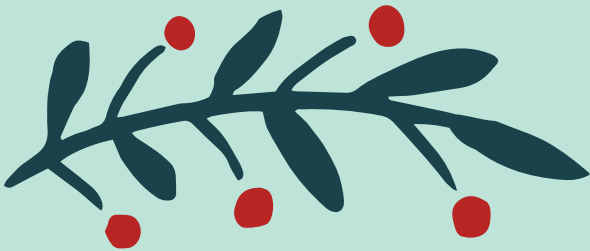
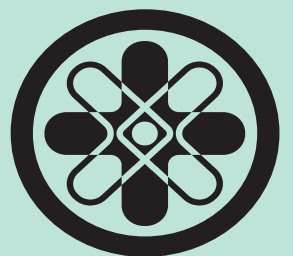


2018



ADVENT FAMILY DEVOTIONAL



WEEK 1 - HOPE

DAY 1 STUMPS & SHOOTS

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
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—*

Isaiah 11:1-2

Have you ever been to a Christmas tree farm? Tree farms are beautiful and the scent of all the pine trees is amazing. You may see trees that are really tall and some that are so tiny, they look like they might be a good tree for a stuffed animal or a doll. You know what else you see there? Stumps. Lots and lots of stumps. Do you know why there are stumps at a tree farm? Because people go to those farms to cut down Christmas trees. And when a tree is cut down, the stump is all that's left behind.

In Isaiah 11, God talks about a stump. He says a shoot (or young branch) will come from the stump of Jesse. Maybe you've never heard of Jesse, but you've probably heard of King David. He wrote many of the Psalms. Jesse was David's father and he's considered the first in the genealogy of Jesus. In other words, Jesse was Jesus's great-great-great-great-great-grandfather.

So if Jesus was in the line of Jesse, why is it a stump and not a tree? Well a stump means something went wrong for the tree. It got sick or someone cut it down. That's what happened when sin entered the world. What was a beautiful tree became a stump that nothing could grow from except Jesus. Jesus is that branch growing out of the stump. And that branch holds great promise.

That branch will bear fruit
The Spirit of God will dwell in that branch.
That branch is Jesus.

Questions:

Describe the smell of a live Christmas Tree.

If stumps are sin, what kind of "stumps" can you cut out of your life?

Jesus is in the line of Jesse; why do you think they mention that in the Bible?



WEEK 1 - HOPE

DAY 2 HANDEL & HALLELUJAH

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given: and the government shall be on his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, on the throne of David, and on his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from now on even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

Isaiah 9:6-7

Have you ever heard the Hallelujah Chorus? I'm sure you have. Maybe someone sang it to be silly because you were finally ready for school, or when you did well on a difficult test. If you pay attention, you'll probably hear it at Christmastime. The Hallelujah Chorus is the last movement of Handel's "Messiah". In 1742, George Frideric Handel wrote this four-hour piece of music in only a month which included vocal and orchestral parts. The next time you have a month to write a book report, think of our friend George.

The verses above are in the Hallelujah chorus. And it's during this part that the audience stands up during a performance. Why do they stand up? Because it's a celebration of something completely amazing. If you look at the verses carefully, you'll see that they're from Isaiah which is in the old testament. In fact, scholars believe this text was written about 700 years before Jesus was born. Your parents knew about you for about 9 months before were born. Imagine a baby so important that his birth was foretold 700 years early? And the reason we all stand? It's because while he was on earth Jesus did everything the prophets said he would. He is all of the things Isaiah claimed. He's Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

Questions:

Have you ever heard this song at Christmas?

If you have, where?

Try this: search "Hallelujah Chorus" on Youtube. Music does a good job helping us feel the things we read in the Bible. Take a few minutes to enjoy it.



WEEK 1 - HOPE

DAY 3 WATCHING & WAITING

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.”

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Have you ever had to wait for something? Sometimes you wait for a short time (like waiting for your dinner at a restaurant) or a long time (like waiting for Christmas morning). Some of the best things come after a long wait. Unless you’re the baby of the family, you may remember waiting for a brother or sister to be born. You probably asked hundreds of times when the baby was coming. Once the baby came, you may have asked if you had to keep him or her.

Do you know who has some experience with waiting? The Israelites. They waited a lot! They were enslaved by the Egyptians for 400 years. They wandered in the desert for 40 years before entering the promised land. And they waited for Jesus since Adam and Eve ate the fruit in the garden. As soon as sin entered the world, God promised to make it right. So, you could say the Israelites waited from the beginning of time until Jesus was born. That’s a lot of waiting.

In the midst of that waiting, they lost patience, they turned to other gods, and many of them lost hope. But God is faithful to honor his promises. And he honored this promise with the birth of his Son. His holy, perfect Son who was born to make it right.

Questions:

What’s the hardest thing you’ve ever had to wait for?

What are some other things God had promised?

Do you believe Him when he makes promises?



WEEK 1 - HOPE

DAY 4 SINGLED OUT & SPECIAL

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Luke 1:26-28

Have you ever felt sort of insignificant? Maybe you went a whole day where your teacher never said anything to just you. Or a friend ignored you in a way that really hurt. Mary probably felt like that some days too. She was young (probably a teenager), and she was a girl. In her time, a teenage girl didn't have any power at all. She didn't go to school or have a chance to plan for a career. She probably felt pretty insignificant. Until one day when an angel appeared to speak to her.

Sometimes we miss the craziness of that situation. An angel appeared to her. And before he gave her the amazing news that she would be the mother of Jesus, he said something important. "You who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

In your lifetime, God probably won't send an angel to speak to you. But the things he says to Mary are true of the way she feels about you. Here's how we know that, he sent his Son for you. He wouldn't have done that for someone he didn't favor. And He's always with you. That's a promise. So, when you're feeling insignificant, remember those two things: You're important to God and He's with you.

Questions:

Do you remember a day when you felt left out?

What do you think the angel looked like?

How would you feel if you saw an angel from God?



WEEK 1 - HOPE

DAY 5 FEARFUL BUT FAVORED

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 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, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

Luke 1:29-33

Remember yesterday when Mary was visited by an angel? Well, it kind of freaked her out. We can't blame her. It's not everyday something like that happens. He tells her not to be afraid and then he tells her the plan. She's going to have a baby who is going to be called "the Son of the Most High."

It's important to remember that Mary was Jewish. And the Jewish people had been waiting for the Messiah for a long, long time. So, she would have known what this baby was. She would have known he was to be the Savior. But that didn't make the news any easier or less scary. What would people think if she claimed to be the mother of the Messiah? Would Joseph okay with this news?

The angel told her not to be afraid, but how could she not? Think about the last time you were afraid of something. Maybe it was at Halloween or maybe you had to do a performance at school. Fear is powerful. It can make us want to run away or give up. Aren't you glad Mary didn't run away from this big assignment God gave her?

She didn't run away because God was with her. The angel said so right away. "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God." Fear is powerful, but God is more powerful. Don't forget that when you're scared. Say this, "My fears are big, but my God is much bigger and I don't have to be afraid."

Questions:

What's something you're afraid of?

Do you have things you used to be afraid of, but aren't anymore?

Try this. With a loud confident voice say: "My fears are big, but my God is much bigger."



*Show me your ways, Lord,
teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.*

Psalm 25:4-5

Have you ever seen the movie, “Christmas with the Kranks?” It’s a silly one where a couple (Mr. and Mrs. Krank) decide to skip Christmas and go on a cruise instead. They don’t decorate, buy gifts, go to parties, or do anything that looks like Christmas. And their neighbors are mad! They don’t like that someone would choose to just skip Christmas. The Kranks find it’s pretty difficult to avoid Christmas. Everywhere they look is more Christmas. It is difficult to avoid Christmas. Everywhere you go, there are decorations and music, but it’s very easy to avoid the reason we celebrate. In fact, you can enthusiastically celebrate Christmas without ever encountering Jesus. People do it all the time.

In Acts, David is described as “a man after God’s own heart”. Here, he is begging God to teach him. To guide him. As Christians, we need to ask God to guide us. We need to beg Him to show us who He is so we will encounter Jesus at Christmas. Otherwise, it’s like throwing a big party with decorations and presents without inviting the guest of honor. But if we pray this prayer in Psalms, God will answer it.

*Show me your ways, Lord,
teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.*

Don’t skip the Savior. God will teach you this Christmas to see the season in light of His son. The baby in a manger who came to be your Savior. Let’s put our hope in Him all day long.

Questions:

Christmas with the Kranks is a goofy movie. What other silly movies have you seen about Christmas?

What’s your favorite Christmas movie?

Over the next few days, pray these two verse together. And if you’d like, pop some popcorn and watch that favorite movie!



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

Micah 5:2

For hundred of years after God led the Israelites into the promised land, they chose to walk away from Him. God used people to warn them and get them back on track with his plans and law. Those people were called prophets. Micah was one of the prophets and (unfortunately for him) he had a lot of bad news to deliver to the Israelites. He warned them about future destruction and rebuked them for being dishonest and worshipping idols. But then, he got to tell the Israelites where to look for the Messiah. In this verse it says Bethlehem Ephrathah. Ephrathah is the ancient name for Bethlehem and he uses it because there were actually two Bethlehems and he needed a way to make a distinction.

Sometimes people who want to argue that Jesus isn't the Son of God will say things like, "It would have been easy for him to fulfill the prophecies since he already knew them. He could just check them off one at a time." Of course, it wouldn't be that easy. In fact, this prophecy came true before he was even born.

Do you think Mary and Joseph were confused that they were to be the parents of the Messiah when they didn't live in Bethlehem? In fact, they lived in Nazareth which is about 80 miles from Bethlehem (a major trip in those days). If the Jews wanted to fulfill the prophecy, they could have made Mary travel to Bethlehem just to make it true, but the decision to go to Bethlehem came from the Roman government of all places. Caesar Augustus, who sent people to the hometown of their ancestors, had one motive: to make sure everyone was paying their taxes. He probably didn't know where the baby was to be born and he didn't know he was sending Mary and Joseph to that very place.

While this may seem like a weird history lesson, it's really important because it helps us know that Jesus was God's plan all along and He really is the son of God.

Questions:

Can you imagine traveling 80 miles on a donkey?

Have you ever made a prediction and it came true?

If Jesus is the Son of God, what's keeping you from telling people about Him?



After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

*But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”*

Matthew 2:1-6

God wants us to prepare our hearts for Jesus at Christmas. Herod was the King of Judea and he had no intention to prepare for Jesus. He was too busy building his kingdom to worry about building God’s kingdom. In fact, he was “disturbed” by the news. It also says that all of Jerusalem felt the same way. Scholars think that “all of Jerusalem” referred to the Jewish leaders who (like Herod) didn’t want things to change. The Messiah might mess things up for them. They might have less power or there could be a war. The Roman government may hurt them.

And although Herod was the king of the Jews, he didn’t actually know the prophecies, so he had to call in experts to tell him where the Messiah was supposed to be born. Does anything look familiar about their answer? It’s from Micah.

But there’s something we can miss if we focus too much on Herod. The Magi, on the other hand, went to Herod to find Jesus because they saw the star and that was enough. They were ready to seek Him out and worship him.

When people hear the good news of Jesus, they’re typically either a Herod or Magi. They either respond with something like, “That doesn’t fit into my plans or I don’t really care.” Or, “Seeing the star is enough. How can I worship Him?”

And the craziest part? Jesus came to save the Magi and Herod.

Questions:

Herod and the Jewish leaders were jealous. Tell about a time you felt jealous.

Did you recognize the verses from Micah when you saw them?

When it comes to Christmas, are you a Herod or a Magi? We all know the right answer, but really think about it. We are called to love God and people. Do you use Christmas as an opportunity to love God and people? If so, you’re being a Magi.



Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Matthew 2:7-12

Have you ever intended to do something, but forgot? Maybe you got to school and opened your book bag only to find an unfinished homework assignment. Have you ever intended to write letters to a friend who moved away, but days and weeks passed and you didn't do it? Good intentions don't change anything, but with follow through, good intentions can change the world. From this passage, you might think both the Magi and Herod had good intentions. Herod claimed he wanted to know exactly where the baby was born so he could worship him. Something sounds fishy about that. Didn't we learn yesterday that Herod was "disturbed" when he found out about Jesus's birth? Suddenly he wants to worship him? Hmmmm.

On the flip side, we have the Magi. They intend to travel to see the baby. Notice it says, "They went on their way." In other words, they intended to see the baby and they actually made the trip. They had both good intentions and good follow through. And notice they didn't go empty-handed. They brought precious gifts worth a lot of money because, although nothing is fit for a Savior, they brought the best things money could buy.

This passage end with, "And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." Sounds like another red flag on Herod's good intentions. If you keep reading, you'll find out that Herod wanted to know where the baby was so he could have him killed. I think we can all agree he had bad intentions. And the Magi took a great risk not reporting back to the king. Herod was known for killing anyone who got in his way or offended him. This included his family members and friends. So, disobeying him was like painting a big target on their chests.

Why did they do this? Why go to an evil king and ask about the baby? Why follow a star? Why buy expensive things? Why risk being killed for disobeying him?

The answer is simple. This wasn't any regular baby and the Magi knew it. They had good intentions and they acted on them because worshiping the baby was the most important thing.



As you celebrate Christmas, remember that worshipping the baby is the most important thing. Don't allow that to be a good intention you don't follow through with. When the Magi arrived, they were overjoyed. Allow God to give you that joy as you worship his Son. It's an intention that's worth the follow through.

Questions:

What are some good intentions you followed through with?

Was it worth it?

How do you intend to worship the baby this Christmas?



A voice of one calling:
“In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Isaiah 40: 3-5

Anyone have a guess as to who the prophet is talking about? Who was born to prepare a way for the Lord? If you answered John the Baptist, you're right. And John is an answer to this prophesy. The language in the second verse is so beautiful. “Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.” Let's look at that beautiful language. It sounds like the prophet is saying the land will be made flat. The mountains and hills will be made low and the valley raised up so they meet in the middle.

Have you ever watched a bulldozer make the ground flat to build a house or a road? It scrapes off the dirt that sticks up and fills in the places that are lower. And that's kind of what John came to do.

No, John the Baptist wasn't a construction worker and bulldozers hadn't been invented yet, but he sort of did that. In those days, roads weren't very good. They weren't straight and they weren't smooth. Traveling long distances was very difficult and took a long, long time. So the idea of a flat road that was easy to travel would have been like a dream. And although John didn't have a bulldozer, he did make the road flat and smooth for people to encounter Jesus. He did this by urging them to change their ways and repent. That way, their hearts were ready for Jesus.

You can do that too. Ask God to prepare your heart for Jesus and if you love him and love others, you are making a path to Jesus for the people around you. They will want to know more about Jesus because you loved them. And in a way, you're bulldozing a path for them. Now, put on your hardhat and get to work loving your friends. Imagine what God will do when we make that path smooth.



Questions:

Have you ever heard about John the Baptist before?

What's the bumpiest road you've ever been on?

Make a plan to show a friend you love him or her. Maybe bake Christmas cookies for their family, or invite them over for dinner, or to church. It may feel simple, but this is a way to make a bumpy road to Jesus a lot smoother.



WEEK 3 - JOY

DAY 1 JEWS & GENTILES

*Again, it says,
"Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."
And again,
"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;
let all the peoples extol him."*

Romans 15:10-11

Have you ever been thrilled to be invited to a party only to find out when you arrived that everyone in the class was invited? Maybe it was still exciting, but maybe it felt a little less exclusive. Your friend had it right though. It's right to invite everyone so no one had to feel left out.

All throughout the old testament, the Israelites (or Jews) were used to being God's chosen people. They enjoyed a great exodus out of Egypt complete with the parting of the Red Sea. (What a sight that must have been!) God protected them and gave them the promised land. He gave them the law so they knew how to pay for their sins and how to deal with one another. He provided manna and quail in the desert. He spoke to them through the prophets. They were His people through and through.

But when God sent his son to earth, He was very clear that Jesus is the Savior for ALL people. Not just the Jews. He came for the Gentiles too. In the Bible, the word Gentile refers to those who aren't Jewish. Ever since God gave the Israelites the law through Moses, they worked really hard to pay for their sins by offering sacrifices regularly and having yearly celebrations to remember God's faithfulness.

Suddenly, God is saying, "Jesus is here for everyone. Jew and Gentile." Some were probably like, "Wait, what? We've been doing all these rituals for generations, and the Gentiles can come in and just be saved?" It's like they got to the party and said, "Let me get this right, everyone was invited?"

And the answer is, yes. Everyone is invited. Because just like your friend who knew the importance of including everyone, God loves his creation. And Jesus died for everyone. If that makes you feel less special, you're missing the point. If you're wondering who needs to hear about Jesus, ask yourself this question, "Is that person created by God?" If so, they need to hear about Jesus because He died for them. And imagine what a party that will be when we meet him face to face.

Questions:

What's the coolest party you've ever been to?

What made it so great?

Is there someone you want to share Jesus with? Pray about it together and talk about how you can do it.



WEEK 3 - JOY

DAY 2 QUESTIONS & COURAGE

But the angel said to her,

“Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 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, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

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. 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. For no word from God will ever fail.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

Luke 1:30-38

We talked about this before, but Mary was young. Probably still a teenager. But look at how brave she is? An angel appears to her and begins talking. She must have looked terrified because he tells her not to be afraid. He gives her the unbelievable news that she will give birth to a king whose reign will never end and yet, she only asks one question. Most of us would have a thousand extra questions. Like, how am I supposed to tell Joseph? What will my parents think? When and where will this take place? Will I have to hide? Are we in danger? Will Jesus be like other babies? When will I stop teaching him and he’ll start teaching me?

But Mary’s response is simply, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word be fulfilled.” Wow!

When we’re faced with something that might be scary, God doesn’t mind if we ask a bunch of questions. In fact, He loves when we come to Him with our concerns. Whatever you’re concerned about, take it to God. Tell him everything. Ask Him anything. He already knows it, but telling Him is good for us. It helps us hear what He wants us to do.

After you ask a bunch of questions and you feel like God is giving you an answer, try doing what Mary did. Say something like, “I am your servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.” If that’s too difficult to understand, simply say, “Yes Lord. I’ll do what you have planned for me.”

Questions:

What would you have done in Mary’s place?

What are some questions you have for God?

Do you believe He likes to hear from you?



WEEK 3 - JOY

DAY 3 DIRT & DIVORCE

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. 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.

Matthew 1:18-19

This part of the story might seem a little strange. At Christmas, you always see nativity scenes with a beautiful Mary (usually dressed in blue) holding a baby and a proud Joseph by her side. They look all clean and perfect. But here's the thing. They wouldn't have been clean and they weren't perfect. Mary and Joseph made an 80 mile trip in the desert on a donkey and then she gave birth to a baby in a stable. Nothing about that is clean. And about them being perfect? Think about Joseph. Although Mary says the baby is from God, he's worried about what people will think.

He loves Mary, but the easiest way out is for him to divorce her privately, to save them both from public humiliation. (Quick note: at the time, breaking an engagement would have been as serious as getting a divorce. That's why the word divorce is used here.) Now, imagine that nativity scene again. Does Joseph look like a man who, a few months ago, planned to divorce Mary?

The point of this is not to put down Mary and Joseph. The point is that they were people, just like us. They were flawed. They were probably in need of a bath and good night's rest. They were probably cold, and hungry, and scared. But that didn't stop God from using them to be a part of the greatest story ever told.

The next time you feel like you need to be perfect to do God's work, think again. He could have chosen anything in His creation to do his work, but he chose people. Flawed, tired, in need of a bath people. All He wants is someone willing to say, "yes" and He'll take it from there.

Tomorrow we'll find out what happens next for Joseph. Don't forget to check back and see.

Questions:

Does this change how you'll see the nativity?

Without peeking at tomorrow's reading, do you remember what will change Joseph's mind?

When God asks you to be part of His plan, are you willing to say yes?



WEEK 3 - JOY

DAY 4 COMMANDS & CARPENTERS

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. 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."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Matthew 1:20-25

Was that your guess? An angel? So, Joseph's having a hard time deciding what to do and he goes to sleep. An angel of God appears to him. The angel does two things. First, he calms his fears. "Do not be afraid." That's the same thing Mary's angel and the one who appeared to the shepherds said. It makes sense. Seeing an angel would be so incredible, it would be scary. But here, the angel tells Joseph specifically not be afraid to take Mary as his wife because he knew that's what was troubling him.

The second thing the angel does is give Joseph a command. He's to stay with Mary and name the baby Jesus. It wasn't a request. He didn't suggest it. He commanded it. There wasn't room for discussion or arguing. And when Joseph woke up, he did what the Lord commanded. It sounds simple, but it probably wasn't. There were probably people who didn't believe them. His parents may have had concerns about taking Mary as his wife.

God gives other commands in the Bible. God's commands are designed to protect us from hurt. They're designed to keep us close to Him. Sometimes they are hard to follow. People may think we're crazy, but we must ignore what others think and have faith that God's commands are there to protect us. He knows best and when we obey, He will bless us.

Joseph got to be the one who raises the Son of God. He got to teach Jesus to be a carpenter and see him become the man who ultimately hung on the cross to save us. And all that started with him obeying a command.

Questions:

What do you think the angel looked like?

What kind of things do you think carpenters made in those days?

What are some other commands in the Bible?



WEEK 3 - JOY

DAY 5 SIMPLE SHEPHERDS

And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."
15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."*

Luke 2:7-15

In Matthew 25:40, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." In the U.S., we don't like to think about people who are "the least of these". We like to think we're all equal and there isn't anyone in this category. But Jesus knows something about our hearts and although we don't say it, we don't value people as equals most of the time. Think about it. If you had a meeting with a homeless man and one with LeBron James, which one would you be more prepared for? Remember the beginning of Beauty and the Beast? The prince is heartless to the poor beggar woman. That woman is actually an enchantress and his cruelty causes her to put a spell on the castle. Clearly, the prince missed this important message from Jesus. We are to treat everyone like they are Jesus. Because everyone is created by and loved by God.

People in Jesus's time wouldn't have understood why the angel appeared to shepherds. We're used to them being in the story and all our nativity scenes include sheep and people with shepherd crooks worshipping Jesus. But let's not miss the significance of this. Shepherds during this time were the least of these. They were poor and uneducated. If they told about what they saw, no one would listen. They didn't have influence. By today's standards they'd have maybe one Twitter follower (which would have been their moms).

So why? Why did God choose the shepherds to share this news? Why send the angel to a hillside to speak to them? Because God was establishing right from the beginning that Jesus came for everyone. He came for the least of these. For kings and shepherds. For homeless men and LeBron James. For you and for me.

Questions:

Have you seen Beauty and the Beast?

Who might Jesus mean in your life when he talks about "the least of these"?

Make a plan to serve them.



WEEK 4 - LOVE

DAY 1 JOHN & THE JORDAN

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

*"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"*

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

Matthew 3:1-6

Remember John the Baptist? John was not only sent to prepare people for Jesus, he was also fulfilling a prophesy. Notice the strange clothes he wore and things he ate. Even in Bible times, these were unusual choices. Imagine someone coming to school dressed in camel hair and a big belt munching bugs and honey. That would draw a crowd for sure. Some say John wore the camel hair so people would think of Elijah, who was a prophet and also hairy man. One thing's for sure, he would have stood out. Especially from the religious leaders of that time who wore beautiful, long robes.

Why would he want to separate himself from them? Because they were frauds. In fact, Jesus himself called them "White-washed tombs". In other words, they looked good on the outside, but on the inside they were far from holy. They followed the law perfectly, but they didn't love God and they surely didn't love people.

That didn't stop John from spreading the word and of course baptizing. In fact, that's why he's called John the Baptist. He urged people to repent, or turn away from their sins, and then he baptized them in the Jordan River.

But this is important, John knew he wasn't the main event. He was like the opening act at a concert. He did important things, but the main event came later. In fact, John tells people he's not worthy to carry Jesus's sandals. That's how holy Jesus is. Have you ever stopped to think about how holy Jesus is? We're not worthy to carry his sandals, but he still chooses to love us. In fact, he loves us so much, he died for us.

Questions:

Have you ever been to a baptism?

If anyone in your family has been baptized, share what your experience was like.



WEEK 4 - LOVE

DAY 2 HAPPY HOLIDAYS?

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

We've talked a lot about how we can miss Jesus in the busyness and traditions of Christmas, but there's another way we as Christians can get it wrong. People can get really rude around the holidays. Stores are crowded, traffic is bad, and sometimes we forget how to treat people. Unfortunately, Christians can also fall into that pattern of being grouchy at Christmas. Have you ever heard someone get offended when someone wishes him or her Happy Holidays? I've actually heard Christians correct them by saying, "You mean Merry Christmas?" I think they were trying to defend Christmas and in turn Jesus, but they came off as jerks. What if someone doesn't celebrate Christmas? Is it possible to show the love of Christ without being rude or judgmental about their religion?

Sometimes we get so worked up about how others celebrate or don't celebrate Christmas, we miss out on the opportunity to love. Think about the person trying to wish another well only to be corrected. Imagine what he or she might think about Christians or about Jesus himself. As Christians, we are called to love others, and unlike other times, Christmas actually makes it really easy to love others. Whether we do it through gifts, volunteering, or simply greeting people at the shopping mall with a kind smile, we should choose to love.

If you're not feeling it, pray that God will multiply your love, that He will allow his love to flow through you. Think about a glass of water. The water has to be poured into the glass in order for it to be filled. The glass itself doesn't make water. If you're feeling like you're manufacturing love, you're trying to be a water-making glass. Instead, allow God's love to flow to overflowing and then you can love others.

Questions:

Have you ever encountered rudeness during the holidays?

How did it make you feel?

What are some ways you can show love this Christmas?



WEEK 4 - LOVE

DAY 3 HAPPY HOLIDAYS?

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

John 3:16-17

This is it. It's the most important thing to remember at Christmas. If we don't know this truth, none of what we do at Christmas makes sense. Without the baby we have no reason to decorate our homes, get up on a ladder to put up lights, buy gifts, sing special songs, bake yummy treats, visit family, wrap presents, or cut down perfectly healthy trees and bring them inside. These traditions are silly if the baby in the manger isn't God.

Babies are born all the time. Some even have interesting birth stories. Maybe you've heard about babies being born in the car on the way to the hospital or born too early. That's an interesting birth story, but probably not one that will be told for thousands of years.

We celebrate the baby because He is God's own Son. He came to save the world and if we believe in him, we will live forever. Now that's an interesting birth story!

This isn't just any birthday, it's the birthday of a king. So as you celebrate the Birthday of Jesus, remember why he came to earth. It's not so we could have a holiday. He came to save us. He came to have a relationship with us. He came so we could have everlasting life with him. That's the good news of Christmas and if we believe that, we should tell everyone we know.

Questions:

What's your favorite Christmas tradition?

Do you know any interesting birth stories?

Parents, tell your kids about the day they were born.



WEEK 4 - LOVE

DAY 4 THE KING'S KIDS

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

1 John 3:1

Do you know anyone who is adopted? Maybe you are. Adoption is one of the most beautiful acts of love we can experience on earth. People who adopt usually make all kinds of sacrifices to bring that baby or child home. They often have to pay a lot of money, wait years, and pray daily to get their child. When the adoption is final, friends and family rejoice because they know how much the adoptive parents have been through.

If you have said yes to Jesus, you are adopted too. You are adopted into God's family. Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice by dying on the cross to bring you home. And people rejoiced when your adoption was finalized by your saying yes to Jesus.

If you haven't asked Jesus into your heart, maybe this is the time. Jesus has done all the work and all you have to do is pray to him. Tell him you are a sinner and need a savior. Tell him you love him and he is your Lord. Maybe this will be the Christmas you'll look back and say, "That was the time I became a child of God."

Questions:

Have you ever heard a beautiful adoption story?

Do you have any questions about saying "yes" to Jesus?

What's keeping you from being one of the King's kids?



WEEK 4 - LOVE

DAY 5 BLESSED BIRTHDAY

*Lord, you are my God;
I will exalt you and praise your name,
for in perfect faithfulness
you have done wonderful things,
things planned long ago.*

Isaiah 25:1

At Christmas, we hear a lot of music. Some Christmas songs are cheesy, but some are beautiful. One of the most beautiful Christmas songs is “Joy to the world”. Sometimes we miss the message in this song because we’re so used to it. It becomes background noise, but try this. Don’t sing it, just say the words out loud.

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come
Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room
And Heaven and nature sing
And Heaven and nature sing
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing”

Have you learned anything from reading scripture throughout this advent season? Hopefully, God has given you a better understanding of who He is and how much He loves you.

Now, imagine someone sent you a Christmas card with a check inside. You look closer and see the check is for a million dollars. How would you react? Would you put it in a drawer and forget about it? Would you mention it to a person or two and then move on? Or would you cash it and tell everyone you knew about this generous person who chose to give you an amazing gift? My guess is you’d spread the word.

Jesus gives a gift worth so much more than money. He offers everlasting life. A life that never ends in the presence of God. Are we going to shove it in a drawer and forget about it or are we going to accept the gift and tell everyone we know? The way you answer this question makes all the difference.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her King!

Questions:

What have you learned this advent season?

As a family, pray that God would prepare you to share His good news.

