



Advent

for Restless Hearts

*Christmas devotions for
anyone feeling beaten up,
broken down or weary
from the stresses of life*

J.C. Newton

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DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this devotional to all the restless hearts with whom I have grown to know and love over the course of my adult life. It was the graceful providence of God that first brought us together and the faithful love of God that helped us navigate the tricky waters of this life. I also dedicate this work to my amazing wife, Shannon, for her patient love during the revision and, often, the rewriting of my earlier Advent devotional, the core of which was included in this book. Her personal contributions can sometimes be found in the reflection section each day.

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Advent for Restless Hearts



INTRODUCTION

Christmas is easily the most beautiful of holidays here in the Western World. There is amazing beauty to be seen all around us in the form of green garland and red bows, evergreen trees wearing tinsel and ornaments, and those mesmerizing candles and lights adorning houses and public squares. When the Christmas season descends upon each town things suddenly seem cheery and bright.

But the holidays — especially the winter ones — can also be times of great pain and sadness for many people. All it takes is a bad memory or a heartbreak to send some into a spiral of loneliness and depression. Restlessness is always a simple thought or feeling away during this season.

I'll always remember my first winter as a pastor. I served as the associate minister at a small church in North Texas, a congregation that I had first grown to know and love as a church member and Sunday school teacher in the years prior to coming on staff. We had

one lady in our church, Jan, who had lost her husband of thirty-some-odd years that summer. Jan had a really neat personality. Always upbeat and outgoing, she was a foundation stone of our church. She and her late husband had been among the fellowship's formation group and she never lacked an opinion on anything we church leaders tried to change.

Jan was so upbeat that I got used to her smiling at me and chatting about this or that. But her first winter without her husband, Jim, was among the hardest of her life. We were together in small group — a bible study that met outside of the church building during the week. During our group's annual Christmas party I noticed a dramatic change in Jan. Gone were the smiles. She was quiet. And during our prayer time she shared with us — for the first time — that she was really struggling with facing this first Christmas without Jim. She was depressed. She felt alone, despite that fact her children and grandchildren lived close by. She was experiencing the brokenness that hits many of us during the holidays.

Much like Jan, restless hearts have trouble finding peace and hope during the holidays. A “restless heart” is anyone who has trouble finding spiritual and emotional rest because of ongoing brokenness or pain in their lives. Sometimes it is pain associated with relationships or trauma. Other times it is disillusionment from seeing the world around them — jobs, neighborhoods, governments — disintegrate in ways they fear and dread. And sometimes this stress and hurt sidetracks them from seeing God for who He really is and turning to Him in desperate faith. They often stop walking with Jesus and that cessation makes their restlessness even worse.

Restless hearts need hope. Restless hearts need peace. Restless hearts need to see God at work in their lives and in the world around them. They need to know His renewing power. And they need to feel His presence around them.

I believe Christmas is the perfect time of year to focus the restless heart on the presence and work of Jesus Christ. Take the name “Emmanuel,” for example; a nickname for Jesus that appears on religious holiday decor and means, “God With Us.” Jesus is Emmanuel — God made man — who left His high position of divine glory to humble Himself, become one of us, experience life as a human, and die as a human so that the broken pieces of our lives might be made whole through faith in Him. And His living life as a human means He experienced all the trials, temptations and pains of living life in a fallen world.

He knows us. He “gets” us.

His family disowned Him. His hometown kicked Him out! He lived in financial poverty. He never owned his own house. His government was crooked, too! So were the religious leaders. He lost his best friend. His other “bestie” denied he knew Him three times. He was constantly misunderstood and argued with. People tried many times to kill Him, and one of those times He laid down His life and experienced a rejection that led to death. Because he experienced this pain and rejection, He can fully know the restlessness that you and I experience today.

The Advent Celebration

One of the great Christian celebrations at Christmastime is the ancient observance of Advent — a four-week period leading up to Christmas Day. Its purpose was to help people focus on the person and work of Jesus, preparing their hearts for the joy of Christmas Day. The name “Advent” comes from a Latin word for “the coming” and its origins are steeped in the mystery of history. Some form of it goes back to the 4th Century. Throughout the centuries since, Advent has been observed in both churches and private homes. I’ve found that the Advent celebration is a great way to refocus the restless heart on Jesus and to be filled with the light, peace, joy and hope of Christ during a time when otherwise it would be easy to be miserable.

One of the great things about the Advent celebration is its use of visual aides to help us direct our focus to Jesus. The advent wreath is, in itself, a storybook of the first coming of Jesus. A green wreath is used to symbolize the eternal existence of Jesus and the eternal life He brings through faith. Candles of differing numbers and colors are used to represent the time of his coming to earth and aspects of His divinity and his humanity. The presence of light, from the candles, signifies the holiness of Jesus and the light He brought into a world darkened by sin and brokenness. As the candles are lit each week, the light grows stronger until... on Christmas Day... the final candle is lit and the light of Christ fills the room. It is marvelous!

I wrote this advent devotional to be a help for all who need to focus their hearts and minds on Jesus every day during the holidays. It is a four-week study of the person and work of Jesus. It is intended to help you — with a devotional each day — remember

who Jesus is and find emotional and spiritual strength from what He can do in your heart. Each week has a theme. And each day has a little “liturgy” for you to follow. A liturgy is simply a structured way of worship. Each day has a candle to light, Bible verses to read, Christmas carols to sing (or, if you despise singing, ponder quietly in your heart...), a short devotional you can read out loud or silently, and a prayer to pray.

Do you have a family? Are you alone? Is it just you and a partner or friend? Whatever your life circumstance, I hope this devotional benefits you.

If you have a family with kids, I recommend going through the devotional together, maybe at the dinner table. Keep your wreath in the middle of the table and take turns reading (if possible). Maybe you can even assign different sections of each day’s liturgy to a different family member.

If you are alone (as I was for many Christmases), I recommend that you read it at night, after your busy day is complete and before you lay your head to sleep. That way the candle light is most effective. Another option is to go through it in the early morning, before you head off to the stress of work and daily life.

If it is just two or three of you, pick a time at home that has the least amount of stress. For the last few years, my wife and I have gone through the daily Advent routine every night around 10 p.m. We turn off the television and any noisy appliances. With only a few lights on in the living room, we kneel by the Advent wreath, light the week’s candle, and take turns reading.

Any way you choose to use this devotional, it is my sincere and hope-filled prayer that my words and the Holy Spirit's work will strengthen your heart this Christmas season, bringing the beauty you see in the decorations outside deep into the restless places of your heart.

Be God's this Christmas!

— J.C. Newton (John)



To Prepare for Advent

There are a few items you will need to gather and set up before beginning the Advent celebration. Here is a brief list and instructions:

- ✦ One green wreath. This can be fake or real, cheap or expensive. Both the color green and circle of the wreath represent Jesus. The circle reflects the fact that Jesus had no beginning and will have no end. He is eternal, just like the line of the circle which goes on and on. The green represents the eternal life that He brings. Just as evergreen foliage continues through the winter, the green wreath means that cold and death have not defeated all beauty but, instead, spring will come and bring with it new life.
- ✦ Five candles. Three of the candles need to be purple in color, one needs to be either red or pink and the last one needs to be

white. The purple candles represent the royalty and deity of Jesus. He was born a descendant of King David and as High King of Heaven, He is honored with the color of royalty, which in the ancient world was purple. The pink or red candle represents His humanity. He chose to take on flesh and blood and become human — without ceasing to be fully God. The white candle is called the “Christ Candle,” and is only lit on Christmas Day to celebrate the arrival of Jesus. It represents His holiness and purity because He came into the world (and remained) innocent of sin.

✦ A bible or bible app. Some of the verses are printed out for you but most of the readings are meant to be done out of the bible. The translation does not matter. I primarily used the New International Version (NIV), New American Standard Bible (NASB), The Message, and New English Translation (NET Bible) versions. There are a lot of free bible apps available for electronic devices and all have verse search features. Check your device’s app store.

✦ An open heart. Life outside these pages may be stressful and hard but having an open heart to God is essential to letting this Christmas season be one of hope and peace. Look for God at work around you and inside you. Listen for His voice. Know that He loves you and wants you to be filled with His life-giving hope.



THE FIRST WEEK
THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

The Power of Light

*"I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His word I put my hope.
My soul waits for the LORD more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning."*

Our Liturgy (order of activity)



- Light one purple candle on your advent wreath.
- Read Psalm 130:5-6, Isaiah 9:2-3 & John 1:1-5
- Sing "The First Noel"
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

It is not very easy to envy a nightwatchman.

Back in ancient times, nightwatchmen would be the ones to whom everyone in a town entrusted their lives while they slept. When the sun went down, the watchmen would be on guard high up in the watchtowers, above the city walls, and sitting on benches at the town gates. As the night would descend, they would stand increasingly vigilant, surveying the countryside for any signs of movement. Be they friend or foe, the nightwatchmen would treat each incoming soul with caution.

But humans weren't the watchman's greatest foe. One person can only do so much harm. The watchman's mortal enemy was night. Darkness. The cloak of secrecy.

Any tent camper knows first-hand how important the dawn is to one's peace of mind. The first few nights I spent in Oklahoma's Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge were some of the most intimidating nights I've ever lived through. One third of the refuge is fence-free, meaning the animals have free range at all times, including among the RV's, vans and tents in the developed campground. Creatures of all ilk roam the night. A tent is merely one layer of thin fabric. Some creatures have claws. And teeth. And are ill tempered! When I laid down in my tent that first night I was fully aware of how vulnerable I was. I'll never forget it. All night I heard the rustling of leaves outside my tent. I heard grunting and snorting and sinister chuckling (ok, I made that last one up). I felt the wind blow

against my tent. At least, I think it was the wind! It was a miserable night. I couldn't wait for the morning to come. I prayed for morning. All... night... long.

All around us it is easy to see the darkness present in this world. Wickedness, greed, selfishness, cold-blooded violence... the darkness can quickly overwhelm a soul. But there is hope! Isaiah 9:2 predicted that those living in darkness would see a great light. Jesus was that light. And when you look at His life in the Gospel books you can see that He broke the darkness that was present in His land. He healed sick people, taught the restless how to live a life of purpose, and forgave the sins of those who were longing to be free from their guilt. He still does the same today. Our world is not completely dark. There is light.

Here's to the sun!

REFLECT:

The news every day seems to be filled with images and stories of darkness and evil and hurt. But can you name three stories of "good news" that you have seen or heard recently? It doesn't have to be news from around the world. What about in your life?

PRAY:

"Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world. We who have sat in darkness have seen a great light, the light of Jesus Christ, our salvation. We give You praise for He who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen."

Monday, Week 1

Being Drawn to the Light

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
“For behold, darkness will cover the earth
And deep darkness the peoples;
But the Lord will rise upon you
And His glory will appear upon you.
“Nations will come to your light,
And kings to the brightness of your rising. (Isaiah 60)*

Our Liturgy

- Light one purple candle on your advent wreath.
- Read Isaiah 60:1-3, Matthew 5:14-16
- Sing “We Three Kings” or “O Holy Night”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close



I love Christmas lights. Whenever I see neighbors putting up their lit displays, I get excited. Determined not to be “that house” on the block who refuses to decorate, every year I boldly attempt a meek display of LED lights and garland outside my house. There’s just something about light and color and beauty in the darkness that makes my heart rejoice. How do Christmas lights make you feel?

The tradition of using lights as a celebration happens in nearly every culture of the world, even in places like China and India, where lights are placed on roofs or inside paper bags. Light shining in the darkness makes a statement that darkness will not prevail in our world. When we display anything from a garage security light to a tree accent lamp, we are proclaiming that we have the power to conquer the dark. Therefore, the act behind displaying Christmas lights is related to the celebration of Jesus as the Light of the World.

Jesus was born into a world that seemed quite dark. Israel was being

occupied and ruled by Rome and, despite the overall stability of the Roman Empire, the Jewish people wanted to be free. For 1,400 years generations of people held onto the hope of numerous prophecies that a savior would come to rescue the nation from its troubles and establish peace. This kingly figure would usher in an age of enlightenment with God's authority.

The prophet Isaiah talks about this special person being a "light" that nations will want to come and see. Rulers will hear of Him from afar and come to the land. Isaiah 60:1-3 is a prophecy of the wise men — magi from the eastern world who came to see the young king because they saw His light in the sky and wanted to worship Him. And people around the world are still drawn to Jesus for His light — for His ability to set the sinner free from sin's bondage.

Are there places in your heart or your daily life that need the light of Jesus? Why not pray that He will take those dim places and shine His light so that you might be relieved of any guilt, shame or worry? Are you willing to let responsibility for those areas go so that Jesus might redeem them and make them whole?

REFLECT:

Throughout the Bible Jesus is referred to as "light." What does this mean to you? Recall how and when Jesus' light first shined in your story.

PRAY:

"Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world. We who have sat in darkness have seen a great light, the light of Jesus Christ, our salvation. We give You praise for He who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen."

Learning to See the Light

*"I am the Lord, I have called You in righteousness...
And I will appoint You as a covenant to the people,
As a light to the nations,
To open blind eyes,
To bring out prisoners from the dungeon
And those who dwell in darkness from the prison." (Isaiah 42)*

Our Liturgy



- Light one purple candle on your advent wreath.
- Read Isaiah 42:1-9; John 9:1-7; Luke 2:8-14
- Sing "Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light" or "Amazing Grace"
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

I don't know what it feels like to be blind. Do you?

The closest I came to blindness was at summer camp decades ago. I've always had terrible vision and I can barely remember a time during which I didn't have to wear glasses. One time at camp I was swimming with my cabinmates in the camp lake, diving off a floating platform. Not thinking about my metal and glass appendage, I heartily dove into the water like a dolphin and... came back to the surface minus one pair of spectacles. I remember calling home to tell my parents but there was nothing they could do. It was day two of a six-day camp and I was stuck with blurry vision and disorientation for the rest of the week. It was miserable! I couldn't see where I was going. There were rocks everywhere. I couldn't even see my food (which was probably a good thing) and I had to reach out for walls to gain balance and lift my knees high to avoid tripping hazards.

Jesus came to be the Light of the World. As Isaiah prophesied, people walking in darkness would see the great light. And in Isaiah 42, we see glimpse of the mission of Jesus in this dark world. God the Father speaks to His Son and says,

"And I will appoint you as a covenant to the people,

as a light to the nations,
to open blind eyes,
to bring out prisoners from the dungeon
and those who dwell in darkness from the prison.”

Darkness is a metaphor for sin and judgment in the bible. Light reveals truth and stands for righteousness. Jesus came to render the darkness powerless and clear the vision of those who were impaired by sin. His mission was to make the blind (in the literal and the sinful sense) see the truth of who God is and of who they are. In John’s gospel, Jesus said, “I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in Me should stay in darkness (John 12:46).”

And that’s exactly what happens when a person comes to faith in Jesus. The good news we celebrate each Advent season is that there is a Savior who restores sight to the blind. His light can illuminate the dark places of our restless hearts and free us from the captivity of guilt, shame and sin. Are you willing to let Jesus give you sight and free your heart?

REFLECT:

Have you ever had tripped over something in the dark? Did it hurt? What kind of help and clarity does light bring?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world. We who have sat in darkness have seen a great light, the light of Jesus Christ, our salvation. We give You thanks and praise for He who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

Light That Exposes the Darkness

Everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed...

Our Liturgy



- Light one purple candle on your advent wreath.
- Read John 3:19-21; Ephesians 5:11-14; Psalm 112:1-4
- Sing: “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

Just about every one of us wants the bad guy to “get it” in the end. A movie or book or play seems incomplete or, perhaps, wrongfully manipulative, if the hero or heroine doesn’t triumph over evil and light overtake dark. In the great movies of fiction, there always has to be a moment when our favorite hobbit Frodo throws the ring of power into the fire of Mordor, or when the wizard Voldemort gets bested by the good guys of Hogwarts. Or, in a re-telling of history, the heroic gladiator Maximus kills the evil emperor Commodus before succumbing to his own wounds. We just really want the bad guys to get caught and punished for their evil deeds!

Justice is still an ideal longed for in this world of sin.

This Christmas season we are not just drawn to the light of Christ through Christmas carols and imaginative light displays, but we are also called to see how His light can expose the evil deeds of darkness so they can be rightly judged. Jesus was unique among humans. As God, he could look into the hearts of men and know their motives (John 2:24-25). The Light could expose the darkness of our hearts by merely looking at us! Jesus Himself said, “everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.” And repeatedly during His ministry on earth He exposed the true motives of those who had problems with Him.

Much like our first Advent candle immediately adds light to the room when it is lit, so it is when we act out of God’s truth and justice to expose

evil deeds in this world. Paul wrote this command to the Church, “Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.” For, he says, when darkness is exposed to the light it ceases to be dark. It has been destroyed and in its place is light!

We often are quick to judge people for not being aggressive enough to fight darkness in this world but hesitant to get involved ourselves! The real question you need to ask yourself is, “How am I stepping into the darkness with the light of Christ to expose it?” You don’t need to start with a major world problem, like poverty or human trafficking (though those are major evils in the world) but start with your local community. What darkness do you see around you? How can you shed the light of Christ into that darkness?

When you live your life reflecting the light of Jesus, you will carry his light everywhere you go. Be just, knowing good from evil. Be good and kind to others. And be a person of truth. When you do these things the bad guys cannot win.

REFLECT:

Who is the hero or heroine in your favorite movie or book? Who is the bad person? Do the good people win at the end of the story?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world. We who have sat in darkness have seen a great light, the light of Jesus Christ, our salvation. We give You thanks and praise for He who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

Light That Never Ends

The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light...

Our Liturgy



- Light one purple candle on your advent wreath.
- Read Isaiah 60:19-20; John 5:35-36; Rev. 21:1-5
- Sing: “O Sing a Song of Bethlehem” or “O Holy Night”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

One of the things we tend to take for granted in our super-modern society is the light bulb.

Think about it. With the power of the light bulb we get up in the mornings, staring at our digital alarm clocks until we decide to arise and turn on our bedroom or bathroom lights. We read our morning news by the power of the bulb and jump into our cars where the car’s LED clock tells us exactly how late we are. We office under the power of the light bulb and drive home at night using its darkness-piercing power. Indeed, there are fewer moments more terrifying than a nighttime power outage.

But light bulbs have at least one major flaw — they burn out. Even the most expensive LED bulbs will eventually die. Sometimes they die with a pop, other times with a sizzle, but they always die.

One of the neatest features of the Advent wreath set-up is its emphasis on light. It starts with one candle and then grows to two. Then three candles burn at the same time and then four. By Christmas Day all five candles are burning and the light of the Advent wreath is at its height.

Our Lord will always stand as light where darkness exists. To believe in Him and follow Him will always be the best choice. Decisions become clearer, obstacles disappear, and fears fade away in the light of Christ. And His light is not a temporary thing, not like the “light” of John the Baptist.

I love Jesus’ words in John 5, when He talks about His authority and the authority of John. He says that John’s light — his power, influence and discernment — burned like a lamp and the people enjoyed it. But John’s

lamp burned out, just like one of my light bulbs. Jesus' light, though, would always burn like an everlasting light.

In Isaiah 60 and in Revelation 21 we see the light of the Lord shining even in heaven, where darkness does not exist.

The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light...

Even when we are in heaven, He is still lighting our way. What a glorious picture!

REFLECT:

What was the worst power outage that you have experienced? How long did it last? How did it make you feel when the lights first went out? Were you relieved when the power finally came back on?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world. We who have sat in darkness have seen a great light, the light of Jesus Christ, our salvation. We give You thanks and praise for He who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

Light You Should Not Hide

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Our Liturgy



- Light one purple candle on your advent wreath.
- Read Matthew 5:14-16; Luke 2:15-18, 36-38
- Sing “This Little Light of Mine”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

It’s hard to hide a light.

During World War II, the cities of Europe practiced a defense strategy called “blackout” in which citizens and businesses were ordered to shut off their lights at night. It was the first war in which airplanes could destroy entire cities, and 20 years of technology had turned the Red Baron’s flimsy biplane of World War I into a 10-ton metal bomber, capable of raining explosives on any city within a 300-mile radius.

So, in hopes of avoiding bombing or invasion, the cities would turn out their lights at sunset. If the enemy could see a target, they could destroy that target, and just one light could give away the location of a city or an individual. Even New York City and places on the East Coast of America practiced blackouts during the War.

Jesus said a city on a hill could not be hidden. I’d say it’s the same for a city from the air. It’s there for all to see, day and night.

You could place a flame under a bowl or basket but the light would just go out. You can’t revive it again without another match or flint. Also, if a light is under a bowl or basket, what good does it do? You can’t see around you very well. Nor can others see you.

Jesus is the Light of the World, and since we have been called to walk in His Light and reflect it we need to make sure that others see the Light in us. We are that city on a hill or that household light. We were made to shine the Light of Jesus Christ so that the world may see and turn to God in praise. Jesus said,

“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

We were made to interact with one another every day as we go about our lives and each conversation is an opportunity to share the Light of Jesus. Is someone having a bad day? Cheer them up! Does someone need encouragement or affirmation? Build them up! If anyone asks, let your faith be known. It is in these simple conversations that the light of Christ can be shared.

REFLECT:

Light is noticeable! And sometimes even makes us a target. In what situations are you most tempted to hide the light within you? In what situations is this most easy for you?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world. We who have sat in darkness have seen a great light, the light of Jesus Christ, our salvation. We give You thanks and praise for He who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

Light for Our Relationships

The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness...

Our Liturgy



- Light one purple candle on your advent wreath.
- Read 1 John 1:5-7, 2:8-11
- Sing “Good Christian Men, Rejoice!”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

It’s never easy to love another human being, especially when we have a deep disagreement with them. One of the hardest things I endured as a minister was seeing one person in our church hold a grudge against another person. Sometimes the hurts were serious, like in the case of gossip, and other times they were frivolous, like when one person disagreed with another on what to serve for our annual Thanksgiving dinner. I saw congregants argue over the color and kind of carpet in our fellowship hall, the size of the bathrooms, and even about the importance of installing a water fountain! In some cases, the hurt was short-lived. In other cases, one party left the church completely.

Because Jesus is the Light of the World — and we are called to reflect His light in the darkest places of our societies — it is never right to reject and shun a brother or sister. If we turn against one another, we aren’t following Jesus. We are living as if the Light of Christ hasn’t ever penetrated our hearts. The lightbulb is off. The candle has been snuffed. We are, as the apostle John writes, “in the darkness.”

Human relationships are so often tricky and the emotional waters they swim in can flood over and drown our hearts. It has happened to me many times. Has it happened to you?

I wish that mediation or counseling was always able to heal rifts between Christians, but sometimes people just don’t want to live in the light. Their hearts are darkened and they would rather hold onto their hurts than accept any healing that is available. It’s very sad! And it is very much their choice. But it doesn’t have to be yours.

There are great benefits for our relationships when we walk in the Light of Jesus. As you follow Him, you will increasingly be better able to clearly see right from wrong. You will also see how God's grace not only affects your life but also how it can change others. Best yet, you can pray with a clear conscience for your brother or sister or friend — pray that they will step away from darkness. And always be sure to share with them the grace that was first shown to you by Him.

REFLECT:

Is there someone in your life who tends to dwell in the darkness of either sin or apathy towards God? What is one thing you can do to bring a little light into their life? Now think of one person who has hurt you in the past. Is there something you can do to reach out to them with the Light of Jesus this winter?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world. We who have sat in darkness have seen a great light, the light of Jesus Christ, our salvation. We give You thanks and praise for He who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

Advent for Restless Hearts



THE SECOND WEEK

THE PEACE OF CHRIST

Advent for Restless Hearts

The Peace of Christ

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; I do not give it to you as the world does.”

Our Liturgy (Order of Activity)



- Light two purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read John 14:27; Romans 12:17-18
- Sing “O Holy Night” or “Still, Still, Still”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

Today begins the second full week of Advent, a week in which we will celebrate the peace that Jesus Christ brought with His first coming and the peace that He will ultimately bring with His return to earth.

In a world of toil and trouble, when nation and ethnic groups are at unrest with one another, never has the peace of Christ been more needed. This world is crying out for peace! But only when Jesus, the King, reigns on the earth will the planet truly be at rest. This is an aspect of peace we look forward to when He returns.

However, as His ambassadors in the here and now, we can bring peace wherever we go each day. In Matthew 5, Jesus blessed the peacemakers. In Romans, the apostle Paul wrote: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” As the followers of Jesus, it is our role to be ambassadors of peace to the world around us. We don’t carry guns and swords to make people conform to rules of peace. We show peace in our interactions with strangers and we mediate peace among neighbors and friends.

But not only do we need the peace of Christ in the external affairs of life but also inside the heart. Even for those who already believe in Jesus. Just because we are saved does not mean our troubles will cease. In fact, they are likely to increase, for we have gained an enemy in the form of our sinful world. Christians hurt, too, for we still live in broken bodies in a broken world.

But Jesus said to His disciples in the Upper Room, “Peace I leave with

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you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful (John 14:27).” What Jesus was referring to was His peace given to us in our hearts by the Holy Spirit dwelling inside of us. We are always able to have internal peace if we choose it. Simply ask Him for it.

Because it is the Christmas season, a time to celebrate our Prince of Peace, let this be the time to start relying on our Prince for peace in your heart.

REFLECT:

In what part of your life do you most have a need for peace? Maybe in your marriage or singleness, your job, your family, your neighbor, your church, or your longing for justice. What do you think peace would look like if you had it? Can you imagine what it would feel like?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for your Son, Jesus Christ, who is the Prince of Peace. We who were once alienated from You by our sin have now been reconciled to You through the blood of Your Son. We give You thanks and praise in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

What Brings Peace?

He saw (Jerusalem) and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace!'

Our Liturgy



- Light two purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read Isaiah 9:6-7; Luke 19:41-42
- Sing “O Little Town of Bethlehem”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

We’re all looking for a little peace in our lives — from the mighty to the meek. We put up fences to make peace with the neighbors. We trim our lawns for peace with our HOA. We obey our bosses in order to have peace at work. And we look for the path of least resistance at home so we have peace within our own marriages and our own walls.

In Isaiah the prophet writes, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.”

But do we always want true peace from the Prince? Or are we looking for a “quick fix” for a squabble or conflict?

Fast-forward 33 years from the first Christmas morning.

“When He approached (Jerusalem), He saw the city and wept over it, saying, ‘If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes.’” (Luke 19:41-42)

When Jesus reached a hilltop south of Jerusalem, riding on the foal of a donkey, he saw the city walls, the temple, and the crowds gathered to welcome him as messiah and king. The crowd was excited to see Him. But his disposition was not one of joy and pride. It was sorrow. What troubled Him was that the people who lived in the city didn’t know what brought true peace to their lives. They were looking for a military and civic peace that didn’t include the Roman Empire. They wanted a revolution that brought independence.

You know, the world sees peace start at the end of a gun. Jesus brings

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peace to the recesses of our hearts. And from our hearts come our actions, and from peaceful actions comes peace in our world. But it starts with the work of Jesus in our hearts.

This Advent season, are you seeking true peace?

REFLECT:

When you hear the word, “peacemaker,” what images come to mind? What do peacemakers do? How do they bring peace? Today and tomorrow, look for ways to seek peace in your “circle of influence” (people you encounter in daily life).

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for your Son, Jesus Christ, who is the Prince of Peace. We who were once alienated from You by our sin have now been reconciled to You through the blood of Your Son. We give You thanks and praise in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

Tuesday, Week 2

Peace With God

“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in (Jesus), and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Our Liturgy



- Light two purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read Colossians 1:15-20; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
- Sing “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

The greatest peace that Jesus Christ brought with His first coming was the peace He earned through His death on the cross. Through faith in Jesus, sinners become saints and strangers become brothers and sisters.

This is the basic Gospel message: that Adam and Eve rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden and suffered physical and spiritual death as a result. Sin became part of the human condition from that point down through the generations. Every human being begins life in rebellion against his or her Creator. We are aliens; foreigners; strangers to God.

I’m reminded of the movie *Forrest Gump*, when Lieutenant Dan is saved from certain death by Forrest in the jungles of Vietnam. Dan had a fatalist wish — he wanted to die on the battlefield just like his ancestors — but Forrest messed up his plans. Dan turned his anger towards God and, in an iconic scene, is seen pointing his finger in anger against the Almighty during a hurricane, egging Him on to, essentially, destroy the angry soul. After the storm, Dan not only realized that God existed but that He wasn’t out to ruin his life. So, as Forrest narrates, “I guess Lieutenant Dan made peace with God or something.”

Apart from Jesus Christ we have no peace with God. The apostle Paul says in Colossians that even though God created us, we have been in rebellion against Him ever since Adam and Eve first sinned. And because of our sin and our broken nature, we were in need of someone to save us — a person who did not need saving himself.

So God chose to become man in the form of Jesus, and through His

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innocent death on the cross He bridged the gap between God and man. It is now through faith in Jesus that we can have our peace with God. For Jesus has “reconciled” us to God and now we can have a restored relationship with our Creator. And the truth is that we can have no real peace with man if we do not have peace with God. Oh, sure, we can get along with our neighbor in civility but do we have a lasting peace? Do we have a deeper peace? Can we share a meal in harmony and joy?

Are you a stranger and alien to God? Have you ever believed in Jesus and accepted His sacrifice for you? If you have, take a moment to thank God for bringing you out of the circle of enemies and aliens and making you a son or daughter through faith in Jesus Christ. It is a special place. You are not God’s enemy! You are His beloved child.

REFLECT:

Are there any areas of your life in which you are angry with God? Do you think He is angry with you? What does it mean to be a child of God, a beloved son or daughter? Think about the roles that anger and peace play in your heart and give thanks to God for adopting you as a beloved son or daughter.

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for your Son, Jesus Christ, who is the Prince of Peace. We who were once alienated from You by our sin have now been reconciled to You through the blood of Your Son. We give You thanks and praise in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

Peace With Men

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased...

Our Liturgy



- Light two purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read Luke 2:8-14; Romans 12:18; Hebrews 12:14
- Sing “Angels We Have Heard on High”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

When you hear the words of the Christmas angels, singing above the shepherds in a rocky field near Bethlehem, what emotions do you experience? Are you excited? Are you skeptical?

The subject of peace comes up frequently around Christmastime. In their chorus, the angels have a clear message about peace. Because of the birth of Jesus in the stable, the peace of God will come to earth and rest on those with whom He is pleased. You might wonder, “Well, who is that?” As we saw a few days ago, Jesus gave His peace to his disciples — those who would walk in His ways and carry his Gospel message — through the work of God the Holy Spirit. God is pleased with all who believe in Jesus, and to those faithful ones the amazing peace of God will come. A peace between God and us — and peace between each other.

Over and over again in the New Testament, believers are commanded to be at peace with all of mankind (Rom. 12:18, Heb 12:14). This does not mean that we must bow to the world’s wishes, but instead seek to be at peace with all people. To turn the other cheek. To bless instead of curse. To seek the way of humility instead of always insisting we get our “rights.”

This peacefulness is as much a mindset as an action. It is that mindset we have which tells us to smile at a rude driver or seek to be disadvantaged for the sake of peace. It is a resolution to be a witness for Christ in every situation, regardless of the personal cost.

We are also called to be at peace with those in the church, even if we disagree with their theology or find them to be arrogant, rude or rebellious. We must be peaceful, even if it goes against our behavior type or background. Is there someone with whom you are estranged right now?

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What can you do to become more peaceful in your relationships with other Christians?

Paul wrote these commands about our attitudes,

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.”

“So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.”

First, let the peace of Jesus reign in your heart. Yield to Him. And then pursue peace, both in tangible ways and in relational ways. In this season of peace, let us give thanks for the Prince of Peace, who calls us to be at peace with each other.

REFLECT:

When was the last time you got into an argument with someone? Was something mean or hurtful said? Today or tomorrow, seek peace with those closest to you: like a child, a spouse, a co-worker or a boss. Can you be graceful even when someone close to you is being the opposite?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for your Son, Jesus Christ, who is the Prince of Peace. We who were once alienated from You by our sin have now been reconciled to You through the blood of Your Son. We give You thanks and praise in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

Jesus, King of Peace

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will never end...

Our Liturgy



- Light two purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read Isaiah 9:6-7; Luke 1:26-33; John 18:33-37
- Sing “Joy to the World!” or “Once in David’s Royal City”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

If you were to have an “old-fashioned” king reigning over you with absolute power — no parliament, no Congress, no other lawmakers — what are three qualities you want that king to possess? Do you want a king who is good at war? Do you want a king who is the richest man in the land? Do you want a king who looks... like a legendary king? Do you want a king who is a fair judge? What three character traits or strengths would you like your ideal king to possess?

David is considered to be the greatest king in Israel’s history. Among his many attributes, he was a mighty warrior who ruled with righteousness. He was considered to be a godly king, God’s anointed. But even King David wasn’t a peaceful king. He had some major character flaws, like we all do, but he always sought God’s forgiveness.

In 2 Samuel 7, God promised to David that a descendant would reign on his throne forever. It was an unconditional promise — a covenant that God was bound, by His own will, to uphold. Who was this amazing eternal king going to be? In Isaiah 9, there came a prophecy about the the coming king. This king would reign on David’s throne with peace and righteousness, just the way you would want a king to rule.

Through the next three hundred years, the people awaited this great peaceful king. Many men took the throne of David but none were like him. God worked through the prophets Isaiah and Micah to let the people know that this mighty king like David was coming. But he is more than a king. Isaiah says He would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God and Eternal Father. Micah says His origin would be from days of antiquity (or

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eternity).

No ordinary man could fit this description. Even more, He would be a prince of peace whose government and peace would never end. How ideal!

As both Matthew and Luke clearly state, Jesus was the crown prince of Israel by both blood and legal right. But the Jewish religious authorities didn't recognize him as a prince. God the Father did. Jesus was given the right to rule on David's throne, though He reigns from heaven for now, which makes it an eternal reign. He will never abdicate nor stain the office. He is King of Israel and His kingdom continues to this day. Eventually the King will come back to earth and this peace, this eternal peace, will descend upon the earth with Him.

Are you waiting for the perfect king to return? Will you trust in His judgment and yield to His authority in your life today? Will you seek to be like the king and pursue peace and righteousness?

REFLECT:

We all want to have a leader who is good and kind but also just. Jesus promises to be that leader. What would it look like to follow the kingship of Jesus in your life today?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for your Son, Jesus Christ, who is the Prince of Peace. We who were once alienated from You by our sin have now been reconciled to You through the blood of Your Son. We give You thanks and praise in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

Friday, Week 2

Our Shepherd of Peace

He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young...

Our Liturgy



- Light two purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read Isaiah 40:9-11; Psalm 23; John 10:11-18
- Sing “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

The picture of Jesus as a shepherd perhaps brings the most comfort to a Christian. The most famous shepherding passage in the Bible, Psalm 23, begins, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

But how many of us have any idea what a shepherd does? While they still exist in rural areas, where sheep, goats and other small livestock are raised, the vast majority of the world’s population lives in cities, far from the agricultural lifestyle. It is hard for city-dwellers to fully grasp the vital role that shepherds played in the ancient world. They were more than ranch hands herding cattle — they were hired hands responsible for keeping livestock fed, protected, and healthy. They lived with their livestock, often sleeping in the doorway of a holding pen. It wasn’t a glamorous life. But livestock was worth gold in the ancient world and a rancher was nothing without them.

A shepherd played many roles in the ancient world, including that of peacemaker. When a storm or predator caused the sheep to tremble and panic, the shepherd had to be the one to calm the sheep. He led his sheep in peace and sought peaceful settings in which to place his sheep. Psalm 23 continues: “He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside peaceful waters. He restores my soul.”

The Lord leads His sheep by peaceful waters and is by their side through the darkest valleys. His rod and staff comfort them. The shepherd is there for the sheep.

In John 10, Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know Me.” Jesus came as the shepherd of peace, just as the Old

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Testament writers predicted. He came to bring peace between God and man and, as a result, between man and man. He said that His sheep hear His voice and recognize it.

Have you heard the voice of the Shepherd? Sometimes I find it comes through other people with wise words of counsel. Sometimes it comes when I'm praying or reading the Bible. It's never a strange voice, but instead one that resonates in my heart. Have you ever had that experience?

I find it marvelous that the Christmas angel first appeared not to kings or religious authorities but to humble shepherds on duty in the fields. The angel announced that the Shepherd of Peace had come, in the form of a little infant, that very night. How ironic!

REFLECT:

Like us, sheep need great guidance and care, otherwise they would scatter and be picked off by predators! Is there a life situation that you want Jesus to shepherd you through? Do you need His peace and care? Pray Psalm 23 today or tomorrow whenever you get anxious or worried. Remember that your Shepherd is on your side and will lead you to peace if you let Him.

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for your Son, Jesus Christ, who is the Prince of Peace. We who were once alienated from You by our sin have now been reconciled to You through the blood of Your Son. We give You thanks and praise in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

Peace in Life's Storms

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ.

Our Liturgy



- Light two purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read Philippians 4:4-7; Mark 4:35-41; 1 Peter 5:6-7
- Sing Still, Still, Still or Silent Night
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

There is little worse than to experience a severe thunderstorm. I grew up in a part of the United States that gets hit with strong storms regularly, some of which are powerful enough to crush cars with large hail, blow down fences and trees with straight-line winds, and destroy entire towns with tornadoes. Hiding inside your safest room while warning sirens are going off outside is among the most nerve-wracking and anxious times of life.

Now imagine the storm is emotional, mental or spiritual. How do you find peace during a time of extreme stress, worry or fear?

I remember a night, years ago, when I was overwhelmed by my financial situation. I was broke beyond broke, holding a part-time job but seeing that income disappear into rent, utilities, credit debt, and a car payment. One Wednesday night as I drove home from church, I lost it. As I drove down a dark road I just cried out to God in frustration and fear. After a few minutes I hit my breaking point and prayed, "Father, I know you love me and want me to follow your Son. I will follow. Thank you for your grace... Please take these burdens from me and deal with them in your timing and in your wisdom. I give them to you." At that moment the peace of Jesus Christ came upon my heart and my emotions calmed down. When I got home, the debt remained. But I no longer feared it. I had peace.

Have you experienced such a moment? Have you ever prayed and the peace of Christ came upon your heart?

Jesus Christ came not only to make peace between us and God and to give us peace with one another, He also brings peace inside our hearts

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during life's storms. Paul writes to the believers in Philippi that whenever anxieties and worries come upon them, they should react with prayer. Give up your cares before God and He will take them from you. And the benefit of such action will be peace — a peace that passes all understanding.

Often times when Christians are overwhelmed by worry, they are having difficulty with giving up their anxieties to God and allowing the peace of Jesus to cover their hearts. It is natural to have anxiety in a world of brokenness, and praying doesn't mean your physical troubles will automatically go away. But when you pray and truly give the requests to God, fears are overwhelmed by faith and the assurance that you are not only loved but also cherished by God as a son or daughter.

There is great peace when we are in communication with God — when we are talking with Him regularly. So next time a life storm rumbles on your doorstep, take it to the Lord in prayer and rest in His perfect peace.

REFLECT:

What was your worst life storm — emotional, spiritual or relational? How did God help you get through it? Pray for His peace to lead you through the rough times of your life and learn to lean on His arms when you can no longer walk yourself.

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for your Son, Jesus Christ, who is the Prince of Peace. We who were once alienated from You by our sin have now been reconciled to You through the blood of Your Son. We give You thanks and praise in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

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THE THIRD WEEK

THE HOPE OF CHRIST

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The Hope of Christ

Hope that is delayed makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is like a tree of life.

Our Liturgy (order of activity)



- Light all three purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read Psalm 62:5-8; Isaiah 40:3-5; Romans 5:1-5
- Sing “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

Hope is a huge concept.

Hope dictates how people live their lives, whether they are a Christian or not. Those with hope live with the belief that circumstances and people can change. Self-help and outside-help are often called into play to change the person with hope. Essentially, hope is an enabler of change. For those without hope, however, bitterness and resignation are rules of the day. Everything’s bad and it ain’t gonna change. Same with everyone. They ain’t gonna change, either. Someone without hope is resigned to fate, living to see what happens to them next instead of living to create what’s next.

There is a great difference between human hope and biblical hope. Human hope knows nothing. It’s guesswork. It is based on well-wishing and not given fact. This doesn’t make it bad. It just doesn’t make it reliable. Biblical hope, on the other hand, has God at its foundation and is based on promised certainty, not well wishes. It’s anticipation of a given, an anticipation that produces perseverance through difficulty and joy in fulfillment (Rom 5:1-5).

You see, if God says something will happen, whether a blessing for obedience or the end of the world, hope kicks in until that promise comes true. If He says comfort will come to those who grieve in Him, hope kicks in until that comfort comes. If He says the dead will not sleep forever but resurrection will come with a reuniting in heaven, then hope kicks in until that day comes. When He says all who have faith in Christ have been given eternal life, we hope in that promise and live according to that hope.

In essence, the Christian holds on to hope like a baby’s blanket. God

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says, we hope, then God delivers. We don't always see Him deliver fulfillment to every hope during our lives on earth. Some hopes are "far future" hopes, like resurrection, the end of evil, and, sometimes, vengeance on enemies. But during our lives, we see Him deliver on day-to-day hopes. We always have our daily bread, we always have grace when we mess up, we always have an audience with our King in prayer or praise, and many more things. And we can always hope in the character of God when society pressures us to defame Him.

Human hope is a good thing because it allows us to change and grow. Losing hope causes us to turn to stone. Biblical hope is a great thing because it is grounded in the promises of God and will always find its fulfillment in His timing. Human hope leaves room for the possibility of change but it can also disappoint if change doesn't happen. Biblical hope assures that there will be change. It does not disappoint.

Hold on to hope!

REFLECT:

Every day we live with "mini hopes" in our lives. Sometimes they are wishes, other times they are promises others have made to us. What are three daily hopes that you depend on? How does your dependence on hope affect the way you approach living each day?

PRAY:

"Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the hope of salvation that we have in Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You for the hope found in His first coming and we grab hold of the hope of His return. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen."

Being Patient With Hope

When (King Herod) had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written."

Our Liturgy



- Light all three purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read Lamentations 3:19-24; Micah 5:2-5; Matthew 2:1-8
- Sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem"
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

What is the longest that you've ever had to wait for a gift? Aside from the 365 days between birthdays or Christmas, have you been promised a gift and then eagerly counted down the days before you could receive it? Can you imagine waiting 400 years?

For four centuries the Israelites waited for the Lord to fulfill His promise to bring the messiah — the descendant of King David who would free Israel from bondage and reign with righteousness and peace. Generation after generation lived and died waiting for the gift of God to come to them. Prophets kept the hope alive, bringing new promises from God. But in 430 B.C. the prophet Malachi had the final word for the nation about the messiah. After him, there was silence.

It was a long time to wait! At least the prophets gave some specifics. Like a good mystery case or a scavenger hunt, the pieces of the puzzle were slowly through time being assembled. Isaiah prophesied that the messiah would be born of a young maiden, be a child of divine power and eternal righteousness, suffer mightily, and draw the nations to his light. This person would be the Lord Himself, and He would shepherd His people with gentleness and justice. The prophet Micah wrote that there would be a place in which the messiah would rise — and that place was not where you'd expect. The major cities of Israel were Jerusalem, Samaria, Hebron, Beersheba, Jericho and Megiddo. But this messianic place, the place of the light, was the tiny village of Bethlehem.

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Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David but it was still a small place — a few houses, maybe a barn, a few inns and, as we know, a stable or two. That's it. It was just a stone's throw away from Jerusalem but as rural as could be. Not exactly everyone's first choice for a royal city!

By the time Jesus was born, the people had forgotten about little Bethlehem. It took the pagan King Herod to cause even the scribes and Pharisees to remember it!

Jesus came to Israel, completing their hope, and His promise to come back should fill us all with hope. We wait in eager expectation, though many generations have died without seeing it happen. And, much like He did through the prophets of old, the Lord still gives each generation encouragement and strength and hope as they live their ordinary lives. We ultimately wait for Jesus to return and set things right, but during our time of waiting the Lord lets us see examples of light defeating darkness and broken people becoming whole. So be patient! Look for little fulfillments of God's promises in the world around you. I hope you see them!

REFLECT:

Have you ever had to wait for something really good? What is the best thing that you have had to wait for... let's say... more than six months? Spend some time today or tomorrow looking around you for God working in the world. Do you see Him working? Is there light, peace or hope anywhere in your world? If so, then God is still at work keeping promises!

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the hope of salvation that we have in Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You for the hope found in His first coming and we grab hold of the hope of His return. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

The Hope of Justice

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."

Our Liturgy



- Light all three purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read Luke 1:39-56; Isaiah 51:4-5; John 16:7-11
- Sing "What Child is This?"
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

We often wonder why God allows suffering and evil in this world. Why someone like Saddam Hussein could kill 10,000 people without a second thought. Or how millions could die in Rwanda, Congo and Sudan because of pure hatred. We wonder why the rich keep stomping on the poor without penalty and why the righteous seem made to suffer. "Where is the justice, O Lord?" the prophet Habakkuk cried out.

Have you cried out with the same question?

And yet, with the first coming of Jesus came the justice of God. We may have trouble seeing it in the here and now, but Satan, sin, and all who oppose God have been declared guilty and their judgment has been handed down (John 3:18, 16:11). It is only the execution of the sentence that still awaits. And that step is still future.

Isaiah wrote that the messiah, Jesus, would, "bring justice to the nations," and "bring forth justice in faithfulness." And He will not stop in His mission until justice was brought upon the whole earth. It is in this ultimate justice that the nations place their hope. Are you hoping He will do that too?

The world stands condemned and its ruler along with it (John 16:8, 11). I think we see this every time a wicked person is caught in their evil ways. When a child predator is caught, a murderer sentenced, a dictator overthrown, a sexual harasser revealed — these are signs that evil is under judgement and that the wicked will be punished. There are no tyrants that

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die peacefully. And the voices of victims will haunt those who prey on them.

One day bad things will happen no more. One day evil will be but a vapor. We have hope that what God promised for our future will come true. Until then, we are called to be children of light. Children of peace. Children of hope that expose the darkness and bring about God's justice to our circles of influence.

Jesus has come so that all people might finally see God the Father's face and know of His righteousness. And we are called to follow in His footsteps. How did He treat injustice, sin and hypocrisy? How did he judge the lowly and the humble? Will you follow His example and do the same?

REFLECT:

Have you ever cried out for God to stop evil things from happening or for wicked people to be caught and punished? What can you do in your own circle of influence (a.k.a. your daily life) to stand up for justice in a wrongful situation? Can you think of a way to do so with grace?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the hope of salvation that we have in Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You for the hope found in His first coming and we grab hold of the hope of His return. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

The Hope of Heaven

"In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ... I will come back and take you to be with me."

Our Liturgy



- Light all three purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read John 14:1-6; 1 Peter 1:3-5
- Sing "Good Christian Men, Rejoice!"
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

It is horribly difficult to watch someone you love experience death. Two of my grandparents died "the hard way," with cancer slowly overtaking their bodies and shutting down their vital life functions. My family gathered by their side in the final months of their struggles — praying for and encouraging them and — out of sight — weeping. They struggled for breath and to swallow the smallest sip of water. It was heartbreaking. And agonizing!

We would all like to avoid suffering during the final moments of our lives. Isn't that true? No one asks to suffer. But for some it is inevitable. We live with broken bodies in a world of sin, and we all must die one day as a result of our personal sin. Some go quickly. Others, like my grandparents, don't.

One thing I grab hold of, emotionally and spiritually, when faced with death is the ever-important hope of heaven. That even though our bodies cease to breathe, their death is not the end of all things. That death is not final and existence limited only to what we experience during our time on earth. We suffer here. But there is a place where we will never suffer. Even more, a place where the damage done by addiction and cancer and smoking and... ALL of our ailments on earth are reversed!

This is heaven. The place where God has His throne. Where angels and cherubim and saints dwell in perfect light... and peace... and fulfilled hope. It is a real place. The New Testament writers say Jesus was from there. Before He came to earth, He dwelled there with God the Father and God

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the Holy Spirit. And near the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus said He was going back there to prepare a place for His disciples — for those who believed in His Name. “That where I am, there you may also be,” He said.

The apostle Peter wrote that God has given us a new birth into a living hope. What is a living hope? It is a hope that sustains you every day — perhaps a promise made or a steadfast love. In this case, Peter writes that our living hope comes from Jesus’ resurrection — that we don’t have to end life at the grave — and that we have been given the inheritance of heaven. All who believe in Jesus are going to heaven! This promise is stored up for you in heaven itself, and eternal life in heaven is an inheritance that will not be taken away.

Death is hard and both those who die and those who watch them die suffer mightily. During these times of grief and anguish, hold fast onto the hope of heaven. Cling to it with every ounce of your inner strength! I’ll never forget telling my dying grandmother that I loved her and that I looked forward to seeing her again on the streets of heaven. It is an exciting inheritance and a sure hope!

REFLECT:

Have you lost a loved one over the past year? How difficult was it for you to experience? Does it offer any comfort to know that those who believed in Jesus will walk the streets of heaven when they die?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the hope of salvation that we have in Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You for the hope found in His first coming and we grab hold of the hope of His return. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

When Hope Gets Fulfilled

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

Our Liturgy



- Light all three purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read Luke 1:67-75; 2:22-37
- Sing “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” or “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

The apostle Peter said the Lord is not slow about keeping His promises, though we often seem to disagree. We live in a fiber-optic world, where information is transmitted at the speed of light around the world. Even in space information can be sent very quickly, though billions of miles may separate a spacecraft from earth.

In today's Advent passage, we see the response of Simeon, an old man who waited all his life for the messiah to come. He was elderly now and knew that his days were coming to an end. But the Holy Spirit had told him that he was going to live to see the messiah come. So when he saw Mary and Joseph walking up the temple steps one day, tiny baby in her arms, his heart leapt within him. Why Mary? Why Joseph? Why their baby? Was it something in their appearance? Don't forget Joseph was a blue collar worker and Mary a teenage girl. Or was it something more, something spiritual?

It was the Holy Spirit who struck Simeon's heart that day and told the righteous man that he was seeing the long-awaited messiah come to the temple, though in infant form. In the following verses we see another elderly person, a woman named Anna, who also had awaited for the messiah's coming. She came up to the young family, praised God, and then told everyone around her that the redemption of Jerusalem was at hand (2:38).

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When hope is fulfilled, there is joy. When Simeon and Anna saw their hope fulfilled, what was their response? Simeon held Jesus in his arms (quite a contrast to the role Jesus plays as the Good Shepherd!) and praised God. “My eyes have seen your salvation,” he said. Anna also thanked God and then immediately went about the task of sharing the good news that the messiah had finally come to Israel.

The Lord has never broken a promise. It is not in His nature to do so! Whenever you see a promise of God fulfilled, whether it is comfort or peace you received or strength to keep believing in God’s word, take a few seconds (or longer) to give Him thanks for it.

REFLECT:

Take a look at your life, particularly the past year. Were there times in your life when your hope was fulfilled? What was your response? Were you relieved that a loved one is safe or a paycheck came in the mail or that a doctor’s visit turned out well?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the hope of salvation that we have in Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You for the hope found in His first coming and we grab hold of the hope of His return. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

Hope For Future Generations

Whatever God has promised gets stamped with the Yes of Jesus. In him, this is what we preach and pray, the great Amen, God's Yes and our Yes together, gloriously evident... (2 Corinthians 1:20)

Our Liturgy



- Light all three purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read Hebrews 6:9-12; 2 Corinthians 1:20-22
- Sing “Some Children See Him” or “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

Scripture repeatedly ties together hope and godly conduct. Here, the author of Hebrews lauds his readers for their love and work among the saints. Why are they working so effectively in the church? Because of hope.

The author encouraged all other believers to live and work with the same diligence as those he praised earlier. Those godly believers work with diligence so as to comprehend the full assurance of hope. They get it. They understand that Jesus has already come to give them life and He will come again to take them home. And they live with the hope and realization of a better life in Christ during the here and now.

Peter's application is clear: imitate men and women of faith. They have learned to live with the hope of Christ and that experience has guided their lives. Be like them. Because of Jesus Christ, we have the ability to live our lives to the benefit of future generations.

Paul teaches his disciple Titus the value of passing on godly behavior to the next generations. In Titus 2, he writes,

“Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live... to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure... Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. In everything set them an example by doing what

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is good.”

One day in the future, someone will ask about us — what kind of a person we were, what our hobbies were, what our faith was like. What will they learn about you? What do you want them to know?

Let the hope of Christ guide you today so that future generations may learn from your godly walk. Be conscious of the legacy you are leaving and pass on what you know of Jesus and what it is like to follow Him.

REFLECT:

These days a lot of attention seems to be paid to leaving a legacy. At work, we want to be known for doing something great or, at least, something that moved our business forward. At home, we want to raise well-behaved children and have a good reputation among our neighbors. What things are you trying to do to leave a godly legacy for future generations of your family? Are you following Jesus? Can others see Him in your words and actions?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the hope of salvation that we have in Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You for the hope found in His first coming and we grab hold of the hope of His return. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

Hope That Jesus Will Return

“In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ... I will come back and take you to be with me.”

Our Liturgy



- Light all three purple candles on your advent wreath.
- Read 2 Peter 3:3-4, 8-9; Titus 2:11-14; John 14:1-3
- Sing “Joy to the World”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

One of the great things about Advent is its dual remembrance. Not only does it count down the days until Christmas, remembering the incarnation of Jesus Christ, but it also casts a forward look at His imminent return. Our hope as Christians, I dare say, rests more in Jesus’ return than in His first coming (though that first coming set up a return). We have been saved. The work of the cross is done. Now we wait for our Savior to come back for His church and set up His earthly kingdom (Titus 2:11-14).

So our hope is forward-looking. Already in Peter’s day (this was written later in his life) there were people who thought Jesus had either already returned or wasn’t coming back. Peter calls them “mockers” who may have been from outside the church. They knew of the Christian belief that Jesus would return but with each generational death and many gray hairs, they doubted the validity of that belief.

But Peter offers an explanation for the passing days, one that has been repeated throughout the centuries. The Lord doesn’t count time like we count time. He is not bound by time, for He dwells in eternity. And from His eternal perspective, a heavenly “day” could be a thousand earth years. If this is true, then it has been almost two whole days since Jesus left! That’s not long at all. And the reason God has chosen to wait so long is because of His mercy and love. Could He have cut off this mercy at any time He chose? Sure.

But you and I are beneficiaries of God’s patience. Many wonderful

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things and wonderful people have popped up through the centuries because of this patience. But one day that patience will run out (figuratively speaking) and the Father will send His Son back to claim His church and take us with Him to heaven.

This is our hope. And God does not break His word. If He said he's coming back, and He did, then He will. It's just a matter of time.

Are you living in the knowledge that the King will return any day? Are you doing your best to live in godliness and be found holy for that day? Or are you living with the mindset that Christ won't return in your lifetime — that you'd better get the most out of this life before you die and go to heaven? You know how you should be, considering the hope of Jesus' return. Let us all be better at following that knowledge.

REFLECT:

When you hear that Jesus will come back to earth, what images come into your mind? What do you think it will look like? How does your heart feel? Can you imagine what life on earth would be like without evil and terror?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the hope of salvation that we have in Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You for the hope found in His first coming and we grab hold of the hope of His return. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

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THE FOURTH WEEK

**THE HUMANITY OF
CHRIST**

The Humanity of Christ

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish...

Our Liturgy (order of activity)



- Light all three purple candles and the pink/red candle on your wreath.
- Read Isaiah 7:14, 40:1-11; John 1:14; Luke 1:26-37
- Sing “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” or “O Come, All Ye Faithful”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS:

Since Christmas may fall on any day of this week, I suggest you skip ahead to the final devotional, “Saturday, Week 4” on Christmas Day.

The nature of Jesus has been one of the most debated topics in the last 2,000 years.

Who was Jesus? Was he a man? Was He God? If so, how much of each?

What a mystery! And, unfortunately, it will never be fully explained this side of heaven. Even Bible scholars and theologians cannot explain how it happened. Through the years, many have tried to explain the nature of Jesus Christ and, inevitably, their conclusions make Him one or the other — God or man — but not both. But the Bible tells us that God dwelled fully in the person of Jesus. He was called the Father’s “Son” in the Gospels and said to be the “exact representation” of the Father (Heb. 1:1-2). He was God. And, yet, he was born of the womb of Mary, a human, and had every appearance of humanity — down to His need for food and sleep. And when He was resurrected, He showed up in the flesh before His disciples. And He ascended to heaven in the human body He possessed!

People have always had trouble wrapping their head around the divine/human nature of Jesus. For centuries before His arrival, the Jewish religious leaders knew that one day a great leader would come to Israel. He would be a prophet and a king and have the authority of God at his disposal. But

little did anyone know that this messiah would be none other than God Himself. Somehow the concept of God becoming man and actually walking the earth seemed too far-fetched. Certainly God would never stoop so low as to take on human flesh!

But He did.

There is a Latin word that is often used to describe what happened on Christmas Day. The word is, “incarnation” and it means, “to make into flesh.” This incarnation of Jesus Christ still remains one of the universe’s great mysteries. In what ways did Jesus become like you and me? What does this all mean for our lives today?

This week we will explore various aspects of the humanity of Jesus. God doesn’t ask us to explain the person of Jesus, but instead to believe in Him and follow Him.

So my questions for you this week are... Can you set aside your desire to explain everything and live a life of faith? Can you celebrate the mystery of Jesus?

REFLECT:

Hebrews 2:14-18, Philippians 2:1-9 and Colossians 1:15-22 are three of the great passages of the Bible that describe why God would humble Himself, become a man, and come to earth. Read them and ask yourself this important question: What does it mean to me that Jesus chose to become a human being and live on this earth just as I do?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the humanity of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You that He became like us in every way but did not sin. We thank you that by His atoning blood, shed on the cross, and through His resurrection we have life in His name. We thank You for His faithful intercession on our behalf not only as a priest but also as a brother. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and with the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

He Was Born of a Woman

God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. The angel said to her, "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus."

Our Liturgy



- Light all three purple candles and the pink/red candle on your wreath.
- Read Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:18-25; Galatians 4:4-5
- Sing "Silent Night" or "Of the Father's Love Begotten"
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

Why a virgin? Why did God choose to bring His Son into the world through a young and innocent maiden?

Maybe the answer is that it was the most-unexpected yet most-innocent way to become man! A humble entrance. Outside of that reason, not even theologians can adequately explain the virgin birth. Much like the dual-nature of Jesus as both God and man, it is a great mystery that happened in the pages of history.

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

It was the prophet Isaiah who first introduced the idea that a virgin would be with child and that child would be "God with us," which is the literal translation of "Immanuel." Even more, the Hebrew word translated as "virgin" can also be translated "a girl, or an innocent young maiden." It is a general term used to refer to unmarried young ladies who are of marrying age. In Jewish culture, a girl was considered to be "of betrothal age" after she reached puberty. But the consummation of marriage waited for a year after engagement. Based on prophecy and culture, then, Mary might have been a young teenager when she became pregnant! It was a miracle.

According to Luke, the angel Gabriel came to Mary in Nazareth during the late summer ("sixth month" was like our September back then) and told her the good news. She was betrothed to Joseph, a handyman, but they had not yet consummated their relationship. It was pure. The young lady

responded to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Indeed! But by the will of God, Mary alone was to give flesh to Jesus. She was His link to humanity in the midst of the whole mystery that is the incarnation.

The apostle Paul would later summarize things this way,

“But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons (Gal. 4:4-5).”

Jesus chose to be born through the same process that you and I experienced. He humbled Himself to become a baby — becoming vulnerable like us and depending on His mother for food, just like us. It is no small order that Mary gave birth to the Son of God. It was an entrance that was grand and yet humble. A stable. Some shepherds. And yet angels singing over the fields at night. He became like us so He could fully understand us and relate to our desires and needs. Perhaps that is what the virgin birth truly means!

REFLECT:

Most people remember their mothers. If you know your biological mother, do you share any physical features? If you have an adopted mother, do you share any personality traits? Now think of Jesus’ mother. When Mary held her baby for the first time, what do you imagine that she thought?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the humanity of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You that He became like us in every way but did not sin. We thank you that by His atoning blood, shed on the cross, and through His resurrection we have life in His name. We thank You for His faithful intercession on our behalf not only as a priest but also as a brother. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and with the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

An Ordinary Birth

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger...

Our Liturgy



- Light all three purple candles and one pink/red candle on your wreath.
- Read Luke 2:1-19, Galatians 4:4-7
- Sing “Away in a Manger” or “Infant Holy, Infant Lowly”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

I hardly remember my birth. Hardly. Well, OK, I don’t remember it at all! But my parents do. It was fairly normal by modern standards. A hospital. A maternity ward. Doctors. Grandparents rushing to see their new grandchild. Like I said, normal. But, yet, far more luxurious than the Savior!

It’s funny, everything about the conception of Jesus was so miraculous and yet everything about His birth seemed so plain. Luke 2 simply says, “While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.” Natural mothers know there needs to be little more said. The process is not neat and painless, but messy and difficult. Mary went into labor, like every other natural mother, and Joseph stood by her side, probably as clueless as most first-time dads.

Luke continues, “She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” The cloths were Jesus’ first set of clothing. Long strips of fabric that surrounded the infant to keep him warm and secure.

The manger was the kind used for feeding animals hay or grain. It was a makeshift crib in a makeshift hotel in a quiet town far from home. Oh, sure, there was angelic fanfare above the shepherds. But in the stable? Just another impoverished birth. No maternity suite. No drugs. Not even a midwife on hand. I had it good. Jesus?

In taking on human flesh, from conception, through birth, through childhood, through the teenage years, into manhood, Jesus experienced everything that every other person on earth experiences. But his journey on

earth started where we started, in the womb and then as an infant. Wispy hair, swollen eyes, stubby little fingers that once made the heavens and earth. He relied on His mother, Mary, for life-giving nourishment and surrogate dad Joseph for protection.

When He came out of the womb, Jesus became subject to the same world that everyone else lived in. The same sunrises and sunsets, rainstorms and droughts, blowing sand and breathtaking rainbows. The same society and the same law — the same expectations of a perfect little Jewish boy.

And He did it so that He might know you and I better and truly be able to come to our aid in EVERY situation. He did it to take our place in death and pay for our sin. He had a normal human birth, died a natural human death, and was raised in His normal human body in order to make aliens and enemies into sons and daughters.

REFLECT:

Where were you born? Can anyone tell you about your birth? If you have access, try to look at a few of your baby photos (and maybe share them!). Can you believe that Jesus Christ, Lord of the Universe, was once a little baby just like you?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the humanity of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You that He became like us in every way but did not sin. We thank you that by His atoning blood, shed on the cross, and through His resurrection we have life in His name. We thank You for His faithful intercession on our behalf not only as a priest but also as a brother. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and with the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

He Walked in Our Shoes

One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out. As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came on the lake...

Our Liturgy



- Light all three purple candles and one pink/red candle on your wreath.
- Read Luke 8:22-25; Hebrews 2:14-18
- Sing "O Come, All Ye Faithful"
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

"As they sailed, He fell asleep."

Yes, Jesus slept. I find this single phrase in Luke chapter 8 to be most comforting when I start to wonder if Jesus really knows how I feel. In this instance of His life on earth, Jesus was so tired that he fell asleep in a rocking and rolling boat. And he slept during a gale. He was THAT tired. I can't even sleep in moving cars, much less a rocking boat. Yet Jesus had to sleep. He was human. Just like me.

Sometimes it's easy to think of Jesus as some stoic, hovering spirit-being — a man who never smiled and who never broke stride. The first painting of Jesus that I saw as a child showed a holy, stoic, glowing man, looking almost as though he belonged in another universe. But Hebrews 2 makes it clear that Jesus was just like us in His humanity. It says, "He had to be made like his brothers in every way." In every way? In every way. Why? "In order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." His humanity allows Him to relate to us as a human as well as God, and to be a perfect sacrifice for our sins.

A spirit cannot replace a body, so He had a real human body. Being human means that Jesus did the mundane and routine things we have to do every day for sustenance.

He ate food. He had to or His body would starve! Jesus drank from the watery brook and from the local well. He probably had stubbed toes and

blisters. First Century sandals weren't quite as comfy as our modern flip-flops, and in a world of rocks, hills, and dust, even the heartiest of feet get humbled. He had skin. He got cut.

So next time we're worn out or beat down let us remember that Jesus went through everything that we go through long before we did. He's been in our shoes. And He will give us the strength we need to make it through. He overcame, and because He did, so can we.

REFLECT:

Have you ever been so tired that you unexpectedly fell asleep while riding in a bumpy car or airplane, or during a thunderstorm, or in a rocking boat? Were you surprised? Now dwell on the fact that God Himself, in the person of Jesus, was so tired that He fell asleep in a rocking boat during a thunderstorm. Does it change the way you see Jesus?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the humanity of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You that He became like us in every way but did not sin. We thank you that by His atoning blood, shed on the cross, and through His resurrection we have life in His name. We thank You for His faithful intercession on our behalf not only as a priest but also as a brother. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and with the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

He Shed Real Blood

For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to Himself all things by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Our Liturgy



- Light all three purple candles and one pink/red candle on your wreath.
- Read Hebrews 10:1-18; Colossians 1:19-22
- Sing “Angels We Have Heard on High”
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

The ancient sacrificial worship system of Israel was complicated by our modern religious standards. But there was one annual action that served as the “make or break” moment of the whole nation. That moment was the yearly sacrifice of a bull to symbolically atone for all of the national sins of the people of Israel.

The Day of Atonement — Yom Kippur — was the day in which the fate of the nation was placed in the hands of one man, the high priest, as he went before God. Every year the priest would offer the blood to “make up” for the past year’s sins of the nation.

Why did it have to be blood? Blood is life. We cannot live without it! Way back in the time of Cain and Abel God set a precedent that blood had to be shed to atone for our sin. It was His way. But after the sin of Adam and Eve, no mortal man could be sinless and, thus, be a capable permanent substitute for sin. Only God was holy.

Until a permanent solution came to Israel, they were to sacrifice animals at certain times of the year to temporarily “make good” for their personal sin. But, of course, there was no way that the blood of an animal equals that of a human! As the author of Hebrews writes,

“Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins (10:11).”

So God had to shed His own blood. To do this, He had to take on flesh

and blood just like a man. Jesus Christ did this. His choosing to come to earth as a human allowed Him to be the perfect mediator between us and God the Father, the Righteous Judge of all. His blood needed to be human to atone for humans.

And so He was made like us in every way. He decided to take on flesh in the same way normal people did — starting with conception in the womb. In that way, he fully experienced the depth of humanity. And, once he “had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. (10:12).” His work of atonement was done. We could now be perfectly forgiven!

Jesus Christ is not only our Lord in His eternal deity but He is also our brother in His humanity. He considers us brothers, too, as crazy as that sounds (Heb 2:11). The only way He can do this is to be like us in every human way, and He accomplished that in grand fashion!

REFLECT:

Does it feel strange to think that Jesus had real blood? He got bumps and bruises and cuts because He became human just like you and me. The next time you get a scrape or cut, and you see some blood, try to think of Jesus. He became like you so that He could relate to you in your every restless need.

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the humanity of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You that He became like us in every way but did not sin. We thank you that by His atoning blood, shed on the cross, and through His resurrection we have life in His name. We thank You for His faithful intercession on our behalf not only as a priest but also as a brother. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and with the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

He Really Rose From the Dead

He showed them his hands and feet... (then) He asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

Our Liturgy



- Light all three purple candles and one pink/red candle on your wreath.
- Read John 20:19-29; Luke 24:1-43; 1 Corinthians 15:3-7
- Sing "Of the Father's Love Begotten"
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

In the late 1800's a team of philosophers came up with a unique way to explain the resurrection of Jesus. You see, they refused to believe — as scientists — that a dead body could come back to life, so in order for Jesus to have been seen by people after he was put in the tomb it must have meant only one thing: he wasn't really dead. The "swoon theory" claimed that Jesus suffered on the cross and passed out on the verge of death, only to be revived in the cold, damp climate of the tomb. He recovered from his wounds and kept living.

Another theory rose in the mid 1900's called the "spiritual resurrection." Jesus never physically rose, theologians claimed. His body is still somewhere. The spirit of Jesus came to life and walked on earth, showing itself to people.

So, did Jesus really rise in his flesh on Easter? Or was it a ruse, a medical event, or a ghostly event? The Bible paints a strong picture for a physical rise. Jesus, who was human in form, rose from the dead in that human body and proved that He was still physically there.

Our readings today covered a lot of verses but there is a common theme in all these stories. In John's story, Jesus shows them His hands and side, the wounds of His crucifixion. Thomas doubts but then touches Jesus and believes. In Luke's story, we see first the empty tomb and angels announcing the resurrection, then a fascinating story of Jesus encountering two disciples on their way home. Any ghostly illusion ends when Jesus physically picks up the bread and breaks it. Then, back at disciple

headquarters (the upper room), Jesus proceeds to eat a fish supper in front of them — crumbs in the beard and all, I imagine.

The evidence is overwhelming. Jesus rose from the dead in His human body, except that He now had personal mastery over death and the keys to eternal life.

There are times of restlessness in our aches and pains, our illnesses and our disabilities. On one hand we curse the broken and fragile nature of our bodies, while on the other hand we hope for a day when we won't have to struggle and our bodies operate properly. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, there is a future hope for our bodies. When He returns to earth, our bodies will be raised and restored and we will return with Him to heaven — as whole people — because He is whole. Do you long for that day?

REFLECT:

If Jesus really rose from the dead in His human body, how does that affect your view of death and resurrection? Knowing that Jesus still has His earthly body in heaven (He took it with Him), do you believe that He can relate to your daily struggles in a body here on earth?

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the humanity of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You that He became like us in every way but did not sin. We thank you that by His atoning blood, shed on the cross, and through His resurrection we have life in His name. We thank You for His faithful intercession on our behalf not only as a priest but also as a brother. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and with the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

A Christmas Message For Restless Hearts

Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Our Liturgy



- Light all of the candles on your wreath. Bask in the marvelous light!
- Read Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:16-21
- Sing "Joy to the World!" or "Angels We Have Heard on High" or your favorite songs
- Read the Devotional Below
- Ponder the Reflection Afterword
- Pray to Close

The Story of Christmas is the story of the Gospel — that God would come to dwell with His creation in the flesh and blood of that creation in order to reveal Himself to it and redeem it. And as we dwell on the birth of Jesus Christ today it is important to note that believing the Christmas message is vital to finding rest for your restless heart.

Do you believe that Jesus was born like you? Do you believe that He experienced life much as you do? Do you believe that He died as a human and was raised in His body? Do you believe that in Jesus there is light and peace and hope, not only for today but also for your future?

When Jesus stood in the synagogue of His hometown of Nazareth to read the Scripture and to teach a short lesson, everyone in the building probably thought He would just say a few words of wisdom and give an exhortation. After all, He was on the synagogue "rotation" of speakers and the tradition of the day was to stand when the bible passage was read and sit to talk about it. The portion of Isaiah that He read that day just happened to be about the great light, peace and hope that the coming Messiah — the king coming in the power of God — would bring with Him to Israel. Jesus came to...

to preach good news to the poor...

to proclaim freedom to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind...
to set free the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The language was so full of hope that my restless heart yearns for its fulfillment inside and out! Does yours? Jesus stopped there. He sat down. Then He dropped a bombshell on His audience.

“Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled.”

Isaiah added more to the prophecy. He also said Jesus would,

proclaim the day of our God's vengeance; (justice!)
to comfort all who mourn,
to provide for those who mourn in Zion;
to give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, festive oil
instead of mourning,
and splendid clothes instead of despair.

Would you like to trade your heart's current Christmas clothes for splendid ones? Would you like to experience beauty instead of ashes? Would you like to celebrate instead of mourn, or find comfort in your sadness?

Jesus has come to you. Will you come to Jesus?

Ask Him for His light, then shine it into the darkness. Ask Him for His peace, and then share it with your circle of influence. Lean on Him for His hope, then keep coming back to Him when your hope starts to fade. He has walked in your shoes before and is on your side as you navigate this restless life.

This is the Gospel — the good news — that watchmen looked for in the Old Testament. It is the light that would shine in a darkened world, the peace that would quell the storm that arises in every man's heart, and the hope that sets his feet on firm ground. The coming of Jesus means life.

Jesus has come to you, and He will come again one day. But will you come to Jesus today?

Merry Christmas!

REFLECT:

Where in your life are you poor, feeling captive or blind? Where do you feel oppressed? Is it in a relationship, in a job, in friendships, or in overall direction for your life? Are you willing to let Jesus set you free from the guilt, worry and responsibility that weighs your heart down? Ask Him, and then try your best to rely on Him for strength every time your restless heart starts to falter.

PRAY:

“Our Father in heaven, we light this candle to thank You for the humanity of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You that He became like us in every way but did not sin. We thank you that by His atoning blood, shed on the cross, and through His resurrection we have life in His name. We thank You for His faithful intercession on our behalf not only as a priest but also as a brother. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and with the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.C. (John) Newton is a minister and author who directs Restless Heart Ministries with his wife, Shannon. He is a self-confessed “restless heart” who has spent many hours counseling others who are emotionally weary, beaten-up, broken down, and otherwise longing for things to be right in this world. He holds degrees from John Brown University and Dallas Theological Seminary and is an ordained pastor.
He blogs at jcnewton.net.

Restless Heart Ministries, Inc. is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing physical resources for people in need of physical, emotional and spiritual rest, so that they might lead renewed lives of faith in God, hope in His word, and love for others.

You can find more about Restless Heart at restlessheart.org.