

ADVEN

Celebrating the Coming of Our Lord



My Soul Magnifies the Lord: Advent From the Gospel of Luke

Santa Barbara Community Church

2008 Advent Schedule

Sermon Date	Study	Topic	Schedule
11/30	1	Hope	Homegroups meet
12/7	2	Peace	Homegroups meet
12/14	3	Joy	Homegroups meet
12/21	4	Love	Individual study
12/24	5	The Christ	Individual study

Directions for using this Study Guide

This study is broken into five parts. Each study will follow the lighting of the Advent wreath on Sunday. The first three studies are full length, since we will be meeting in homegroups. The last two studies are for individual/household use, as we will not be meeting in homegroups.

At the end of each study you will see one page entitled **Celebrating Advent at Home**. They are to be used in your home with your family, alone or with roommates. Each session is designed to combine with an Advent candle wreath, but it's not necessary. You can cover all of the material on the Sunday you light the candle or you could spread it out during the week. For example, light the candle on Sunday and ask the first question to ponder. Ask the second question on Tuesday, and then choose one or more of the activities to apply the lesson to your lives. You will find some other good ideas (including instructions for making an Advent wreath) in the **Resource Section** in the back of the study guide.

Parents may consider reading each session over and tailoring it to fit the ages of your children. If you have older children, be sure to involve them in leading the activities. You might give them the whole session and let them do the editing. Make it a fun activity, enabling them to see the eternal gifts Christmas represents. Your children will be bringing home additional resources from Sunday school and Children's church. Allow these to influence your family celebration as well.

May this Christmas season bring glory to God in our hearts, in our homes and in his Church!

The study guide was written by Reed Jolley. The introduction was written by Christian Schalesky and Tricia Popp wrote the sections *Celebrating Advent at Home* and *Additional Resources*. Kat McLean did the artwork for the weeks of Peace, Love and Christ. Thanks to Susi Lamoutte who proofread the text and added helpful questions.

SOURCES

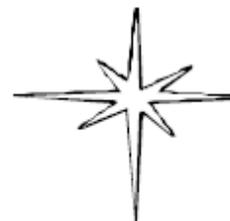
ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
Lewis	C. S. Lewis, <i>Mere Christianity</i> , Macmillan, 1952. C. S. Lewis, <i>Miracles</i> , Macmillan, 1947. C. S. Lewis, <i>The Weight of Glory</i> , Macmillan, 1941.
Morris	Leon Morris, <i>Luke</i> , Inter-Varsity Press, 1988.
NIV	New International Version
Toon	Peter Toon, <i>Advent</i> from <i>Evangelical Dictionary of Theology</i> , Baker, 1984.
Wilcock	Michael Wilcock, <i>The Message of Luke</i> , Inter-Varsity Press, 1979

Scripture passages are from the English Standard Version.

Introduction

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,
and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son
from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

John 1:14



For as long as humanity has been worshipping God the changing seasons have served as sacred markers calling us to celebrate the Lord of all life. For centuries Jews have organized seasonal celebration around the Exodus from Egypt.¹ As Christians the focus of seasonal celebration revolves around the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Throughout the history of the Christian Church the cycle of the liturgical year was instrumental in teaching the biblical stories of God's redemptive work in the world to a people shrouded in poverty, illiteracy and lack of education.²

The Advent season marks the beginning of the ecclesiastical year. It begins the 4th Sunday before Christmas and culminates in the celebration of the birth of Christ. The celebration of Advent is not a biblical mandate nor does it have a Scriptural precedent, yet it has a rich tradition in the Christian Church as a season of reflection upon the life, death, resurrection and future return of our Lord Jesus. This season, like all others, has worship of God as its purpose.

The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, meaning "coming" or "arrival."³ The focus of the season is upon the birth of Christ in his First Advent and the future return of Christ in his Second Advent. The biblical Greek term is *parousia* [parousia] which usually means "presence" but can also mean "coming" or "arrival." When we recognize Advent, therefore, we are not only mindful of the First and Second Advents of Christ but also his unique and powerful presence in our lives today. A focus on the past and the future must affect our lives in the here and now.

Celebration, Anticipation, Self-Examination

Advent is a time of *celebration*. The infinite and unknowable God of the universe became one of us that we might know him. He was born in a far away land into the humblest of circumstances for the express purpose of redeeming the world from sin and reconciling humanity to himself. It is a celebration of the Incarnation

¹We see the Old Testament principle of seasonal celebration inaugurated by God in Exodus 12-13. Throughout its history Israel has recognized festivals, celebrations and holy days as reminders of God's goodness and faithfulness.

² Prior to the 16th century the great majority of people were illiterate. In their ardent determination to instruct followers to read the Bible in their native language, leaders of the Reformation extended literacy to the masses. The invention of the printing press made widespread publication a reality.

³ Toon, p. 15.

of Christ. And the Incarnation cannot be separated from the Crucifixion. The baby Jesus was born under the shadow of the cross. He not only came to teach, heal and perform wonders, but also to suffer, die and rise again. For us, the Incarnation is the bridge from death into life. This is cause for *celebration!*

But the Advent season is also, like unto the prophets of old, a time of *anticipation*. The Old Testament prophets, with eager anticipation and preparedness, foretold the coming of the Messiah. In the New Testament their visions and signs were confirmed in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Today's Advent is a time of longing and hope as we prepare our hearts for the Second Coming of our Lord.

As we stand between the ages, between the First and the Second Advent of our Lord, this season should also be a time of *self-examination*. We are called to reflect upon our relationship with the Lord and his mighty and merciful presence in our lives. It is a time to prepare ourselves for his glorious return to judge the quick [living] and the dead.

Hope, Peace, Joy, Love

The Advent season is filled with meaningful symbolism. We will be celebrating each week by the lighting of the Advent wreath. For each of the four weeks there will be four corresponding candles on the wreath. Three of the candles are purple; the royal color of our King, and one of the candles is rose-colored. Each candle represents a biblical theme. This Advent season will follow the themes of **hope, peace, joy and love**. In the center of the wreath will be a fifth candle, the Christ candle, which we will light on Christmas Eve to mark the Messiah's arrival. Christ came that we might experience these wonderful benefits of the cross. Yet we wait in eager anticipation for the full realization of the hope, peace, joy and love that he offers. Therefore let us not only say "Merry Christmas," but may we cry "*Maranatha!*" [Lord, come quickly]!

The First Candle: Hope

Zechariah and Elizabeth

Luke 1:5-25

Luke's Gospel gives the reader the most comprehensive presentation of the Christmas story (132 verses if the account of the boy Jesus in the temple is included⁴). A great place to begin our celebration of Advent together is to simply read this section of Luke. Notice the story-telling of Luke. It almost sounds like, *Once upon a time there was a man named Zechariah. . .*



1:1—2:52 Read these verses and make a few notes on what stands out.

How does Luke write his story?

What details does he include which you wouldn't have expected?

What details does Luke leave out that you would have expected?

Which verses speak to you most personally? Why?

As you read through these verses look for the following:

The main characters:

Zechariah and Elizabeth

⁴ These two chapters are longer than some books of the Bible. For example, James has 108 verses, Colossians has but 95 verses.

The angel Gabriel

Mary and Joseph

John the Baptist

Jesus

Simeon

Anna

The main songs / poems:

Mary's Magnificat

Zechariah's Benedictus

The main events:

Zechariah in the temple

Mary in Nazareth

Mary and Elizabeth in the hills of Judah

The birth of John

The birth of Jesus

Jesus in the temple

1:5-25 Zechariah and Elizabeth

In the time of Herod the Great (37-4 BC), various divisions of priests would tend to the various priestly activities in the temple in Jerusalem. There were 24 divisions of priests who served for a week at a time twice a year. Each morning and evening, incense would be lighted in the holy place of the temple by an individual priest. A priest was only allowed this privilege once, if that, in his lifetime. It is not too much to say that Zechariah would have seen his entrance into the holy place as the high point of his entire life!

1:5-7 What do we know of Zechariah and Elizabeth? What details of their life does Luke give us?

1:8ff. What happens when Zechariah (= *the Lord has remembered*) goes into the Holy Place? He encounters an angel (Gabriel = *man of God*). Notice Gabriel's first words (**1:13**) . . . *your prayer has been heard*. What prayer?

While the context might cause us to think that Gabriel is referring to a prayer for a child, a closer look indicates otherwise. The tense of the Greek verb indicates that Gabriel is referring to a single prayer. Furthermore, it would seem from Zechariah's response that he and Elizabeth had long-since ceased asking for a son. It is likely that Zechariah prayed, as he offered the incense, for the hope of Israel, for the coming of messiah.

How is Zechariah's prayer answered?

He and his wife, both too old to bear a child, will have a son. His name is to be John which means *The Lord is gracious*.

1:14-17 Make a list of what we learn about this son who was to be born? What was he to be like? What would he do? Why are these promises so important to the hope of Zechariah? (see Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6)

What emotions and thoughts are provoked with the linking of these two passages in Malachi with Luke 1-2?

Notice the parallel responses of Zechariah and Gabriel.

1:18-19 Zechariah says, *I am an old man!* Gabriel says, *I stand in the presence of God!*

Zechariah has his focus on his own inadequacy; Gabriel has his focus on God. What lessons can you learn from this? How does this give you hope?

Zechariah asks for a sign that will give him certainty of the angel's prophecy. Does he get a sign? What is it?

1:24-25 Other than getting pregnant, what happens to Elizabeth after she returns home with her husband?

1:17 As we have seen quotes the prophet Malachi giving his readers *hope* for the future. G. Campbell Morgan writes of this verse,

It is significant that the angel ended with the last words of hope from the Hebrew prophet. Four hundred years and no voice, and then the final words that had come from an authentic prophet, were spoken in the Temple to a listening priest. That prophecy, that final word was now about to be fulfilled, and the mission of the forerunner was declared. (Morgan, p. 16)

In 1:57-66 we read of John's birth. The baby John becomes the famous John the Baptist, perhaps the second most startling figure of the first century. Indeed, John the Baptist had a following for at least two centuries after his death.

But John never points to himself. He comes to as a herald of hope. He continually prepares the way and points to Jesus as the savior of the world. He is so impressed with Jesus that he points his sizable following toward the man from Nazareth proclaiming, *Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!* (1:29 ff.). Later, when the Baptist's disciples become jealous of Jesus' growing popularity, John rebuffs them saying, *[The] joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.* (3:29b-30).

May it be so in our lives during this Advent season.

The First Sunday of Advent: Hope

Readings: Isaiah 9:1 & Hebrews 10:23-25

The first candle reminds us of the light of hope that the prophets had as they looked forward to a Messiah who would bring peace and love to the world. Because we believe Jesus did come, and now hope for the Second Coming, we have the gift of hope to give others. Since we know Jesus came we can share that Good News with those who haven't heard.

We are also told to remember Jesus is coming back and live differently because we are hoping for that Day. One way we are to live differently is in the way we treat each other. We are told in Hebrews to encourage each other to live in love and good deeds as we wait for Jesus to come back.

Light the first candle

Questions to Ponder:

- Who do we know who has no hope? How can we share our hope with them? Let's pray now for them.
- How is our household doing in spurring one another on to love and good deeds? Can we think of ways to encourage each other? How would you go about doing this?

Optional Activities for the Week:

1. Pray for those without hope. Ask God for opportunities to reach out to them and share the Good News. Talk at dinner about the different ways we witness to the gospel in our lives.
2. Consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds (Heb.10: 24). One great way to spur one another on is by doing a good deed yourself. Think of a loving thing you can do for someone at home. Give everyone present a sticky note to write his or her plan on. Take time for people to put it in a spot so they'll see their own reminder.

See Resource Section for more ideas

Sermon Notes. . .

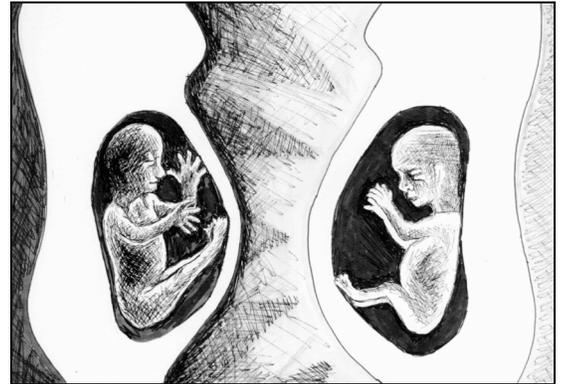
The Second Candle: Peace

Mary and Elizabeth

Luke 1:26-45

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Isaiah 9:6*

Peace is a precious and rare commodity in many parts of the world today. Upheaval and revolution are constants in India and Tibet; the Middle East continues to march along its centuries old trail of conflict. Drug cartels battle in Mexico and Columbia. Civil war and disorder run rampant through many parts of Africa.



What is true of nations is also true of the human heart. A war rages within each of us and spills out into our homes and our relations. Chaos, worry, friction and frustration are commonly experienced rather than God's *peace*.

Read Luke 1:26-45. In these verses we find a young woman who might have found anything but peace and an older woman who has found peace at last. Mary of Nazareth, a virgin, finds she will give birth to the promised messiah! Elizabeth prepares to give birth in her old age even as she rejoices in the greater miracle of her relative's pregnancy.⁵

Read and respond to these verses.

⁵ It is often suggested that Mary and Elizabeth were cousins (The Message, KJV, etc.). That may be the case, but the Greek word used is both rare and ambiguous. It means a *female relative*.

1:32-33 It would be easy to read these verses and miss their astonishing claims. Consider the claims made for this child.

- First, his name is to be *Jesus*. The name Jesus (Joshua in Hebrew) means *the Lord is salvation*.
- Like John the Baptist (1:15) he will be *great*. But this child will be called the *Son of the Most High*. Suddenly Gabriel's prophecy is unlike any other. In the Greek text we read, literally, *Son of Highest*. The absence of the definite article (the) indicates the "absolute uniqueness and highness of His divine Sonship. (Geldenhuys, p. 76)
- Next, this child will receive the throne of David! The words of the Lord given to Israel's greatest king are being fulfilled. One thousand years before the time of Jesus the Lord said to David,

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

2 Samuel 7:12-13

- Finally, this child will reign *forever*. The Jews in the first century had various expectations of messiah when he came. Most expected messiah's reign to be of limited duration (Morris, p. 90). But Gabriel informs Mary that her son will reign *forever*.

How should these four promises give the followers of Christ peace in their lives? What do they do for you personally?

1:18, 1:34 Zechariah's and Mary's response to the angel are similar but different. The former, apparently, asks for a sign that will confirm the angel's prophecy. Zechariah's question expresses doubt that God can really do this (see 1:20). Mary, on the other hand, asks in faith about how this prophecy will be fulfilled.

Think about how you understand God's promises in your life. Do you receive these promises more like Zechariah or more like Mary?

1:38 Think about Mary's response to the angel's prophecy. On the one hand, Mary learns she will become pregnant without the benefit of marriage. The people of Nazareth will talk. Mary, Joseph and both of their families will be shamed. We know from Matthew's Gospel that Joseph planned to divorce his fiancée when he learned she was pregnant (Matthew 1:19). Deeper still is the possibility that Mary might lose her life for the sin of adultery (Deuteronomy 22:23ff.). On the other hand, she is going to become the mother of the messiah! She has been chosen to bear the savior of the world!

Look again at Mary's response to the angel's news⁶. What can you learn from Mary for your own response to God's will in your life? How can you promote a Mary-like trust in God?

1:42-45 Make a list of the statements Elizabeth makes to Mary upon receiving her greeting. You should be able to find 5 statements (one being a question)⁷.

- 1.
- 2.

⁶ Mary calls herself the *handmaid*, or, *servant*, of the Lord. The Greek word, literally, is *slave girl* of the Lord.

⁷ William Hendrickson makes that point that this is the first of five songs in these chapters. He outlines them as follows (Hendrickson, p. 95):

Name of Song	Passage	Distinguishing Feature
Song of Elizabeth	1:42b-45	Love
Song of Mary	1:46-55	Faith
Song of Zechariah	1:68-79	Hope
Song of the Angels	2:14	Adoration
Song of Simeon	2:29-32	Resignation

- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

How would these statements promote peace in Elizabeth's life?

Despite the grim realities of violence in the world and the unrest in our souls, we gather on the second Sunday of Advent to light the candle of peace. We light this candle symbolically to celebrate the *peace* that Jesus has brought to our lives and to the world. Those of us who have responded to the call of Christ and have placed our faith in him experience the peace he offers. Having tasted this we anxiously anticipate the fullness of his *peace* when he comes again.

In Scripture, *peace* is a favorite greeting found at the beginning and end of many New Testament letters. *Peace* (*shalom* in Hebrew; *eirene* in Greek) in the simplest, biblical sense can be considered *completeness*, *wholeness*, and *soundness*. It is not only expressed by cessation from war but also in friendship between two people (Genesis 26:29; Psalm 28:3), and intimate relationship with God (Numbers 25:12; Isaiah 54:10). The very purpose of Christ coming into the world was to bring *peace* with God through redemption and reconciliation.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand . . .

Romans 5:1-2a

Take a moment and reflect upon what Christ has done in your life. Has knowing God through Christ brought *peace* to your life? How have you experienced this *peace*? Share this with your homegroup.

The Second Sunday of Advent: Peace

Readings: Isaiah 9:6 & Ephesians 6:13,15 (Colossians 3:15)

Today we light the candle of peace. Jesus is the Prince of Peace and we are to live in His kingdom in peace. Our feet need to be ready to spread peace as we serve the Prince of Peace.

Light two candles

Questions to Ponder:

- Do I have peace in my heart today? Do I need to ask God to fill me with His peace?
- Is there peace in our home? Is there something we need to talk about to help the Prince of Peace be the ruler here?
- Are we being peacemakers in the world? Can we pray now for our brothers and sisters in difficult places to have peace? Pray for specific locations you know of that are in turmoil.

Optional Activities for the Week:

1. Is there someone you need to make peace with? Seek her/him out this week and reach out in Christ's power to make peace.
2. Is someone you know unhappy? Write a note to them or do something kind for in the name of Jesus. Use your "feet" to make peace.
3. Choose a place in the world you know is in turmoil and pray daily for peace.

See Resource Section for more ideas.

Sermon Notes. . .

The Third Candle: Joy

Mary, Zechariah and their songs of Joy

Luke 1:46-80

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come:
Let earth receive her King
Let ev'ry heart, prepare him room
And heav'n and nature sing,
And heav'n and nature sing,
And heav'n and heav'n and nature
sing.*



We sing this song as a Christmas carol, but Isaac Watts wrote this hymn about the second coming of Christ. He based his text on the second half of Psalm 98 which celebrates the coming judgment of God! When God comes, as the second stanza has it, *The Savior reigns! Joy!*

Nevertheless, Watt's hymn is an appropriate Christmas carol because with the first advent of Christ his rule and reign begins.

It wouldn't be too much to say that *joy* is the dominant word in these chapters.

- The birth of John will produce *joy and gladness* (1:14).
- John leaps for *joy* in his mother's womb (1:44).
- When John is born the neighbors *rejoice* (1:58).
- Mary *rejoices* in God her savior (1:47).
- The shepherds receive news that will be a *great joy that will be for all the people* (2:10).

Read Luke 1:46-80. These verses contain two songs / poems. The first is Mary's response to the blessing of being chosen by God to bear the messiah. The second is Zechariah's response to the birth of his son John. The old-man father and the teenage virgin both overflow with joy.

What initial thoughts, reactions and questions do these verses provoke?

1:46-56 The Magnificat

Mary's song is often called the Magnificat from its open word *magnified* from the Latin text. *It is an outburst of praise largely in Old Testament language*⁸. (Morris, p. 92).

1:49-50 concentrate on God power, holiness and mercy. Look for each in these verses. What do we learn about God from Mary's statements?

1:51-55 Mary uses the common Greek past tense (aorist) to describe six things God has done in the past. Each of these gives Mary joy in the present. Make a list of these six activities of God.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

How do these works of God give you joy in your life?

⁸ It is often asked, *How did a teenage girl from Galilee come up with such a beautiful song?* On the one hand, we can say God inspired her to write these lyrics. On the other hand, as a first-century Jew Mary would have been steeped in the Jewish Bible (the Old Testament). She would have memorized large portions of the Bible, especially the songs of the Hebrew Scriptures. Her song is quite similar to Hannah's (1 Samuel 2:1-10), and is laced with other allusions to Old Testament scriptures.

1:67-80 The Benedictus

After a rather humorous account of the naming of John, Zechariah's tongue is finally loosed and he speaks! The Benedictus (named again after the first word in the Latin text for *Blessed*), is the old-man who is a new father responds to God's grace in his life with a song. This song could be called the last prophetic word of the Old Testament. John has arrived and messiah will be born in a mere six months time.

Read Zechariah's song again. Notice the two parts of this song of thanksgiving.

1:68-75 give thanks not for baby John, but for the coming messiah. This is the surprise in Zechariah's lyrics. We would expect this father to begin thanking God for the gift of his own son. But instead, he extols God for the gift of messiah.

Make a list of Zechariah's specific praises to God for the gift of the Christ child. What will the presence of Jesus accomplish?

1:76-79 Make a similar list of the reasons Zechariah gives thanks to God for his son John.

1:80 The first chapter of Luke comes to a close with a very brief description of John's upbringing. Much is left unsaid. Perhaps Elizabeth and Zechariah died while John was very young and he was brought up by a desert community. Or perhaps Luke wants us to see that John was a prophet from the beginning for the desert was thought to be the place where these angular preachers got their inspiration. In any event, the stage is set for the birth of Jesus. Joy!

Consider this quote by C. S. Lewis,

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in

a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.⁹

Take some time to examine your affections. Is there anything that comes between your heart and God?

What adjustments can you make so that your desires and joy are rooted in and derived from your relation with God?

Spend some time in prayer. Pray that God would give you *joy* in Him this Christmas season.

You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.
Psalm 16:11

⁹ Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, pp. 3-4.

The Third Sunday of Advent: Joy

Readings: Luke 1:39-44 & John 15:10-11 (Psalm 16:11)

Today we light the candle of Joy. We read in Luke that Elizabeth's baby leaped with joy at the baby Jesus' presence. Jesus came to give all of us joy. He says we will have joy as we draw near to Him and obey His commands. Happiness goes away, toys break, things don't always turn out right, but in His presence is fullness of joy.

Light 3 candles

Questions to Ponder:

- Do you feel joyful now? Is it because you need to draw near to God? What would help you draw near? Singing? Prayer? Sharing with other believers? Reading the Bible? When will you do this?
- Are there areas of your life where you are disobeying God's commands and are not feeling joyful? Take time to confess your disobedience to God and thank Him that He gave us His commands so our lives could be lived in joy.

Optional Activities for the Week:

1. Read some of the Psalms of joy. Write your own Psalm of joy and use it in worship.
2. Sing some songs of joy together this week.
3. Spread the Good News of God's joy this week with someone who is needy. Think of a neighbor, classmate, family member who might need to see your joy.

See Resource Section for more idea

Sermon Notes. . .

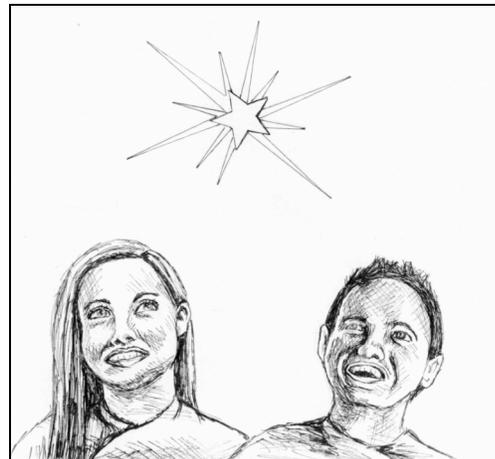
The Fourth Candle: Love

A Baby and Four Witnesses

Luke 2:1-20

The Second Person in God, the Son, became human Himself: was born into the world as an actual man—a real man of a particular height, with hair of a particular colour, speaking a particular language, weighing so many [pounds]. The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man, but (before that) a baby, and before that a *fetus* inside a Woman's body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab.

C. S. Lewis



Luke 2:1-20 records what we might call the grand miracle of all history. In this short section of Luke's Gospel, we read a breathtakingly understated account of God becoming a baby. Theologians call this the *incarnation*, God becoming flesh. Technically we should probably say the "Christmas story" takes Luke only 7 verses to tell (out of 1,151 verses in the whole Gospel)!

Read and ponder these wonder-provoking verses. Meditate on the love of God that would stoop to such depths.

What thoughts come to mind as you read?

Mary gives birth and the savior of the world is born. Witnesses see what happens and glorify God accordingly. Mary and Joseph are, of course, the first two witnesses. Then the angel testifies to what God has done. And then the shepherds (we'll count them as one witness) come and see the Christ child. They too testify to *all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them* (2:20).

Ponder and meditate upon each of these witnesses. What does each witness add to the story? Let their witness take you into the Christmas event. Think about what each witness adds to the story.

Many of our homes and apartments are adorned at this time of year by a crèche, a manger scene, replete with animals, straw, a star and baby Jesus in a feed trough. In fact, much is left unsaid in Luke's story. Mary, Joseph and Jesus could have been in a cave (as some early church tradition has it), they could have been staying with a very poor family who essentially live in a barn. There is the possibility that the word *inn* refers to a room at a house which was occupied by the time Mary and Joseph arrive.

We know only that everything points to poverty, obscurity and even rejection. (Morris, p. 101)

In the baby Jesus we find God himself. The magnificent, all-glorious God of the universe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a feed trough for the animals. As Paul put it to the Corinthian church,

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

1 Corinthians 8:9

The fourth candle on the Advent wreath is lit to remind us that God is *love*. It is the very nature of God that compelled him to send his Son into a sinful world to die unjustly on a cross for us. This is a time to celebrate the *love* of God and to show that *love* to those who have not experienced it in their own lives.

God's *love* is a love that is unmerited and unselfish. This is seen most profoundly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In Jesus, God's amazing *love* became human in order to experience our situation and yet not sin and so conquer death. Jesus died for sinners like ourselves who at one time stood as God's enemies deserving only the wrath and judgment our sinful actions warranted. But, instead of giving us our just penalty, He sent his one and only Son to be punished for us. God's *love* is sacrificial.

May we begin afresh this Christmas season to give ourselves to the One whom we owe a double-debt of love. *We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).*

Write a brief prayer to God describing his love for you. Then pray this prayer and meditate on this love you have received.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent: Love

Readings: Matthew 1:20-23 & I John 4:9-11

The fourth lighting celebrates the reason Christmas happens at all. It is because God loved us and sent Jesus as the best gift we can ever receive. When our Christmas gifts are all used up and the decorations taken down, He will still be there offering to give us hope, peace, joy and love because He loves us. We can show we love Him back by the way we love others here on earth. This is the gift we can give to God (with His help, of course!).

Light 4 candles

Questions to Ponder:

- We know God loves us because He sent Jesus to be our savior. What other ways do you see His love in your life now?
- How can people see that you love God? How will you love those people you live with and show God that you love Him?

Optional Activities for the Week:

1. Work on being loving to the person you live with that is the most difficult to love. Start by praying daily for her/him. Then seek to do something loving for her/him this week to open your heart to greater love.
2. Seek to show love to someone in church or your neighborhood that could use some help (offer to baby-sit? Mow the lawn? Make a meal?). Do it to show love to God.

See Resource Section for more idea

Sermon Notes. . .

The Fifth Candle: Christ A Baby and Two Witnesses (Simeon and Anna) Luke 2:21-40

The essential point, as I see it, about Christ's birth is that it was so poor and so humble. The Son of God was born into the world, not as a prince, but as a pauper. So, to deck up the legendary scene of his nativity with precious hangings, pictures, glittering lamps and other ornamentation, is to destroy whatever valid symbolism it might otherwise have. Truly, we human beings have a wonderful faculty for thus snatching fantasy from the jaws of truth.¹⁰



Malcolm Muggeridge is right. Jesus could have come in full glory as a blazing light visible to all. He could have come on a horse and vanquished the Roman armies by the word of his mouth. He could have come as an emperor or been appointed High Priest in Jerusalem. But the second person of the triune God chose to come as a helpless infant. The Creator of the universe was born to a peasant Jewish girl in a tiny town in the eastern corner of the Roman Empire. He chose the way of humility and suffering. From infancy the way of the cross is his destiny (Luke 2:34-35).

The final candle on the Advent wreath is the Christ candle. With the lighting of the Christ candle we celebrate the pinnacle of all history, the coming of the Lord. At last the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled.

Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.

Isaiah 25:9

On Christmas we ponder what it meant that *the Son of God became a man to enable men to become the sons of God.*¹¹

Read and ponder Luke 2:21-40. What do you see in the baby Jesus?

¹⁰ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered*, 1969, p., `67.

¹¹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity* p. 154

Simeon 2:22-35

Mary and Joseph bring the baby Jesus into the temple to consecrate him to God.¹²

Other than his name, that he was righteous, filled with the Holy Spirit and that he was waiting for the *consolation* of Israel, we know nothing of Simeon. We don't know if he was a priest, a Pharisee or simply a faithful worshipper of God.

Read and ponder Simeon's song. What do we learn about Jesus from verses 29-32?

Anna 2:36-38

That Luke mentions a *prophetess* is significant. There had been no prophets in Israel for four hundred years and the Talmud¹³ recognizes only seven prophetesses combined. For Luke to mention Anna as such is impressive to say the least.

For what does Anna give thanks? Ponder this, and spend time doing the same. Christ has come. Praise.

As you read consider the baby Jesus, consider what it meant for the God of the universe to become a child? Read the following passages.

¹² Commentators point out that two ceremonies are present here. First, Jesus is *presented to the Lord* and second, Mary needs to be ritually purified.

¹³ The Talmud was, and is, a massive and growing body of recorded rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law and ethics.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 9:6-7

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Galatians 4:4-5

What insights do these Scriptures offer about the first Advent of Christ? What should be our response to this Jesus who was God in the flesh?

The Christmas hymn captures the praise of both Simeon and Anna. We should join their song.

*O come O come Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appears,
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel,
Shall come to thee O Israel.*

The Fifth Sunday of Advent: The Christ

Readings: Matthew 24:42-44 & 2 Peter 3:1-14 (can be read in two parts: v.1-9; 10-14).

This is the last candle of the Advent season. Today we celebrate that Christ was born.

We have prepared during Advent for Christmas but the waiting should still go on. As we celebrate Christ's birth, let us also live for Christ each day, knowing He will return soon. He wants to find us taking His light of hope, peace, joy and love to the dark world.

Light all 5 candles

Questions to Ponder:

- Think back over the last 4 weeks of Advent. What have you learned about living for Christ?
- Which gift (hope, peace, joy, love) do you value most today and why?
- Is your life ready for Jesus to come back today? What needs to change?

Optional Activities for the Week:

1. As you begin each day this week, read II Peter 3:14. Ask God how you can be better prepared for His coming as you plan your day.
2. Thank God for each of the gifts we have looked at during Advent. Be specific about how you have been blessed by hope, peace, joy and love.
3. Before opening your Christmas gifts, take time to tell each person how they are a gift (how you see hope, peace, joy or love in their lives).
4. Be intentional in sharing Christ with one person this week. Think of a person today and look for opportunities as you pray daily for them.

See Resource Section for more ideas.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This is a sprinkling of ideas to help you celebrate Advent.

1. **Advent Wreath:**

The never-ending circle of greenery reminds us of God's love and the source of our hope. The lighting of more candles each week reminds us of the coming of the light of Christ into a dark, cold world.

Supplies:

- 6-8 evergreen boughs between 6"-12" long
- Wire coat hanger
- Lots of green twist ties
- 3 purple candles (about 10" since they will be lit several weeks)
- 1 pink candle and 1 white candle

Directions:

1. Shape coat hanger into a circle. Bend the hook toward the center of the circle or clip off.
2. Fasten boughs to coat hanger with twist ties.
3. Put candles into holders (can be 5 lumps of clay shaped into holders).
4. Place candles in the wreath.

2. **"Krist Kindl"**

Krist Kindl is German for "Christ Child." It refers to an activity during Advent in which you try to share Christ's love with others in your household. It can be tailored to your own schedule.

Write everyone's name on a piece of paper. Put the papers in a container. Each person is to draw out a name and keep it secret. The name will be your Advent friend. You will have the chance to do things secretly for this person in the name of the Krist Kindl. It could be a chore, note, homemade gift, kind word or prayer. It should never be a bought gift.

You may draw new names each Sunday in Advent or keep the same name all month. Reveal identities at Christmas.

3. **Jesse Tree** (Isaiah 11:1; Matt. 1:1-17)

A family tree shows the names of the relatives who lived before a person. The family tree of Jesus is called the Jesse Tree because Jesus came from the family of King David whose father was Jesse.

Materials Needed:

Branch	Scissors	Glue
Symbols*	Paper Punch	Cardboard
Crayons or Markers	Yarn	

*Sample of names and suggested symbols:

Adam (apple)	Moses (tablets)
Noah (ark)	Jesse (stump with roots)
Abraham (pile of sand)	David (star)
Isaac (altar)	Solomon (scales)
Jacob (number 12)	Mary
Joseph (coat)	Jesus (Cross)

Directions:

- 1) Draw symbols for different family names.
- 2) Glue each symbol to cardboard and cut out.
- 3) Color each symbol.
- 4) Punch a hole in symbol and use yarn to tie it to your branch.

4. **Books for Additional Resources:**

Christ in Christmas: A Family Advent Celebration, James Dobson, etc., Navpress
Celebrate the Seasons by Phyllis Stanley and Miltinnie Yih, Navpress

Advent is for Children by Julie Keleman, Liguori Press

Countdown to Christmas by Susan O'Keefe, Paulist Press