

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



The Heart of Christmas

PREPARING OUR HEARTS FOR CHRISTMAS
IN ADVENT

(Image of Candle before each reading to set it apart)

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

WEEK I: HOPE

FOR ADULTS:

Meditate on this verse the week:

“God gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who HOPE in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” Isaiah 40:29–31

THIS WEEK WE LIT THE CANDLE OF HOPE IN WORSHIP.

You are encouraged to light the candle of Hope on your Advent Wreath at home.

Sometimes duty is more the name of the game during Christmas than hope. Life can be exhausting anyway, especially when we have multiple agendas that we are responsible for. Simply juggling family, work (volunteer or paid) and church can be enough to sometimes push us over the edge. Then add the demands of Christmas to this equation and who knows what mood we'll be in at the end of the day! Yet in the scripture above we are told that when we hope in the Lord he will renew our strength. How does that

happen I often wonder. All I need is another scoop of strength here and there, and I'd be a poster child of Christian virtue. I get the tired and weary part of this passage - not so much the renewing my strength part. However, the truth is that if I put my HOPE in what God will do in this season (not so much in my own efforts) the strength starts to flow back into my life. I can surrender to HOPE and expectancy realizing that God is with me - the meaning of Emmanuel. I was not in charge of making the first Christmas happen, and I am not in charge of making the 2014th Christmas happen either. Christmas is all about what God does, meeting us right where we are. I can surrender to HOPE realizing that God will meet me in my exhaustion and frenzy. I can ask him to give me a sense of and inner strength to see Christmas through the lenses of faith.

PRAYER: Lord, I don't want to be in charge of this season. I want to surrender to your presence that meets me right where I am. Help me to walk through this season with peace, looking forward with HOPE to experiencing your presence in my life - you who are with me always and meet me in whatever state I am in. In Jesus' Name...AMEN

FOR CHILDREN:

Read the above Scripture, Isaiah 40:29-31

What do you hope will happen this Christmas?

(make a list)

Does hoping that good things will happen make you happy?

What does it mean to hope in the Lord?

God has many good things in store for us. At Christmas the good thing he has in store for us is letting us know that Jesus is coming! We can look forward to this and it makes us happy in our hearts.

Dear Lord: Thanks so much for Jesus coming to be born. I am excited as I look forward to Christmas. I am hoping in you.

Amen.

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT WEEK 2: PEACE

Meditate on this verse for the week.

“My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, give I to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” John 14:27

THIS WEEK WE LIT THE CANDLE OF PEACE IN WORSHIP. You are encouraged to light the candle of peace on your advent wreath at home.

Often we think of peace as the absence of something; the absence of war, or anxiety, activity or conflict.

Shalom is the Jewish word for peace and it actually means the presence of something - not the absence of conflict. It means the presence of wholeness; a sense of well-being and fulfillment. When we say, “I just want some peace!” we mean “give me some space without all this rushing around or conflict!” We don’t mean “Lord give me a sense of fulfillment in you that makes me whole.” However, that is the meaning of peace in the Bible.

In the scripture above, Jesus is saying to the disciples “My fulfillment and wholeness as a person I give to

you. Not as the world gives, give I to you. Let not your heart be troubled neither let it be afraid.” There is so much fear in the world, but when I am whole and fulfilled my fear is gone. I know that no matter what happens God is the source of my wholeness, and my fulfillment. I am able to rest securely in him. This makes sense too when we look at the lives of the disciples. They were whole and fulfilled in the presence of Christ, but their lives were anything but peaceful in the traditional sense. They lived in prisons, and were martyred and persecuted.

When the angels shouted “Peace on earth” they were shouting out to the world “Wholeness! Fulfillment! Completeness on earth – through Jesus!”

Perhaps you can think of some ways to make Christmas more of a time of wholeness and fulfillment for you and your family. It could mean more time in prayer, or more time savoring the small things that make life so wonderful and cause us to look up to the One who gave us Jesus and whisper “Thank you” a little more often. Or even remembering to donate a certain percentage to a special project for those need.

PRAYER. LORD, help me to savor peace, not as the absence of activity and conflict as that would mean I would have to leave this world and lock myself away. Rather make this Christmas full of You, and bring

fulfillment and wholeness to me as your gift. In Jesus Name, Amen.

FOR CHILDREN:

Have you ever been really super hungry?

What did you eat?

How did you feel after you were all filled up?

Jesus said that our spirits (the invisible part of us) are hungry for him. He told us that he is the only one who can satisfy that hunger by filling us with his presence.

Have you ever felt filled up with Jesus? When you sang? When you prayed? When you read the Bible?

Share that experience.

PRAYER: Jesus thank you that you fill us up with yourself, and that is why you came at Christmas. You came to show us that you could fill up a human body with grace and truth. Fill me up today Jesus! Amen.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT WEEK 3: LOVE

FOR ADULTS:

Meditate on this verse this week:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved.” John 3:16-17

THIS WEEK WE LIT THE CANDLE OF LOVE IN WORSHIP.

You are encouraged to light the candle of Love on your Advent Wreath at home.

In the ancient Palestine of Jesus' day, there were three languages that were routinely spoken. There was Hebrew, (which became a dead language until revived in modern times), Koine Greek, (which has been replaced by contemporary Greek), and Aramaic (which is now actually being threatened with extinction by ISIS).

Still, nothing can ever threaten the most important language employed by Christ--the language of God's agape love.

In communicating His message to the world, Jesus went beyond mere words. By willingly coming to earth, Jesus became the incarnate expression of God's love.

Even then, hatred, violence and persecution attempted to silence the message of God's love by killing its messenger - both when Jesus was a child and Herod sought to kill him, and on the cross when his enemies thought they had won. The brutality of those who tried to destroy Christ only served to fulfill God's plan. Evil couldn't stomp out love. Hate only served to accelerate its spread. Instead of being "overcome by evil," love overcame "evil with good" (Romans 12:21). God's love, we are assured in Scripture, "endures forever" (Psalm 118:1). The language of Jesus--God's agape love--cannot be destroyed.

For us it is so important that the language we speak this Christmas not be the language of frenzy, or routine or activity for activity's sake. The language that we speak must be the language of love, even in a culture that pulls us toward the language of materialism, busyness and preoccupation. Maybe this Christmas the language of love for you would be allowing yourself to be present to another without distraction. Or allowing yourself to be present to God more fully so that *you can receive his love*. Agape love is from everlasting to everlasting. May we all learn to fluent in agape love.

Prayer: Agape love is your kind of love O Lord. When we experience your love we are changed. We look at

the world through eyes of compassion and we love all people. Give us the ability to communicate, as well as to receive, your kind of love this Christmas. Amen.

FOR CHILDREN: Read Scripture (John 3:16)

How do you know when someone loves you?

What if someone said they loved you, but then did things that were mean. Would you believe their words?

What kinds of things can we DO to show others that we love them?

God didn't just say that he loved us with words. He sent Jesus to show us that through action. Jesus came and acted out love every day he lived on earth.

Dear Lord Help me to love others by doing acts of love. I want to be like you. AMEN

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT WEEK I: JOY

FOR ADULTS:

Meditate on this verse the week:

*"The angel said to (the shepherds) "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of **great joy** that will be for all the people. Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."* Luke 2:9-11

THIS WEEK WE LIT THE JOY CANDLE IN WORSHIP. You are encouraged to light the candle of JOY on your Advent Wreath at home.

Mark Speckman was born without hands. For many people, that disability could cause great embarrassment and become an excuse for underachieving. Not for Mark. Without hands, Mark played high school football, and then went on to play middle linebacker at Azusa Pacific University in Southern California. He earned an honorable mention for All-American honors in 1976.

One day, when Mark was still a college student, two kids came up to him in the supermarket. The kids exclaimed, "Hey, mister! Where's your hands!?"

Mark said, "Oh no! I was looking at the cereal boxes and I must have set them down over there." Sure enough the kids dashed over to the cereal boxes and started looking for his hands. Mark could hardly

contain himself. Then he said, "No, wait! I was washing my hands in the bathroom and set them on the counter."

Isn't that a great response? Mark chooses to have joy in his life rather than focus on his circumstances. He has never let his disability hold him back. He can still write, type, use a cell phone, drive, and play racquetball, and he even played the trombone in high school.

For us as Christians joy goes beyond circumstances. Joy is the melody that keeps playing throughout all of life's challenges; its ups and downs. Joy is the beat of expectation that keeps our thoughts bright through each day. Joy is a gift of God. One look and shepherds saw the source of all joy lying in a manger. The angels told the shepherds "*behold I bring you good news of GREAT joy which shall be to all people*". Not just a little dribble of joy trickling into our lives but great joy! May we become well acquainted with God's joy this Christmas that transcends all circumstances.

FOR CHILDREN: Read scripture above

J is for Jesus

O is for Opening our hearts to him

Y is for Yearning for more of him!

What does it spell?

JOY!!

With Jesus in our heart we can be filled with joy even when hard things happen. We can know that God is with us in and through it all.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, come and fill my heart with you joy, just like you filled the shepherds hearts with joy when the angels told them about Jesus. **AMEN**

DECEMBER 24: CHRISTMAS EVE LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

Merry Christmas!

Read the following together as a family and have a wonderful time celebrating the birth of Christ! Point out if you have children that just as the magi brought gifts to Jesus so we celebrate by giving gifts now. But the greatest gift we celebrate is Jesus himself!

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem² 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.”

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When 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. ⁵“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶“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.’^[b]”

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸He 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.”

⁹After 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. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.
MATTHEW 2:1-12