



2018 Advent Devotional Book

Celebrating Jesus' First Coming and
Anticipating His Second Coming

A Giving & Learning Activity



Scripture: Matthew 10:8

This scripture tells of Jesus sending out the twelve disciples to minister, but the last few words of the scripture is the focus “freely you received, freely give.” Think for a moment of all you have received in this land of plenty. You have all your needs met and then some. Then think of God’s great gift of salvation, a free gift given with love and compassion.

We would like to challenge you and your family during this season of giving to “freely give” to many who have far less than we do. There are families in our neighborhoods that don’t always have 3 meals a day and Hungry Souls is trying to fill the hunger gap by providing food to families who have children only eating at school in the free lunch programs.

During the month of December we challenge you to read the devotionals together and then everyday add a food item to a festive box that will be shared with Hungry Souls for their January meal bags. Just watch the box fill as the days go by. After Christmas we will communicate with you about where to take your full box. This is a great visual way for your children to learn the art of giving freely.

Here are items needed in these boxes: (remember just one a day)

Applesauce	Pasta sauce	Pasta	Fruit cups
Canned Green Beans	Rotel tomatoes	Tomato sauce	Rice (1 lb. bags)
Cream of Chicken Soup	Granola Bars	Syrup	Pancake Mix

By collecting 1 item a day from December 1-25, you will have provided meals for two families. Freely give with a humble heart!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, may we always remember how freely we have received Your great gifts including Your Son. Change our hearts to gratefulness and compassion so that we can “freely give.”
Amen

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1

Once someone said, “Life is short. You should take while you still can.” His friend replied, “Life is short. You should give while you still can.” There is no dispute about whether life is short. It is, so don't waste this time taking greedily. Now is always the best time to give.

You may think that you have nothing to give. Maybe you depend on another person's charity, the government's subsidies, or your friends' and family's help to make do each day. Maybe you are in a trying time of your life after losing your job, your health, or a loved one. Perhaps your family has broken down or you are struggling with rebellious children.

Growing up in Asia, it never occurred to me that my family was poor. Even when I received old coats and toys and accompanied my mother to borrow money each month, I did not notice our poverty. To me, the poor people were those who looked tired and old, begging at our door. My mom would gently take the bowl they held out and fill it with uncooked rice and a little money. There went our family's lunch . . . but we still had our dinner. What was given was not the rice or the money, but the grace of God.

When my kids were aged one and five, we moved to a condo next door to a single mother with two children aged seven and nine. I had my suspicion about her line of work after I observed her leaving with men every evening dressed in sexy clothing and heavy makeup. Though the woman spoke on several occasions, with pleading in her eyes, about letting our children play together, I kept my kids away from her and her house. All she had wanted was friendship for her kids and a little compassion for herself. Was it that difficult to give?

You can freely share God's grace even when you are sick or needy. No matter what you may think, the trials in life are the times when you will gain the most understanding of what it really means to give if you choose to take the step of faith.

Do not forget, however, to give with God's wisdom. We cannot force our giving on others. Once I handed a Johnny bag to a homeless woman. After examining the contents, she declined the bag. I did not take the rejection personally but was thankful for her honesty. I realized that perhaps I was not the one blessed with the privilege to help her. We must always trust in God's divine wisdom.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You that You have given Your best, Jesus, to us. Help us to give the way You give: with love, faith and wisdom. Teach us to give now and any time. Help us to have faith that You have given us more than we think we can give. Let us give with wisdom, according to Your will.
Amen

Scripture: Micah 5:2 and Luke 2:1-4

My hometown is a small community of only 400 people. It's not a place of wealth and beauty, and in fact has a number of abandoned and neglected buildings, but it's home to me and I treasure the memories of growing up there. Generations of my family have lived there and it gives me a sense of belonging to something longer lasting and larger than myself.

Jesus had a hometown too, and where he would be born was chosen from the beginning of time. God placed many references in the Old Testament that predict the coming of Jesus and facts about his family and place of birth.

We read in Micah 5:2 the prophecy of our Messiah coming from the city of Bethlehem. David, from whom Christ descended, was also born in Bethlehem, which was a small town, and like my small town, not known for its wealth or beauty, but it was the birthplace of the King of Kings.

In God's perfect plan He chose Joseph to be Jesus' earthly father so that he would be returning to Bethlehem to register just at the time Jesus was to be born, thus fulfilling prophecy.

All of us, whether we have an earthly hometown or not, can feel that we are a part of something, not just long lasting, but eternal. Because of our faith in Jesus as our Savior, we will live with Him in Heaven forever.

Prayer: Dear Lord, We thank You for planning a way for our salvation before the world was even created. You knew each detail of Your perfect plan and we can rejoice at this time of year in particular over the birth of Your son Jesus as a tiny earthly baby. What a sacrifice You made for us! Hallelujah, the light of the World has come. Praise You, Father.
Amen

Scripture: John 1:1-5

Is there a special day that you look forward to and can hardly wait for it to arrive? Perhaps it's your birthday, the last day of school, and almost certainly Christmas? For the people of Galilee in Bible times, they surely looked forward to a time when they were no longer under the oppression of the Romans. It was a time when numerous nations were trying to conquer and take over other, perhaps smaller, countries. It was also a time when there were numerous divisions, political and religious, within the country of Galilee.

Certainly, the people were looking for a leader who would free them from the rule of the Romans and who would help heal the divisions within their country. Were they looking for someone who would lead them spiritually? Most were not. They didn't necessarily see their problems as being spiritually based. But God knew that all problems stem from spiritual neglect. He knew before the beginning of the world that all of mankind needed a spiritual leader to guide them. He knew that one day He would have to send His Son to the earth to lead the people of Galilee, as well as throughout the centuries to come.

Is a spiritual leader needed today? Has there ever been a time when a spiritual leader hasn't been needed. One of those questions should be replied 'yes', while the other should be answered 'no'. It was necessary for Jesus to come to the world then. His presence is needed today. We welcome Him this season. But we need to keep Him every day.

Prayer: Father, we acknowledge that, like the Galileans, we need your Son Jesus to lead us in all that we do. We are unable to do the work before us without Jesus in our lives and guiding us. We pray for Jesus' guidance and direction that we might be used for Your glory.
Amen

Scripture: Genesis 1:31 and John 1:1-3

Jesus is the “Light of the World”. Mankind would be in complete darkness had God not provided a way for redemption of sin for us. Jesus goes back to the beginning. John goes back into all eternity past, and presents Christ as the second person of the Trinity dwelling forever with God, His Father.

John found all the wonderful things about Jesus—“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.”

The marvelous revelation is that Jesus is eternal. If we can imagine back before the beginning, Christ existed. Jesus knows all things because He had existed before the beginning of all things. We can thank God for a Savior Who can supply our every need. He made us and this beautiful world in which we live. Oh, that sin had never blemished it!

Prayer: Dear Father: We thank you for your great love for all people. With gratitude we focus on your mercy and love that was made known to us by Jesus, Who was from the beginning. Teach us to attend to Your promptings and leadings through the Holy Spirit and always be willing to be Your servants here on earth and serve You because of the “Light of the World” our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen

Scripture: Luke 2:26-28, Matthew 1:20, and Luke 2:9, 13-14

From my earliest remembrances of the Christmas story, angels have always played a prominent part, and I'm sure I wore a few angel costumes when we portrayed nativity scenes. Angels are very significant as the story unfolds.

The angels in the Christmas story had an attitude of reverence and obedience toward God, the ultimate authority, yet they exhibited compassion toward those who received their messages, always assuring them not to be afraid.

The first angel, Gabriel, appeared to Mary with an announcement, and what an astounding message he had. Mary was to have a child who would be the Son of God! The second angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, telling him not to be afraid to marry Mary, and about just how special the baby would be. The appearance of this angel assured Mary's protection as she carried the child.

The third angel appeared to the shepherds with a message of great rejoicing. The Savior had been born. This was such wonderful news that a whole host of angels joined the first one, singing praises to God.

Has an angel ever visited you? I know I've never seen one, but God speaks to us in other ways too. He often speaks to us through prayer, reading the Bible, and through religious music. He also speaks through other people: ministers, teachers, and friends. We need to be listening for His voice every day.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Thank you for sending Jesus to us in the form of a tiny baby. He left the glories of Heaven to come down to die for us and be our Savior. Thank you for using angels to minister to the people in the Christmas story, and may we be ever aware of your presence in our lives.
Amen

Scripture: Luke 2:26-27 and Luke 2:38

Mary was a young Jewish girl, probably only around 14 years old. She must have come from a very devout family who instilled in her a love and obedience for God.

When the angel appeared to her with the message that she would have a child, her response was truly amazing. It revealed what a humble and accepting person she was as she said, "May it be done to me according to Your word."

How many of us would have responded as she did to such news? In our society today, humbleness is not a trait most young people aspire to. We seek ways to better ourselves without much thought for the needs of others and certainly not for God. Mary's humble spirit allowed her to accept the special role God had for her with thankfulness and praise. As we think of the miracle of the Christmas story, our response should be one of humbleness and gratitude to God for His unspeakable gift.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for Mary and the wonderful example she sets for us by accepting and resting in your plans and provision for her. She truly had the heart of a servant, which is what You desire for each of us. Help us to be more like Mary during this season as we remember your precious gift to us of your Son.
Amen

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-24

"You are WHAT???" was the young man's exclamatory reaction to his roommate's unexpected pregnancy. Dozens of questions invaded his mind in an instant. What were they going to do now? This was life-altering news.

A similar life-altering situation occurred over two thousand years ago in the small town of Nazareth. The couple was Mary and Joseph and they were engaged to be married when he discovered she was also pregnant. One very unique thing about their story is they had not been intimate together. In that moment do you think it likely he might have also said "You are WHAT???" In that moment do you think he had dozens of questions invading his mind?

Joseph had a dilemma. What was he going to do? In those times he actually had the right to have Mary stoned. However, Joseph was called a righteous (good) man. So with compassion, mercy and humility he decided to divorce her quietly instead. He was totally unaware things were about to radically change for him as he pondered this decision. As he was sleeping an angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife; the child she was carrying had been conceived by the Holy Spirit and the son she would give birth to would be named Jesus because He would save His people from their sins.

I'm sure this was all very confusing to Joseph but what strikes me here is the depth of faith demonstrated with his next action. Scripture says Joseph got up from sleeping and did as the Lord's angel commanded and married her. Joseph's part of this amazing event is often quickly overlooked. Don't miss this...he demonstrated his faith by being immediately obedient to the Lord's command. God knew the humbleness and faithfulness of Joseph's heart and knew he was the right earthly father to His Son...our Savior.

I'm happy to say the young couple mentioned at the beginning chose life and a precious son was born to them. How about you? When life throws an unexpected curve ball are you ready, like Joseph, to respond with trusting faith and obedience to do the right thing even when it doesn't make sense and is hard?

Prayer: Dear Father: Thank You for Joseph's humble example of faithful obedience. Thank You for never leaving us alone in our troubles. Please help us in times of difficulty to step back and trust that You will give us Your guidance and strength to do what is right in the situation regardless of how hard it is. We pray In Jesus' name.
Amen.

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7 and Isaiah 41:10

Luke 2:1-7 is perhaps the most famous passage concerning Jesus' birth. Under Roman rule, all Jews had to abide to census laws to ensure taxes were being appropriately secured. For Joseph and Mary, the timing could not have been worse. As most expectant mothers know, traveling, especially in your last trimester, is a huge "No-no," much less on a donkey, through the wilderness, with no assurance of help when delivery of your baby is imminent! Scholars estimate it would have been a three-day journey and arriving in the evening in Bethlehem ensured that the couple would find no decent accommodations, save for a stable. Talk about a rough road trip! And while the passage does not illuminate conversations or details of how Mary or Joseph felt on this journey, we can gather it was probably a very trying time, which would have required a great deal of patience, prayer, and faith.

Journeying is a recurring theme God reveals in His Word, and rarely does the journey come at convenient times or with many comforts (Moses' and Jonah's stories to name a few). But like all journeys, Mary and Joseph's arrival was a new beginning of something greater than they even knew. Surely joy and peace were so overwhelming the night of Jesus' birth, the aches and pains of having been on the road for three days paled in comparison to the reward God had prepared for them in that humble stable.

No matter the journey God has you on; He will never leave you to face the trip alone. Maybe the Christmas season is a difficult one to navigate, as it was for Mary and Joseph, maybe fatigue and tiredness have set in and the pain feels more than you can bear, but remember the words of the prophet that foretold of our Hope for continuing the journey: Isaiah 41:10 "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will hold on to you with My righteous right hand."

Prayer: All-knowing Father, help us learn to praise You for the journey of life. Show us the favor of Your presence along the way and when we forget that You are there, give us that experience that will turn our hearts back to You and help us see Your hand. We love You.
Amen.

Scripture: John 1:1-5

While there is no explicit verse affirming the presence of a donkey that carried Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, there are historical and cultural markers that scholars have cited to indicate the likeliness of a donkey being the mode of transportation for the mother of Jesus. Joseph, not from a necessarily affluent family, could only afford a humble animal, such as a donkey, a horse would have been very costly, as they were an indication of great wealth. Think about it as if renting a Ford Fiesta rather than a Mercedes-Benz for your holiday travels.

There are many beautiful meanings we can derive from Mary riding a donkey, including a foreshadowing to Jesus' riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. While neither Luke nor Matthew directly shed light on Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, perhaps God allows us to imagine the beauty of His potential orchestration of that trip, including inserting the idea of a humble donkey to serve him.

Maybe the point of omitting a detail like the donkey is also representative of how we ought to view ourselves in perspective of God's kingdom: it's not about us. It's not about the donkey, it's about Jesus. Whatever mode of transport Mary rode to Bethlehem, it was gentle enough to get her there safely, it listened to its master, Joseph, and it humbly complied to faithfully finish its part in Jesus' birth. No matter our circumstances or positions, let us remember we're a small part of Jesus' story, so let us be worshipful.

Prayer:

⁷ Praise the Lord from the earth,
you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
⁸ lightning and hail, snow and clouds,
stormy winds that do His bidding,
⁹ you mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars,
¹⁰ wild animals and all cattle,
small creatures and flying birds!

Praise the Lord!

Amen

Psalm 148:7-10 (NIV)

Scripture: Luke 2:41-51

When you go on vacation, do you stay at a hotel or motel? Perhaps you enjoy camping, and visit parks designed for families traveling in a recreational vehicle or pulling a camper behind their car. Whether you go to a hotel, motel, or camp park, do you expect someone to be at the front desk or office to meet and greet you? Someone who will direct you to your room or lot? Being greeted and given directions certainly makes us feel important.

In the story of Jesus' birth we learn in Luke 2:7 that there was no room in the inn. We assume that the owner of the inn, the innkeeper, came to the door and shook his head and sent Mary and Joseph on their way, saying 'Sorry, I have no more rooms. But you can sleep in the barn with the animals.' But actually, the verse says nothing about an innkeeper. I wonder why we assume that an innkeeper answered the door. But why would Luke have not included the innkeeper in his account of the nativity?

Do you think that Joseph felt less important because of the lack of a room in the inn? Or do you think he was appreciative of the place he had been given considering Mary's circumstances? If Luke had included information about the innkeeper, do you imagine we might spend too much time thinking about him rather than on the birth of Christ himself? During this season, our concentration should be on the birth of God's Son, rather than the circumstances of the events around us.

Prayer: Father, we thank You for the precious gifts You give us, especially at this time of the year. But, Father, we are especially thankful for the most important gift You have given us, Your Son. Help us to acknowledge Jesus in every event of this Advent season and to share Him with others around us.
Amen

Scripture: Luke 2:1-5, John 3:16

The story in Luke tells us that Joseph was to return to his ancestral home to be counted in the census. Bethlehem was a small town in Judah and at the time of His birth, was not very important to Rome. However, Joseph was of the line of David, and that made him a very important guest in Bethlehem, and he would have been welcomed into any home for their stay there.

There are three different Greek words in the New Testament that are used for an “inn”. The one used by Luke usually denotes a guest room in a house and not formal lodging that we are used to today. In those times, public inns were available but they were usually frowned upon by the Jewish community as unsavory or unsafe. Hospitality was an important Jewish tradition. Some homes had a large guest room serving many guests at one time.

Homes were constructed to house not only the human families, but the work animals of the owners. Their livestock were very important to them, and although many of the herds of adult animals were sent to the fields to graze in the warm weather, animals who were about to give birth or who were sick and needed protection and were housed on the ground floor of the house. The houses were made of stone, as were the stalls and the feeding troughs where straw was placed for the animals. These rooms were well protected and offered shelter that was both private and safe.

The Bible does not give us a clear understanding of where Mary and Joseph stayed, whether it was a stable, a cave, or the bottom floor of one of these homes, but we know that the space was well protected and offered shelter that was both private and safe, and it was a place where they could rest. After all, what is important in the telling of this story is not the house where Jesus was born, or the number of people who may or may not have been present at the birth, but that God sent His Son into this world, to be a Light for all the world to see, and to be the sacrifice for the sins of all who believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

Prayer: Gracious heavenly Father, thank You for Your great love for all of us and the gracious gift of eternal life through Your Son, Whom You gave because of your great love for us. Teach us the virtue of hospitality and the willingness to give those in need a place to rest.

Amen

Scripture: Isaiah 53:3

You may recognize today's scripture as one that is most often used around Easter, when referring to the crucifixion. However, as we think about the circumstances of Christ's birth, we know that His place of birth was very lowly – a manger – a trough for feeding the livestock. It was almost like Jesus was born into a situation of rejection and lack of respect.

We learned in the December 4 devotion that the people were looking for a powerful leader. Jesus came as a baby, not very powerful. He was probably born in a stable being laid in the feed trough, not very important. In fact, the people he attracted at that birth were the lowest of the low – common shepherds. Yet God chose them to hear the Good News proclaimed by the angels, and to find their way into Bethlehem to the place where Jesus was lying in a manger. Many people of the time would have been turned off by seeking a child in a manger, but not the shepherds. A manger would have been very familiar to them.

Jesus's place of birth may have been unacceptable to some of the people of Bethlehem, but it represented to many who follow Jesus later, the idea of accessibility. Jesus was not set above people on a throne. It also represented to followers the idea of Jesus being approachable, for he certainly was right before people, not off in a throne room with guards keeping people out.

As we live for Jesus, let us be approachable and accessible to all people.

Prayer: Our loving Father, help us to always remember that You sent Your Son for all people, rich and famous, poor and lowly. Jesus did not set Himself apart from the people, but made Himself accessible. Let us be like Jesus and be open and available to all people.

Amen

Scripture: John 3:16

Every year at Christmas it's so much fun pulling out the decorations and lighting the tree. There is laughter, excitement, old traditions and creating new ones. But when the Nativity is brought out there is a complete change of atmosphere. Each piece is brought out with careful handling lest it should break. Each one placed at just their right spot. The Wise Men are placed across the room because theirs is a long journey to the town where Jesus was born. There is a quiet awe and wonder as we once again remember the significance of what we are celebrating.

But where is baby Jesus? Ahhh, He isn't born yet, so He cannot be in the stable with Mary and Joseph. He will come in the early hours of Christmas morning as he did so many years ago. We will wake and celebrate His birthday with a cake and singing. We will read about His birth from the Bible. We will talk about what gifts we can give Him in this next year; things like loving one another, kindness, patience, and obedience among others.

The very name of Jesus should cause us to pause, ponder, and praise. His name tells us His purpose. He came to save us from our sins. He is Emmanuel, God with us. He is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. His is the Messiah-Savior. John 3:16 says "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

"Where's the baby?" I pray this Christmas season He won't just be a figure in a manger scene, but will be fully alive in your hearts. This baby, Jesus, is the best and most important gift you can ever receive and God gives it freely.

Prayer: Father: I thank You for the free gift of eternal life You offer us through Your Son, Jesus Christ. I pray we will open our hearts and be renewed to the true meaning of Christmas.
Amen

Scripture: John 10:11

On the first Christmas night, shepherds were outside the city walls taking care of their sheep. In their culture, shepherds were not well respected. They were lower class citizens. Their work was dirty, and the 24/7 duties kept them from participating in religious ceremonies. Imagine their surprise when the skies lit up with a crowd of angels announcing the birth of a baby King. Why would the angels choose to announce Jesus' birth to such simple men? Surely the type of announcement should have been delivered to the leaders of society. But God chose the shepherds.

After the angels had announced the birth of this most special baby, they told the shepherds to go to Bethlehem and see Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus sleeping in a manger. So, what did the shepherds do? They did exactly as they were told. They went to see the holy family and returned to their fields praising God for all they had seen and heard that night.

Why do you suppose God chose shepherds to be the first outsiders to hear about the birth of the Savior? Perhaps, because God had been acting as the shepherd of the children of Israel for thousands of years, He thought shepherds would understand. In the 23rd Psalm, David claims the Lord as his Shepherd. In about thirty years, Jesus will announce that He is the Good Shepherd.

God is not impressed with our social standing or career choice. He calls to humble men and women willing to hear His message and do as He asks.

Prayer: Father help me to be like the shepherds, willing to see Your glory and follow Your instructions and praise You while doing so.
Amen

Scripture: Luke 2:8-18 and John 10:27

I still like to send Christmas cards, especially to family and friends whom I do not see at Christmas. As often as I can, I look for cards with sheep on them. The Bible does not mention sheep near the manger where Baby Jesus was sleeping, but there were certainly sheep with the shepherds on the hillside when the angels announced His birth.

Sheep were important to the Jewish culture of the day. Since Moses' time, the children of Israel were known to be excellent herdsman. Sheep played a big role in their economy. But sheep are not very smart. They can become easily upset. They need help finding food and water, and they can become lost wandering away from the flock. Both Old and New Testament compare God's people to sheep. We are also easily distraught and prone to wander. Fortunately for us, we know the voice of our Good Shepherd who cares for us. In fact, when Jesus said He was the Good Shepherd, He also said that no one would ever be able to take His sheep from Him.

Sheep were also used as sacrifices when God's people needed to atone for their sins. The most perfect sheep was required for such an offering. John the Baptist predicted Jesus' ultimate sacrifice for us when he said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

The death of the Lamb of God on the cross was the final sacrifice, providing eternal life for those who believe.

Prayer: Lord, like a sheep I am also prone to wander, and I am easily upset. Help me to hear Your voice and follow You. Thank You for Your sacrifice for me.
Amen

Scripture: Isaiah 55:6-13

The "Three Wise Men"; a familiar, and countless retold story, but, arguably, one of the most misunderstood.

Firstly, there is no record of there being just three wise men. This conclusion came from the fact that the Messiah was presented three gifts of which most are familiar (gold, frankincense, and myrrh). There could have been as few as two wise men, or far more than just three.

Secondly, some people think they were "kings", per the classic song lyrics, "We three kings of Orient are;". Also a misnomer! They were more than likely priests or astrologers from the East (Babylon); for these "wise men" had knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures (prophecies) and they knew that there would be a sign in the skies announcing the Hebrew Messiah's birth.

We need look no further than to the leadership of that time and see King Herod's frustration and fear at the inquiry of these "wise men", to understand the weight of their presence (Matthew 2: 3-8). Even before Jesus performed a single miracle, tyrants and false kings trembled at the knowledge of Christ's potential. He was the harbinger of peace and signaled the beginning of the end for man's reign over the Earth (land). We were to become stewards instead of rulers. And in a time that we view as "calm" and "bright", Jesus' arrival is one of the most convicting reminders of the Enemy's unrelenting fear of what is true and good, and what will be his ultimate failure as Jesus and His followers claim that Jesus came to redeem us with so great a salvation. These "wise men" were knowledgeable, determined, giving, and most of all, faithful.

Even in the face of Herod's atrocities and potential self-sacrifice, these wise men embodied what Jesus would want all of His followers to become, knowledgeable, determined, giving and faithful.

Prayer: Father God, help us to be students of Your word and determined to be what You designed us to be all the while giving generously and living faithfully.
Amen

Scripture: Matthew 11:28-30; Isaiah 41:10-13; Psalm 55:22; and 1 Peter 5:6-7

Camels! Whoever came up with the crazy idea of putting a devotional about camels in an Advent book; I have never heard of such. And then on top of that ask me to write it. But, the more I have reflected on these “ships of the desert” the more I can see a good reason to look at camels.

I have never heard a Christmas carol about camels (except maybe “Alice the Camel”, but it’s not a Christmas song) and even though we assume that the wise men rode on camels, the Bible never says a word about them bringing the wise men. But camels were important in Bible times, in fact there are several places in scripture where camels are listed as useful livestock and part of a person’s wealth. So even though they are not mentioned in the Nativity story we can probably safely deduce that the camel brought wise men from the East to find the Messiah.

Camels were known as “ships of the desert.” A running camel is much faster than what you might expect. They can go long distances, especially in heat without food or water. Their humps are made of stored fat that give them sustenance in difficult conditions. Camels also were known to carry large loads when they were needed. It is safe to assume the wise men didn’t carry those gifts in their hands and walk all those miles. The camel took their burden so the wise men could do the work God sent them to do.

Isn’t it interesting that the young child the wise men found became the bearer of the burden of our sin, so that we could do the work God has for us to do and you don’t have to carry your current burden alone.

Prayer: Thank you Jesus for taking our burden of sin so that we might be free to do the work God has given us to do.
Amen

Just a heads up—go ahead and read the devotional for December 25. You might want to use some ideas there in your preparation for Christmas Day.

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-11

Matthew 2:1-11 recounts the Wise Men's journey to see Jesus, guided by a star. Many scholars have speculated and theorized what exactly "the star" was and how it compelled powerful men from the East to follow it far beyond their homelands. Theories range from the star being a supernova, a comet, and a triple conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. While all these ideas are fun to analyze, God's ultimate intent was to see obedience. The Wise Men were diligent in their studies and curious in their urge to find meaning behind the star, which ultimately prompted them to follow it so that, "We saw His star when it rose and have come to worship him." (Matthew 2:2)

Often, we find ourselves asking for a sign from God so we can follow His will. As nice as it would be to have a looming, celestial presence in the sky above our destinations, God has put into play other signs, signals, and spiritual nudging that prompt us to obedience. Like the wise men who sought and studied the star, we should seek and study God's Word. Ultimately, this is the light that guides us to Him, (Psalm 119:105). If we claim to love Jesus, we will follow Him in obedience John 14:15, and in that obedience, we follow his words (John 14:23).

Prayer: Lord, thank You for Your Word that is our guide. Help us trust the Words You have given and teach us to hear You more clearly as we seek to walk in Your way. Thanks for the brightest "star", our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen and Amen

Scripture: Isaiah 60:4-6

They came from the East -- kings, wise men, magi, and various other interpretations of their position. They brought gifts for a king: gold, frankincense, myrrh. Today, only the gift of gold seems kingly, royal.

But why is gold such a precious material? It's found mostly in ore located in the Earth's crust and mantle. While large amounts have been found, it's not easily mined. So it's somewhat limited in availability. Also gold is one the few metals which does not react to most chemicals; that fact increases it's desirability. Availability and durability cause gold to be worth more than other metals, making kings and other royals more likely to be able to afford large amounts of gold. And certainly, if a person wanted to make an impression on the king, then a gift of gold would be the likely gift.

If the visitors from the East were magi, then they were likely astrologers. They studied the stars and other heavenly bodies. They would have seen the unusually large star that directed them towards the area of Judea. While they would not have known that the king they sought was the Son of God, they knew an important person had been born, and they wanted to honor him.

Old Testament prophets predicted the coming of a king. Jesus fulfilled that promise. He came as a baby, but yet was a king. He may not have had a throne on earth, but He deserves the honor and worship that a person of royalty deserves. We may not bring Him gold to honor Him, but we must bring our best to give Him. Look at what you have, whether it's physical objects, or time, or abilities and, like the magi from the East, offer those things to Jesus to best honor Him and to worship Him.

Prayer: Precious Son of God, Jesus, we praise You for being our King. We bow before You as our royal leader. Thank You for all the blessings You give us. And we return to You our gifts of priceless importance.
Amen

Scripture: Matthew 2:11

When we talk about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, we are reminded of the three gifts brought to the Messiah, by the wise men. The wise men, who traveled from the east, were guided by the star, to Jesus. In Matthew 2:11, these special gifts were presented to honor the birth of Jesus.

Frankincense was a very special gift, as it was a highly prized commodity in ancient times. It was primarily used in temple routines, and burned ceremonially by the priests. Scholars believe that frankincense was presented as a symbol of Jesus' priestly role.

Frankincense, native to India, Arabia, and northern Africa, is often referred to as "liquid gold" or the "King of oils." Frankincense is obtained from the Boswellia tree, which grows in hot climates, can grow out of solid rock, and produces a thick resin. The trees, which usually grow on the mountain side, are scored to release the frankincense. The Hebrew word "labonah", which means "white", is referring to the color of the gum-like resin that comes from the Boswellia tree. The first cut is the purest form of frankincense and frequently referred to as "tears."

In the book of Exodus 30:34, Moses is instructed by the Lord to mix frankincense with spices to make incense. The incense was to then be placed in the tabernacle, where our Lord was to meet with Moses.

Frankincense is still a popular oil and has many properties that are beneficial. It promotes a feeling of satisfaction, peace, and relaxation. It is also used to improve breathing, boost immune function, treat dry skin, used in salve for wounds, reverse the signs of aging, and used as eyeliner by Egyptian women.

Prayer: Dear Father: We thank you for providing us with the wonderful gift of frankincense and its many healing properties. Help us to remember that Jesus is not only our Savior, but also High Priest. Guide us to praise Him, during this holiday season and help us to remember the reason we celebrate Christmas. In Jesus name we pray.
Amen.

Scripture: Esther 2:12

As we see in today's scripture myrrh was used as part of the beauty treatment for women in ancient times. It was also used as a cure for leprosy, but commonly it was used as embalming oil. Myrrh was used in a variety of ways from beauty product to medicine, anointing oil, and incense. It was used at home and in religious services and burials.

Myrrh was one of the three gifts given to Jesus by the wise men. It is believed that myrrh symbolized Jesus' death. It is a reminder to us that He gave Himself in death, to take away our sin. We also see it mentioned in Mark 15:23, when Jesus was dying on the cross. He was offered wine mixed with myrrh (it was believed to stop the pain), yet he did not drink it. This is just another example of how Jesus did not expect special treatment.

Myrrh is obtained from Arabia, Abyssinia, and India. In Arabic, the word "myrrh," means "bitter". It has a dry, earthy aroma and is a fragrant gum resin that comes from a small bushy tree. Small cuts are made in the bark and the gum resin is allowed to drip. It is collected and stored for three months, until it hardens. It is then crushed and mixed with oil to make perfume.

Myrrh is still being used to improve heart rate, stress levels, blood pressure, breathing, and immune function. It is also used to calm emotions and is frequently used for meditation.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, We worship You during this holiday season. Teach us to pray and worship You during all our busy times. Help us to be kind to one another and share the Truth of Your sacrifice for us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Scripture: Revelation 19:1-10

“Wait! It’s almost time!” “Not yet, be patient.” “It’s coming!” These words seem like torture, especially as a child. I remember as a child that the time between my birthday at the end of October until Christmas seemed like more than an eternity and the last few days before Christmas were that eternity doubled. Expectations were really high and my ability to wait got harder and harder. But, as an adult the perspective has changed and seems like Christmas gets here the day after my birthday.

As high as that Christmas expectation is, there is an expectation that rings louder in my heart every year. That expectation is the second coming of Jesus and it will be far different from His first coming to Bethlehem.

Jesus will not be a baby in a manger, but He will be a valiant warrior and loving groom coming for His bride and in her defense, striking down the cold-hearted, hate-filled opposition. He will come when most of us least expect it, whisking us away with Him until His final return when we will stand with Him and watch as He rights all the wrongs, fixes all that is broken, and creates a New Heaven and a New Earth. All of this is far above our current and limited understanding; it will be the place we long to be.

Bill Gaither wrote a song, that brings me to tears just thinking about the words and when someone sings it my heart wants more and more for it to be the reality in which we live. Some of those words are:

No more night, no more pain,
No more tears, never crying again.
And praises to the great, “I am”
We will live in the light of the risen Lamb.

Jesus can take you where you are right now and fill you with this glorious expectation, but you must first decide how you will respond to the Baby in the manger, Who came to give you life eternal. Will you give yourself to Him, or just see Him as Christmas ornamentation?

Prayer: Father, thank You for giving us the great gift of the Savior born in a manger, but would you grant us the excitement of what is yet to come and live in the light of this Great Expectation. Call Your children to You today because of our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Scripture: Romans 12:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 8:5

Here I am at last—it's Christmas Eve and the kids are all in bed. Maybe I can slow down and think for a minute before the great reveal tomorrow. I've checked everything off my list but there seems to be something missing.

As my body relaxes and quiet settles in around me, I hear this still small voice. I have heard it before but in the past few weeks things have been so crazy, so I have ignored the voice. But now that I am quiet and really listening, I hear the voice of Jesus ask, "What are you giving Me for Christmas?"

The words nearly knock me out of my chair and the tears flood down my face. I checked everything off my list, but how could I have forgotten the most important person in this season. Christmas wouldn't be Christmas, without Christ and I haven't even considered a gift.

So, what will I give Jesus this year? Christina Rossetti said it perfectly:

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I'd do my part.
Yet what can I give Him?
Give Him my heart.

But this time I hear Jesus say, "Do you love me more than these?" and my response can only be to give my heart as a living sacrifice, with total allegiance to my Savior.

How about you? What are you giving Jesus this year?

Prayer: O God, give me a humbled heart that I can in turn give to Jesus for Christmas this year. Help me remember through tonight and the family celebration tomorrow that the best gift I have to give is all of myself to all of You.
Amen

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-24; Luke 1-2; and Matthew 2:1-18

This is the big day, highly celebrated in many places around the world. Unfortunately for many of those places Christmas is only secular and to most of the people Jesus is an unknown. This is also the case in the United States. So your challenge this year is how will you put Jesus in the middle of Your celebration?

Here are a few ideas to start your creative juices flowing.

1. It's not truly a Christ-centered Christmas without reading the story from the Bible. The scriptures are listed above. Be sure to read them all yourself and choose what to read to the family.
2. A very popular idea for families with children is to have a birthday cake for Jesus, candles and all, accompanied with the birthday song.
3. Early in the month take Jesus out of the manger and let the children search for Jesus first thing on Christmas morning. A very cute variation of this that I've been told sets the tone for opening gifts is to wrap the baby Jesus in a package and let it be the first package opened. We all need the reminder that Jesus is the best gift.
4. Ahead of time make Christmas cookies and put several in a bag for the neighbors. Let the children make birth announcements with sayings like, "A King is Born", "The Savior has Come", "Be Happy, Jesus has Arrived" or any other things you can think of. Put an announcement with each bag of cookies and deliver them to the neighbors or maybe senior care facility sometime on Christmas afternoon.
5. Cut large stars out of yellow paper and put one at everyone's place for Christmas Dinner. Provide pencils and ask each person to write one thing from this past year that God has done for him/her. I've been told you will need extra stars.
6. This one was a new idea to me. Set a place at Christmas Dinner for Jesus and then open or at least unlock the door, weather permitting, to welcome Him in. This comes from a Jewish tradition at Passover where a cup of wine is set out for Elijah to come because some believe that Elijah will be the one to announce the coming of Messiah. But, as we know the Messiah has come and we welcome Him to dinner.
7. No matter what you do, include prayers of praise in the celebration.

Prayer: Hallelujah! We are blest above all people. Great is our Lord and King and greatly to be praised. Now and forever we sing and pray.
Amen