference!



Come to the King



Today's Reading: Esther 4:10-17 (NIV)

10 Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai,

11 “All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.”

12 When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai,

13 he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape.

14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

15 Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai:

16 “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

17 So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther’s instructions.

Esther, she's a Jewish girl without a mother or father, a girl with eyes like a raven sky and an Uncle Mordecai as old as the hills and a smile so tender it wins over the heart of a warrior king. And the king makes Esther his queen.

Uncle Mordecai, in his sackcloth and ashes, he patches a message through to his niece Esther in her queenly robes that all her father's people and all her mother's people, all the Jews, are about to be killed by order of the king. At a time such as this, will Esther go before the king's throne? At a time such as this, will she please beg the king to change his mind and save all their people from certain death?

Yet to go to the king without being called may mean certain death for the queen herself, for this was the law and all the land knew it: come to the king uncalled-for and you die. Unless... **Unless the king held out his gold sceptre toward the one come on bended knee.**

But in the fullness of time, our King of Kings coming to Bethlehem, He makes the whole of the universe His court and He invites all men and all women and all children to freely come before His throne of grace and to come boldly, because Christ our King comes with a tender heart to help us in our time of need (Heb. 4:16).

So we need not fear that He may not hold out the gold sceptre and save us.

Because He holds out his hands that took the iron nails to save us.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are the God who took the nails so we could come close. Your love is the gift that saves us.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: God made you for such a time as this. Find one person you can help today in their time of need.





Watching for Him who is Enough

Today's Reading: Habakkuk 2:1, 3:16-19 (NCV)

1 I will stand like a guard to watch and place myself at the tower. I will wait to see what he will say to me; I will wait to learn how God will answer my complaint....

16 I hear these things, and my body trembles; my lips tremble when I hear the sound. My bones feel weak, and my legs shake. But I will wait patiently for the day of disaster that will come to the people who attack us.

17 Fig trees may not grow figs,
and there may be no grapes on the vines.
There may be no olives growing
and no food growing in the fields.

There may be no sheep in the pens and no cattle in the barns.

18 But I will still be glad in the Lord; I will rejoice in God my Savior.

19 The Lord God is my strength.

He makes me like a deer that does not stumble
so I can walk on the steep mountains.

All Advent we stand at the top of a Jesse Tree, looking like Zacchaeus, looking for our Jesus, looking like a watchman, waiting for our God.

And could we say that if the Christmas tree had no gifts and there were no grapes on our plates or chocolate in our stockings, if there were no food in our fridge nor vacation in our future, if we were stripped of everything we have in all this glittery world, would we still be glad in the Lord?

Even if all we have were gone, our God is not gone, and is God really enough?

If all we could claim in this world was only Christ, would having Jesus make us happy — or do we have hearts set on having more? **Is the Lord — or our luxuries — our strength?**

If we lose everything we've ever owned and our home is laid low to the ground, could we say that real foundation of our joy is never in stuff, but always in our Savior?

When we have much, may we enjoy God *in* everything, and when we have little, may we enjoy God *as* everything, and Jesus is with the poor so why would we want to be any different?

The love of Jesus alone delights us and we peer from our Jesse Tree like a watchman leaning off the peak of a tower, looking for the only One in all this world Who matters, Who will carry us out of this world and into the next world which is the only world that matters.

Lord Jesus, may we care little for the things of this world but may we run to the very heights, anxious for the coming of You who are everything to us and more than enough... Forever.



Unwrapping more of His Love in the world: Really give up something today, a true sacrifice, for someone else, and rejoice in it.

You have Jesus and He is enough!



Grace Turns Us Towards one Another**Today's Reading: Luke 1:5-25 (NIV)**

5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. **13** But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.

14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

18 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs tot

them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

It only happened once. Just this once in all of the Bible does an angel come right into the temple with a message from God. And the angel all ablaze comes to bent and wrinkled Zechariah wearing his priestly robes, Zechariah burning his incense to the Lord, his aged voice murmuring prayers for the salvation of the world as the plume of incense wafts up towards the heavens.

Fear not, the angel greets, as angels always greet, and he says that Zechariah, a man seeking after God, just as Noah had, would bear a son in his old age, and Elizabeth who had long been childless would become a mother after years of waiting, just as Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah had. Because sometimes in waiting for what we long for, we praise God long when the gift comes at last. **Sometimes God has his people wait long so our gratitude becomes deeper and wider.**

“Name him John.” The angel says. His name John, it means **Gracious**. And John would make a people ready for the Lord Jesus, who would grant us grace, to make us full of grace. This boy John would turn the children of Israel back to God and back to loving each other and **the gospel always invites us to come home to God — home to each other.**

There were four hundred years of silence from the time the last Old Testament prophet spoke the word of the Lord to this angel now coming right into the temple to deliver a message from God to priestly Zechariah. And Zechariah whispering prayers for salvation, he doesn't believe, so God closes his mouth and makes him fall silent until his son John is born — John who will become the voice preparing the way for Jesus.

This Jesus who will be the very answer to Zechariah's prayers: the coming salvation of all the world.

Lord God, Good News has come out of silence: Grace. We are silenced at the awe of You hearing us.... We believe that You, our Grace, are coming. We prepare our hearts. We turn towards you — and each other.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Quietly, without words or fanfare, do something kind and gracious for someone in your home today.



The Water of Repentance**Today's Reading: Matthew 3:1-6 (NCV)**

1 About that time John the Baptist began preaching in the desert area of Judea.

2 John said, "Change your hearts and lives because the kingdom of heaven is near."

3 John the Baptist is the one Isaiah the prophet was talking about when he said:

"This is a voice of one who calls out in the desert: 'Prepare the way for the Lord. Make the road straight for him.' " — *Isaiah 40:3*

4 John's clothes were made from camel's hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food, he ate locusts and wild honey.

5 Many people came from Jerusalem and Judea and all the area around the Jordan River to hear John.

6 They confessed their sins, and he baptized them in the Jordan River.

John the Baptist, the man telling us about the coming Grace, he looks a bit like a wild man and he doesn't wear designer clothes or eat at the posh restaurants or live in the nicest house on the street. He's a radical man living out in the wilderness, sporting his camel hair and rustling up a big plate of locusts. **Because sometimes the best way to make a way for Jesus in the world is to give up some of the ways of the world.**

Though he's the son of the man whose voice was silenced, John's voice cries in the wilderness, thunder in the dry. **But God Himself is the speaker.** Can you hear the thunder?

The good news of Jesus, the gospel, it always begins in the wildernesses, in the parched and thirsty places, because it's in the wilderness that the law of the ten commandments was given and it's in our wildernesses that grace must find us.

And repentance, changing our hearts and minds and ways, it can bring tears, and it comes like gentle rain to our cracked and hard hearts. Our sins are washed away in showers of grace, and new growth and hope sprouts, tender shoots. Grace, it comes, heaven's water falling softly.

Lord Jesus, in the wrapping and the baking and the preparation, have I repented and prepared the way for You?



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Buy a small plant today. (Keep watering your wheat seeds!) Every time you water it, repent of sins and thank Jesus for turning your heart and celebrate new life!

Be a Dwelling Space for God**Today's Reading: Luke 1:26-38 (NIV)**

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,

27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.

31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.

32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,

33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.

37 For no word from God will ever fail."

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.



That same angel Gabriel who came to Zechariah in the temple, he comes now to Mary in the quiet, and the glory story of Love making His way to us, that **grace which God has begun, He carries it on to completion.**

There in almost forgotten Galilee, land bordered by a people who didn't even believe in God, Gabriel whispers the impossible news: Mary, with the name that means exalted, Mary poor and long-ago descended from the line of King David, Mary will be made mother of the Messiah. **God's rescue near!**

The promise God made back in the beginning, at the Fall, in Eden, He's keeping it and completing it and He's coming, a Babe to Mary, the One who will crush the head of the enemy.

God can do anything and He can come curl small in the womb of a young girl and the hands that slung all the stars across space, He can swell all the space of Mary who says yes, let me serve you, Lord.

Nothing is impossible for God who is with us and God who is in us and God who works through us, and may all things happen just as God says.

Grace could fill all our empty spaces today.

Lord God, with You anything is possible and nothing is impossible and come Holy Spirit and cover us and come Father God and indwell us and come Baby Jesus, fill us with grace this day.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Take ten today. Ten minutes. Make five minutes of space and stillness and silence just with God.

Make five minutes of space in your day for someone else and let them fill all of your attention. Invite God and His love to indwell you today.



Son of a Carpenter**Today's Reading: Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV)**

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 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.

21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

23 "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Joseph is a man in the royal line of David and he's a carpenter, a builder, a man who carries a hammer and nails and builds shelters and restores the broken down. And in the night while he sleeps, an angel comes to speak to him in a dream, because **it's when we're still and wait quiet that we're most likely to hear God whispering, "This is the Way."**

"Take Mary as your wife," the angel assures Joseph, because "she will give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

The angel announces Jesus as our Saviour but we each still need accept Him as our Saviour, and He is only Jesus who saves us because He is *God who is with us* — **only God alone can save man.**

Jesus, son of the hammering man, he alone brought God and man together in one, that God might be with us and we might be with God and in Jesus all the happiness of our Garden beginning begins again because we are friends again with God.

God our friend! God not in shadows, God not in smoke, but holy God in human skin and in the dark cloud over tablets of law, He was God against us, but now by the light of Grace star over Bethlehem, *He is God with us.*

Because the carpenter's Son will take the nail and a tree made into a cross, and **He will rebuild us and restore us and all we who are broken down will find shelter in grace and make the heart of God home.**

No wonder this time of year we all haul trees into our homes...

Lord God, restore the broken places in our home today, in our country and this world. Build us strong in You.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Find two twigs today and construct a cross out of the bits of wood with a bit of (red) string. Set your cross in a window sill for all the world and you to see. Give thanks to God with us, who rebuilds us.



Journey**Today's Reading: Luke 2:1-5 (NIV)**

1 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 their

own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

At that time, for such a time as this, now in the fullness of the long journey of time, God sends out an order for His Son to make His way into the world and God who has no beginning or no end, He travels into time to meet us as a helpless Babe.

Joseph journeys with his Mary and God comes nearer and people round the globe push in closer, the whole of Earth waiting with bated breath, all the dusty world with all its heavy baggage journeying to Bethlehem tonight. **We seek a deliverance of our own.**

But tonight there will be no room in the inn.

Jesus comes as a traveler and if we follow Him, this world is not our home, but heaven is our destination, and we put on our shoes and go out into all the world, so more will hear of Him and journey with us to the cradle of the King.

Lord, we are almost there and our waiting and yearning and seeking and journey is almost over — or are we just beginning the greatest journey of all?



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: Put on your shoes and go for a walk today. Sing a Christmas carol out loud. Go into all the world today and tell one person about the coming King and how He loves.

Here**Today's Reading: Luke 2:6-21 (NCV)**

6 While they were in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to have the baby,

7 and she gave birth to her first son. Because there were no rooms left in the inn, she wrapped the baby with pieces of cloth and laid him in a feeding trough.

8 That night, some shepherds were in the fields nearby watching their sheep. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them. The glory of the Lord was shining around them, and they became very frightened.

10 The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news that will be a great joy to all the people. Today your Savior was born in the town of David. He is Christ, the Lord. This is how you will know him: You will find a baby wrapped in pieces of cloth and lying in a feeding box."

13 Then a very large group of angels from heaven joined the first angel, praising God and saying: "Give glory to God in heaven, and on earth let there be peace among the people who please God."

15 When the angels left them and went back to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem. Let's see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about."

16 So the shepherds went quickly and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in a feeding trough. When they had seen him, they told what the angels had said about this child. Everyone was amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

19 But Mary treasured these things and continued to think about them.

20 Then the shepherds went back to their sheep, praising God and thanking him for everything they had seen and heard. It had been just as the angel had told them.



We are the ones amazed, because when we come quiet and look over the edge of the feed trough and look into the red wrinkled face wrapped there in swaddling clothes, we almost whisper, “**Can this really be the Messiah, God with us?**” For why in all the universe would the Creator God, who sculpted the mountains and birthed the ice and cupped the waters of the world, come to us as a mere flailing Babe?

Does the God who cannot be contained by even all the heavens come to us swaddled and small because who doesn’t wait anxiously for a Baby, long to hold a Baby, yearn to draw near to the heaven scent of a Baby?

And when we hear all the night air fill with the thrum of the angel wings and the night stars sing the refrain of the angels, “Glory, Glory, Glory to God in the Highest,” we can feel it burning in our hearts and we know, “**Surely this Baby is the Son of God.**”

It’s for this moment the whole span of history rises, surges. For this, the Ancient of Days, made only the span of a Baby long.

All the beads of our days have been strung and accomplished and we’ve read the whole epic drama of God’s story and hung all the symbols and now at the top of the tree — we hang the star.

The starry hosts over the fields blink wonder over the God Child. The shepherds under them sing praise. And all peoples in all homes all around the world, we spin with Creation in the dance of the saved!

Jesus here.

God! With! Us!

Love for us — and all the world!

The angels will return to heaven. The shepherds will go to tell all the world the good gospel news. And soon.... even the star on the top of the tree will be packed away.

But we will be like Mary, who does not leave, but long keeps all these things in her heart.

And we too will keep Christ here, ponder Him in our hearts all the year round and because all things are in Him and from Him and to Him (Rom 11:36), we treasure our Jesus as the only true Gift ever given.

And every day, all year long, He invites us to unwrap more of His love.



Unwrapping more of His love in the world: This day, cut the wheat grass down and lay it in the manger for Baby Jesus. Invite Christ to stay here in your home all year and give Him the gift of unwrapping more of His love for everyone we know.



Jesse Tree  Journey

This *Jesus* Advent Celebration

was brought to you

by a heart that's passionate about Compassion.com.

Ann Voskamp is an advocate with Compassion International and was invited to be a Compassion Blogger traveling with a team to Guatemala. The story of the little girl who changed her life is included in these end pages, a gift to you this Christmas.

If this Jesse Tree Journey book has blessed you in any way, might you consider giving a gift of even a dollar or two to Compassion.com?

A small gift for Jesus' birthday? Giving to the least of these is our giving to Him. Might you?



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<http://gifts.compassion.com/>

How to Make Life an Endless Celebration Text/ Photos: Ann Voskamp

She asks to speak at the pulpit, to say a few words, her apron still on, her eyes love worn and lined with gentle strokes. Her name is Ruth. She's a woman [who makes her pots a holy thing](#) (Zech. 14:21), who stirs eternity at the end of her spoon.

The translator serves us Ruth's first words:

"My mission is the kitchen."

Many saints have dishpan hands and I eat her words. They preach rich truth to me, that **the kitchen with a plate is the place where the strangers at Emmaus and the starved of this earth meet the face of Christ.**

That the table can be a holy revelation.

Ruth, she tells us what this means to her, a church-going woman, to now serve in this [Compassion.com](#) project, to minister bowls of grace in the kitchen of her local church, a whole body of volunteers partnering with Compassion to offer a [Child Developmental Program](#) on the steep hillsides of Guatemala City, a city that more than two million people call home.

Nearly 195 of those are children who call Ruth home, her table their meeting place.

They call the Compassion project in the middle of this place: **"Foragers of Hope."**





From the moment the bus door opens in the gated district of the church, we can hear it ringing off the red clay hillside, these children, Ruth's children, Compassion's children, clapping eager in the church sanctuary to welcome the feet of those who bring the good news.

We applaud. They sing. We smile. They sway hallelujah. **Confetti falls like manna** and we all laugh startled wonder and we feast on hope. I watch little boys gather confetti and stuff their pockets.

I hadn't expected the colors, the banquet, **the way His flame makes the moment fill.**



And one child, beaded and braided, she sits at my feet and she never stops shimmering, a candle at the table. I am captivated. We taste each other's

happiness. I think my burning heart might burst.

What do strangers know on the way to Emmaus?

Us foreigners carry out the food with Ruth.

We serve the Compassion children lunch. They pray in Spanish. A toothless boy whispers "Gracias, Gracias." A pony-tailed girl giggles, slurps down her drink, eyes us shy. Rain falls heavy from the sky. The pastor tells us that because of the partnership of his church with Compassion into this community, 11 new families, [all of Compassion kids](#), now attend this church. I brim with blurring emotion. What is greater than this kind of feast? The sky rumbles low. I shake Ruth's hand before we board the bus. She is Martha with a Mary heart and they will be telling her story at the end of time.

In my pocket, I carry my own sliver white manna confetti from the feast.

So I will not forget.

The sky's still splitting when we drive the winding, sloshing streets to find the home of [our sponsored child, Xiomara](#).

Barbed wire lines walls. The top of cement blocks gates deter with spiked razor edges of broken beer bottles, serrated glass. Every window's barred with iron. Trash lies in the streets.

Where is your table in all of this Xiomara, Xiomara?

The bus slows at a numberless, nameless street. A vendor's selling t-shirts on the corner. A dog splays in a doorway. From the top of a the telephone wires overhead, a pair of faded yellow running shoes dangle.

I walk slow, uneasy. My cornfields are a whole continent away from the rain drizzling off these rusting tin roofs.



What do strangers know when they reach Emmaus?

And then out of doorway, around a corner, down the street.....

she comes running.



Child of our hearts, child who I have carried, child I have come for, she finds me and the strangers recognize the burning hearts.

Mine bursts.

Xiomara was the child at my feet at noon! *I was the stranger she glowed for at the church!* Neither knew, but we'd smiled into each other's eyes at Foragers of Hope...

Xiomara and I, we've found our food! Giddiness!

She welcomes me in.



I pass through her kitchen.

Sit next to her table.

I'm the stranger who doesn't pass by but stays with her here, and I take the bread of this moment, give thanks for it, and **I give thanks that we can be broken and we can be given and this is how Christ is recognized in the world.**

Why is the world hungry when God's people have bread?

Are bread?

I unfold the map and show Xiomara, her parents, where I'm from, a stranger finding her way. Finding The Way.

I point to their star of Guatemala City. The translator says it in Spanish, how I tell them my prayers will travel all the miles between home and here for them.

I give her a kaleidoscope, just like the one I had as a little girl, and she does what I did, watch all the floating stars bloom into a fireworks of glory. I smile at my Guatemalan star blooming too, radiance of the God glory. **I can't believe I'm here, that she's here, a wonder in the dark.**



I ask her what she wants to be when she grows up. She smiles, this blaze of brilliance, and she tells me she wants to be a doctor. Her father knows just where to find it and he slides it out of its yellow envelope, her report card. She points to her grades and I tell her she can do this and she nods. She tells me the names of her sisters, her brother. That she swims at a pool in a private park nearby. I tell her of our snow and our pigs. **We exchange slices of our lives.**



I point to the cats sleuthing along near the corrugated tin ceiling. I ask her if they are hers. She nods. Do they have names? She nods. That one is Negro, the black one, her favorite.

She's named the other one Spotted One -- and she's named her dog the same, Spotted One. We laugh at this.

I ask her, Can you read?

And she reads this whole first page of the [Jesus Storybook Bible](#) and the line that reads, "Because God created everything in His world to reflect Him --- to show what He is like..."

And my heart keeps exploding, breaking, a kaleidoscope of fracturings.



I tell her that someday, when she's read the whole Bible, to write me a letter and tell me? *Si, si*, she says.

And I whisper, that if I ever someday learn Spanish, I should write her a letter and tell *her*. We laugh at this.

Then I tell her of the dress I picked out for her and my concerns that it wouldn't fit and how I had to call Levi, nine too, and ask him to try it on,

and [how Malakai laughed to see his brother in pink, but Levi did it for her.](http://www.aholyexperience.com/2010/09/how-you-might-really-be-pregnant-and/)

(read that story here: <http://www.aholyexperience.com/2010/09/how-you-might-really-be-pregnant-and/>)

She tries the dress on. She says yes, take a picture, for Levi to see, and she does it for him.

And I think of a son on our far-away farm and this far-away-sponsored-daughter right here, both clothed together in the same fabric of grace and how **we all sit around the same table of fellowship** and I touch her long black hair.

It's a perfect fit.



I whisper, "**You are beautiful...**"

I pray she will long savor this soul manna.



And then it is time to go, our too-short meal ended...

I shake her mother's hand, her father's, and he tears, "*Gracias, Gracias.*" I tell him how my husband and I thank he and his wife for the privilege of partnering with them and I squeeze his hand, shake it with fervor and **what more is there in this life than to reflect Christ -- than to show what He is like.**

Than to be bread for another man?

Before I go, we bow together and I pray, give thanks for this real food and I say Amen. We all say Amen.

And over Xiomara, over this one bed in one room that sleeps six people, I glance it: **The Table where the banquet was laid, The Bread Body that was broken and given**, the plate of sacrifice that was passed that sin could be passed over.



And I lean in close to the Last Supper on the wall of a tin house and I nod.

This, all this, all this we ever give, this is in remembrance of Him.

To be bread like Him. **Because the Last Supper is the supper that never ends, His Love Body, his people, being broken and offered again and again and this is the testament to the power of resurrection.**

I must not forget.

Xiomara waves, enlivened.



And I slip back for one more long embrace. I hold this daughter only once, but forever in the heart.

And at the end of her street, her scent still on me, her hope still blooming in me, the Compassion worker tells me that Xiomara had begged her parents to be allowed into Compassion's program, that since she was a very little girl, she has been coming to the church on Sunday morning with her sisters, but never her parents.

That once her parents agreed to her entering the Compassion program, she had waited nine whole months for a sponsor --- a whole long gestation, and one that I had felt within -- and how excited she was to know that someone had finally said yes! And the Compassion worker tells me that now -- these past three Sundays now --- her mother has been coming to church with her.

I choke it back. When we break our lives as bread, we don't know how long God will extend the table and how many He'll be invite to the feast. *What*

could be more to life than being broken bread?

I whisper through the brimming and spilling, "How... how did Xiomara get to church on Sunday before she was in the Compassion program? When she was younger, before her mother started coming too?"

The worker gestures and the translator translates:

"You remember the woman at the church who spoke. The one in the apron? Ruth?"

"Yes," I nod, feeling that burning again in the chest --- "the one with the mission in the kitchen."

"Yes, her --- Ruth brought Xiomara every Sunday since she was little."

At the table of everyday, Christ is revealed in the lives broken and given and missionaries in kitchens can change the world for eternity.

On the bus taking me far away away from Xiomara, I am no longer a stranger on the road and I see Christ and I am forever beautifully broken and wrecked for the poor and even my life can be given to satisfy emptiness.

So I slip it out of my pocket and into my palm, that confetti manna I gathered up after the singing and I trace its curl, it's smile.

And I celebrate the supper that never ends. :::



Might you prayerfully consider being bread for a Guatemalan family in honor of Jesus' birthday?

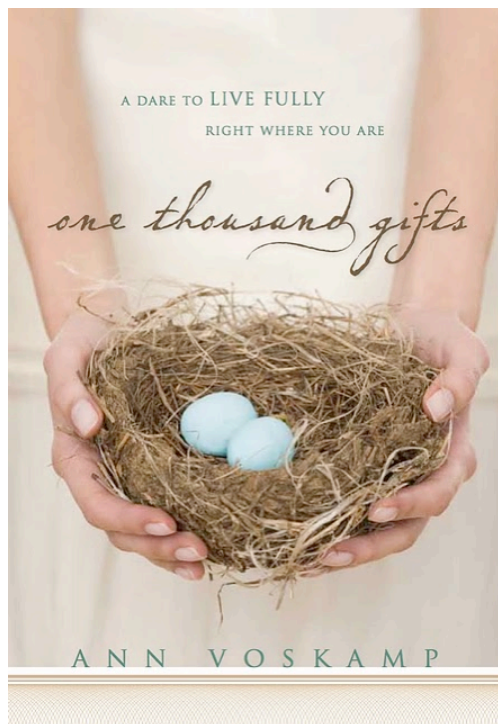
http://www.compassion.com/sponsor_a_child/default.htm?referer=112584

To experience the complete trip to Guatemala with Ann:

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November 30



December 1



December 2



December 3



December 4



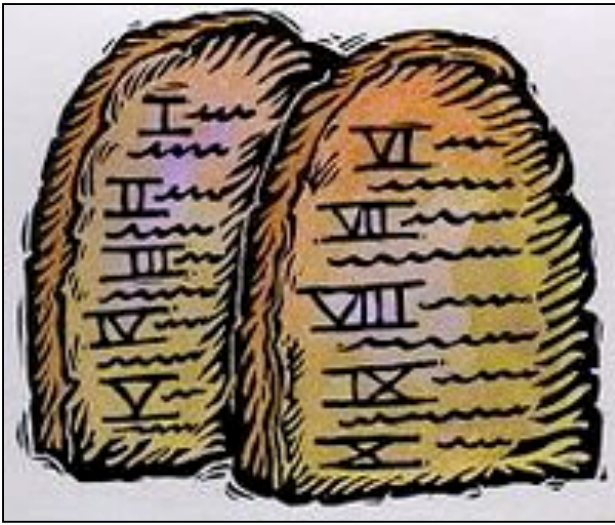
December 5



December 6



December 7



December 8



December 9



December 10



December 11



December 12



December 13



December 14



December 15



December 16



December 17



December 18



December 19



December 20



December 21



December 22



December 23



December 24



December 25

THREE WAYS TO HAVE A MERRIER CHRISTMAS:

1. The Three Simple Practices for a Peaceful Advent

<http://www.aholyexperience.com/2009/12/3-simple-practices-for-peaceful-advent/>

2. How to Prepare for Family and the Holidays: The Fish Principle

<http://www.aholyexperience.com/2010/11/how-to-prepare-for-family-the-holidays-the-fish-principle/>

3. Consider what Jesus really wants this year for His Birthday

<http://www.aholyexperience.com/2010/11/christmas-its-just-deciding-whose-birthday-it-really-is/>

BONUS: 10 Things to Do Just for Today for More Joyful Parenting

<http://www.aholyexperience.com/2010/11/10-point-manifesto-of-joyful-parenting-free-printable/>