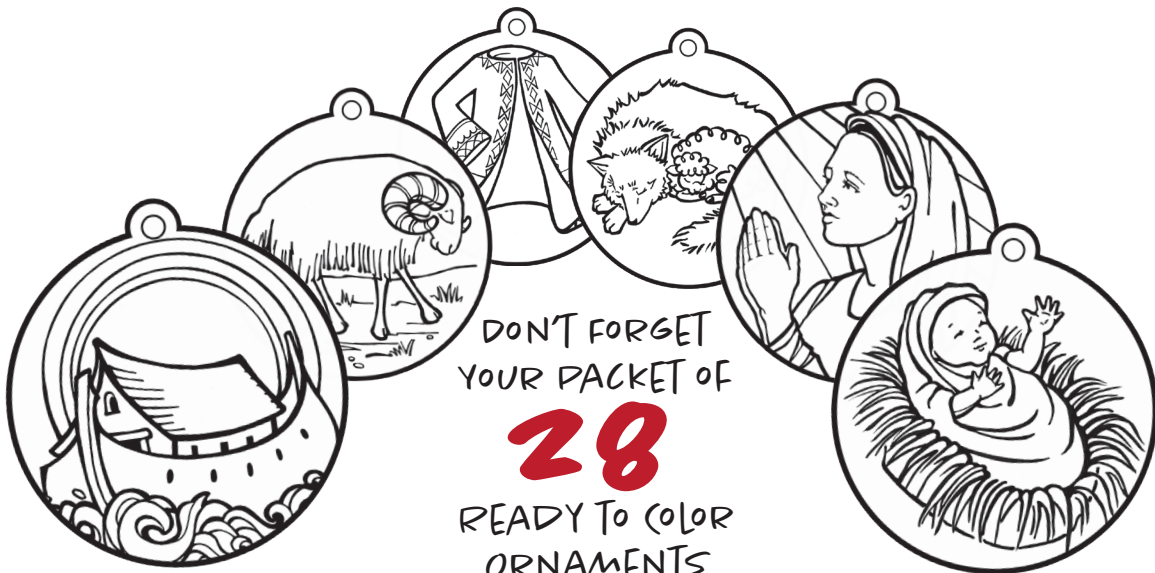




Jesse Tree

ADVENT DEVOTIONALS
FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY

..... BEGINS SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2021



What is Advent?

WHAT DO YOU DO DURING ADVENT?

Traditionally, during Advent, we read daily scripture readings that turn our focus to celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. Through readings from the Old and New Testament, we hope you will see that the coming of Jesus, the Christ, had long been anticipated and foretold, and His Story began, not with Mary, Joseph, and a manger in Bethlehem, but in Genesis and was repeated throughout the Bible. To help you celebrate Advent this year, we are making this guide available to you with material for preschoolers through adults.

WHAT IS A JESSE TREE?

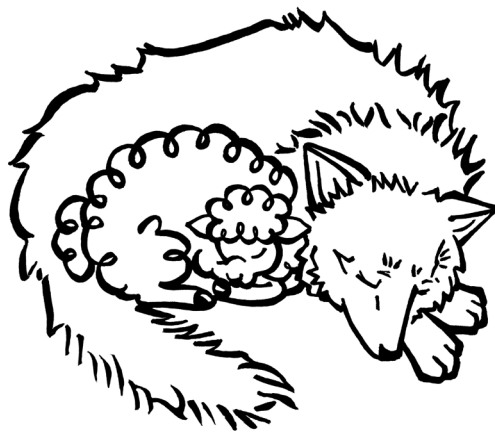
The Jesse Tree is named from Isaiah 11:1, "A shoot will spring forth from the stump of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots." It is a vehicle to tell the Story of God in the Old Testament, and to connect the Advent Season with the faithfulness of God across 4,000 years of history. The Branch is a biblical sign of newness out of discouragement, which became a way to talk about the expected Messiah (for example, Jeremiah 23:5). It is therefore an appropriate symbol of Jesus, who is the revelation of the grace and faithfulness of God. Your Jesse Tree can serve as a very special kind of Advent calendar to help you focus on Christmas conversations with your family and friends and prepare for the celebration of Christmas this year.

HOW DO I USE THIS GUIDE?

Advent begins on the Sunday after the last Thursday in November. Each day read the story in this devotional and place the appropriate ornament on your tree. A section on the left side of the page is for older children through adults. The right side contains language that preschoolers and younger children can understand. Also in this guide are the daily ornament symbols on card stock for the option of having young children cut these out, color them, and place them on your Jesse Tree.

The questions following the devotion are meant to create conversations with your family members. The prayers at the end of the story contain a thought to challenge us to allow God to make a difference in our lives and the lives of those we know. Consider how you can put some of these challenges into action.

Have a blessed Christmas!



NOV
28

The Branch from Jesse's Stump

ISAIAH 11:1-2

*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.*

*And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

This is hope: that even when the forest has been decimated, every last living plant hacked to the ground, no birdsong in the trees—even then, when all seems lost, a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse.

In today's passage, we read about Israel, having endured slavery and wilderness, now in exile. The people of God are weary and battered, discouraged by their own sin and the wickedness of the world. They look around: No one lives honorably. Evil reigns. Orphans are preyed upon. Widows are neglected. People are puffed up, and institutions corrupt. And God, in His righteous judgment, intends to put a stop to it by bringing it all to the ground.

He "will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the great in height will be hewn down, and the lofty will be brought low." (Isaiah 10:33). All that will be left is a barren landscape, the bald remains of a clear-cut forest.

But—

"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit." (Isaiah 11:1).

Imagine wandering through that post-apocalyptic landscape, seeing nothing but gray for miles, and suddenly coming across that shoot! The first green. The first bit of supple growth, signaling water beneath and, someday, a tree.

Who is this shoot, whom the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon?

Jesus. Jesus, descendant of Jesse. Jesus, descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus, the one promised centuries before his arrival. Jesus is the one we hope for this Advent.

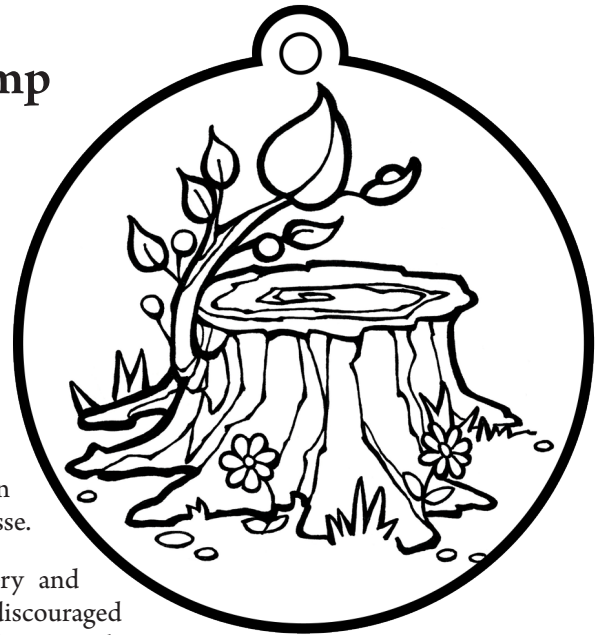
When the forest is felled and lofty brought low, Christ remains.

DISCUSS:

1. In the world around us full of strife, suffering, and pain, can we too have hope in Jesus? Why?

PRAYER:

God, we are amazed at your patience and your plan for redeeming all things. Give us the strength to keep placing our hope in Jesus, your Son. Help us to focus on you this Advent season so that we may bring glory to you. Help us to share the amazing news of your plan with others. Amen.



PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

A long time ago, the people who once loved God and tried to follow His commandments had turned away from trusting in God. They were unkind to each other. They did not care for children without parents. Older people who had no family were forgotten. They were unfair and mean to each other.

But God had a plan to bring them back to Him. Because He loved the whole world, out of the broken people that were all descendants of Jesse, God would give a baby named Jesus.

Jesus came as God's own Son. He came as the Messiah. He was the Savior the entire world needed. Like a baby branch growing from an almost dead stump, Jesus promised new life to those that love and trust in Him!

DISCUSS:

Are good things worth waiting for? Jesus promises to make all things good for those who love Him.

PRAYER:

God, we love you and thank you for sending your Son Jesus.

NOV
29

The Image of God

A SELECTION FROM GENESIS 1:26-31

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

When God created the first two humans, the list of those present is actually more extensive than it appears at first glance. Of course, there are the two humans and God the creator. There's also the Spirit, hovering over the scene. And there's the second person of the Trinity, the Word who was with God in the beginning, through whom all things were created (John 1). That person, Jesus Christ, may not be present in his human flesh quite yet, but He's certainly part of this scene.

As God squats in the dust, gathering it into the form of a man, he has another human in mind—Jesus Christ. Though Jesus has yet to be born into the world, when He is, He will define humanity for all time. He is first—alpha—and ultimate—omega (Revelation 1:8). So when God creates that man and that woman in Genesis, fashioning them after His image, He is really fashioning them after the image of Jesus Christ, who is the image of God (Colossians 1:15). If we humans bear God's image, Christ is God's image.

Keep this in mind the next time you hear that it's our ability to reason, to create things, or to relate to other people: that it is the image of God in us. It might be that. Or it might simply be Jesus Christ, the perfect human, the one there from the beginning, the one who is always interceding for us (Romans 8:34). If we worry that the image of God has grown dim in us, we can be confident that through Christ, it's shining brightly.

DISCUSS:

1. Read the first chapter of Genesis. God describes His creation in two words by the end. He says everything He created was "very good." What part of us is "very good?"
2. How does Jesus expect His followers to view all others whom He also created?

PRAYER:

Thank you, God, for creating us in your image. We pray that you will help us understand the responsibility and the honor bearing your image entails. Help us to love you and love others as you have loved us. Amen.



PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

God created Adam and Eve. Not only did God form their bodies, their feelings, and their minds; He also crafted them to be like Himself. He did not make them to be gods like He is God, but He gave them the ability to love, to think, and to make good choices. These are all things that Jesus did while He was on earth.

God wants you to be like Jesus. That's why He sent Jesus to earth to teach us how to love God and to love others.

When you look at another person, remember, God created them with just as much care and love that He did when He created you.

DISCUSS:

What are ways you can show others that you love them the way God loves them?

PRAYER:

Thank you, God, for loving us and creating us in a way that we can love you and others.

**NOV
30**

The Fall of Man

A SELECTION FROM GENESIS 3

Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

And everything was going so well...

God gave the man and the woman He created a perfect place to call home. They ate from the garden and of the tree of life freely. They were to love God as He loved them. A perfect relationship. Yet, they listened to the voice of deception in the form of a serpent. They chose to forgo their relationship with God and become gods themselves.

However, they did not become like God. Their disobedience separated them from God. Their sin took root in their hearts as it also took root in God's good world like a noxious weed. Because Adam and Eve ate the fruit off the tree that God commanded them not to eat from, they were banished from the garden. Exiled. They ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and now they are cut off from the tree of life.

But you might know how the story ends. There's a tree at the beginning of the story, and there's one at the end. At the end, the tree is smack dab in the center of the city, drawing its nourishment from the river that flows from the throne of God. The leaves of the tree have restorative powers: they are "for the healing of the nations" (Revelations 22:2). The people who live in the city have a share in that tree.

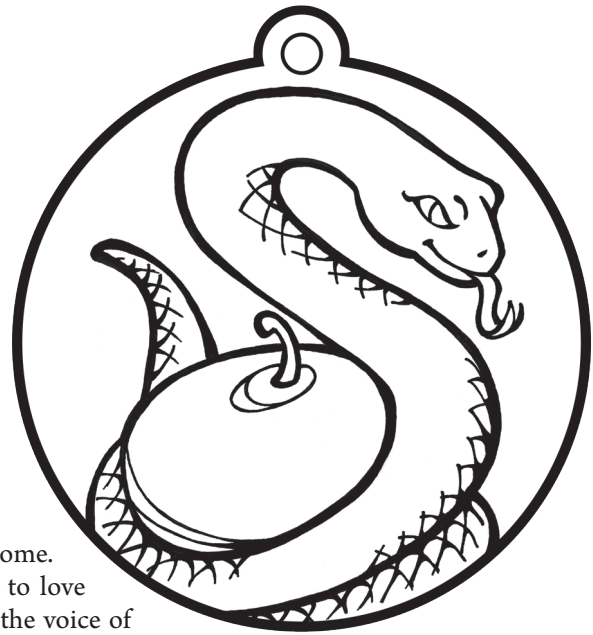
So how do we get from the tree at the beginning to the tree at the end? It's by way of another tree—the cross upon which Jesus hangs. God the Son takes up residence in the world, not like a noxious weed, but like a careful gardener, tending His creatures and sacrificing Himself on our behalf. Because of His birth, death, and resurrection, we are invited back to the tree. We can eat of its fruit, find rest in its shade, and delight in its beauty. Thanks be to God.

DISCUSS:

1. What effect does sin have in our lives?
2. What temptations do we face that cause us to sin? How can we resist those temptations?

PRAYER:

Thank you, God for creating your lovely world for us to enjoy. Thank you for loving us so much that even when we sin and choose to disobey, you promise us Jesus and His love. Help us to understand how you prepared the world for the advent of Your Son. Amen.



PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden and had one rule from God: "Do not eat the fruit of the forbidden tree." Adam and Eve listened to the devil instead of God and ate the fruit. God still loved Adam and Eve, but He had to punish them for disobeying Him. He sent them out of the garden, and they had to work for their food. God also made a promise to Adam and Eve: He would always love them. Today, we remember that even when we make bad choices, like Adam and Eve did, God still loves us.

DISCUSS:

What sort of bad choices do we sometimes make?

PRAYER:

Thank you, God, for loving us, even when we make bad choices.

The Price of Sin

A SELECTION FROM GENESIS 6:11–9:13

The flood continued forty days on the earth. The waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters prevailed and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the face of the waters. And the waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered. The waters prevailed above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, livestock, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all mankind. Everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. They were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark. And the waters prevailed on the earth 150 days.



The wickedness is too much to bear. Cruelty and violence are overwhelming. Everything is corrupt to the core: “every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5).

Fed up, God demolishes it. He drowns it in rain. Water, murky water, swallows up the whole of God’s creation. What was once a lush landscape had been marred by the evil of people, so God buried the whole thing in water.

By God’s design, only Noah and his family and a sampling of animals survive. And even they are powerless, reliant on God’s mercy to stop the rain and begin again. The lonely ark drifts on the vast expanse of water.

Until the rains stop, and the deep holds back its fountains. Still the ark drifts.

The waters subside. But still the ark drifts. A bird sent out returns, finding no place—not a single twig—to alight on for even a moment.

The waters recede further, though not enough to see more than the tops of mountains. No grassy plains, no flower-strewn meadows, no tree-lined valleys. Just rocky peaks.

Noah sends out another bird. He doesn’t hold his breath. It may very well return bearing no sign of life. But wait—what’s that in its beak? An olive leaf, smooth, fragrant, redolent with life. Hope is born.

DISCUSS:

1. What is the price of sin?
2. God made a promise to never again destroy the whole earth with a flood (Genesis 9:11). What other promises has God made and kept throughout history according to Scripture?

PRAYER:

Lord, we understand that sin deserves to be punished. Thank you for making a way for us to receive forgiveness for our sins through Jesus Christ, your Son.

PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

Many people were disobeying God and this made God sad. There came a time when there was so much sin in the world that God had to find a way to remove sin from the world. So He asked Noah to build the ark and to save his own family, as well as the animals, because Noah and his family remembered God. Then God sent rain and the world flooded, and God destroyed all the people and animals that were not on the ark. When the water was gone, God sent a rainbow to show us that He won’t ever flood the world again. Every time you see a rainbow, remember that God keeps His promises.

DISCUSS:

- Have you ever seen a rainbow?
- What colors did you see?

PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for keeping your promises and for rainbows.

The Calling to Follow
A SELECTION FROM GENESIS 12:1-7

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Moving isn’t most people’s idea of a good time. Packing feels overwhelming, loading and unloading the truck are exhausting, and settling in seems never ending. Then there’s the way moving often takes us far away from the places we know and the people we love.

But God doesn’t let those challenges stop Him from calling us to a new home. Abraham and Sarah had to pack up their tents, load up their camels, and slowly make their way from their home in Ur to a new land, Canaan. Abraham and Sarah could have decided to stay put, figuring that the energy of moving wasn’t worth it. They could have established themselves more deeply in Ur and remained close to their families.

If they had done that, though, God’s blessing wouldn’t have gone out to the world. Through Abraham, God promises to bless all the families of the earth. Abraham’s willingness to do something uncomfortable and unknown means that the grace of God goes out.

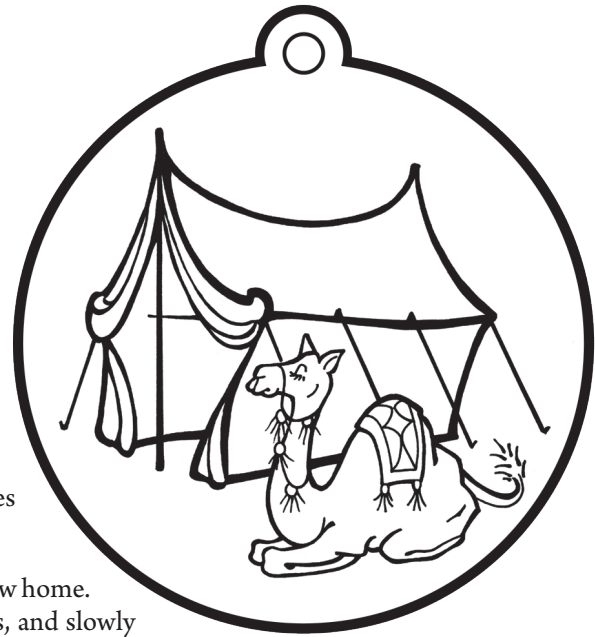
In Abraham’s journey, we can see the faint outlines of Jesus Himself. The Son of God also left His home, where He dwelt with the Father. He also traveled to a distant land, the land of humanity. And through Him, the grace of God went out. Jesus’s willingness to leave the comfort of the divine dwelling and enter into our world means that the blessing extends to us. From Him, we have received grace upon grace.

DISCUSS:

1. God has a plan for your life, but it may not be as focused on yourself as you might think. His bigger purpose is to incorporate you into His bigger plan. How has God called you to join His bigger plan?
2. What are some ways you can seek God’s will in your life?

PRAYER:

God, thank you for using Abraham to bring hope into the world. Through his family, you really did bless the entire world by sending your Son, Jesus, as one of Abraham’s descendants. Thank you for being faithful. Help us to seek your will for our lives as we read your Word and pray.



PRE-SCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

Sometimes God asks us to do things that are hard to do. God asks us to be good when it would be so much easier – and sometimes more fun – to be naughty. God asks us to go places and do things we’d rather not do.

God told Abraham to leave and go to a special land where God would take care of him and all his children after him. Abraham obeyed God.

DISCUSS:

Name a time that you did the right thing even when it was hard to do.

PRAYER:

Dear God, help us to listen to you and the Bible and do what we know is right.

The Promise in the Stars

GENESIS 15:1-6

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.



On a night when you're far from city lights and the sky is cloudless, the view is enough to stop you in your tracks. Plum-black backdrop, speckled with a thousand pinpricks of light. And the longer you stare, the more those thousand multiply into a thousand thousands. The dimmest distant stars reveal themselves.

That's what Abraham saw. He couldn't count them. He might have tried, curious about exactly how many descendants God was promising him. But you know how it goes—as you try to focus on one star, the rest go shimmery, and you lose count.

Childless Abraham, being promised not just one son, but a multitude of descendants. And the really magnificent thing is that those descendants aren't limited to the blood relatives of Abraham. The reason his descendants would be as numerous as the stars is that we're among them, too. In Christ, we were grafted into the family tree. A tree that includes Adam and Eve, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Jesse and David, and Jesus Himself. We are those stars. We are part of the story, too.

DISCUSS:

1. What did God call Himself when comforting Abraham and telling him not to be afraid?
2. God keeps His promises. It is one of His attributes that will never change. What promise does God give those who place their trust and faith in His Son?

PRAYER:

Lord, help us to place our trust in your promises. You are more faithful than the morning sun and the changing of the seasons. Thank you for being steadfast and loving.

PRE-SCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

God showed Abraham something amazing. He told Abraham to look up into the night sky and count all of the stars. There were more stars than Abraham could count. God told Abraham that his family would be as plentiful as the stars.

Today, we know that there are billions and billions of stars in our universe. God's promise to Abraham did not just include Abraham's family and all of their children. It also includes those who love and trust in Jesus. Jesus' followers are also Abraham's children and God's chosen people!

DISCUSS:

Do you think Abraham tried to count all the stars he could see? What does it feel like to be part of God's family?

PRAYER:

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, thank you for making me part of your family. I'm thankful that I get to be in the same family as Jesus. Amen.

The Gift in the Thicket
A SELECTION FROM GENESIS 22:1-14

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you..."

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

Oh, the heartache. Abraham had been promised not only the abundance of a multitude of descendants but the delight of a particular son. And here he stood, about to sacrifice that very son. God put him to the test, asking for what was most precious to Abraham: his son Isaac.

The promise hinged on Isaac. If Isaac didn't live to have children of his own, then the countless descendants would never come to be. God would have broken His promise. So, in heading up the mountain with Isaac, Abraham was counting on God to make a way where it seemed there was no way.

And God came through, providing a ram for Abraham to sacrifice. God kept His promise. He kept it again, centuries later, when He provided a different Lamb as a sacrifice. Like Abraham, God was willing to sacrifice His son, but in this case, there wasn't a ram to take His place. This time, the Lamb was the Son, too.

And it's that Lamb, the one who offered himself on our behalf and who rose again to new life, that we await this Advent. After all, Advent isn't just about getting excited for the babe who comes at Christmas. It's also about longing for his coming again. When all the world seems out of whack and it seems like there's no way for good to triumph, we wait. We wait for Jesus Christ to come in glory. We wait, counting on God to keep His promise to set things right.

DISCUSS:

1. What are some things that God may be asking you to trust Him in? What are you willing to sacrifice to follow His will?
2. Do you feel God is requiring too much from you at times? Could He be encouraging you to trust in Him more?

PRAYER:

God, trusting that you'll keep your promise is so hard sometimes. Strengthen our trust and give us the courage to wait to see how you will provide. Amen.



• PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

• Isaac was a special boy, and his father, Abraham, loved him very much. But Abraham loved God even more than he loved Isaac. One day God asked Abraham to take Isaac on a journey.

• Abraham obeyed. God also asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a way of showing how much Abraham loved God. Abraham was sad, but he knew that he had to obey God. He trusted that even though he was being asked to do something terrible, God would make everything right. As he was getting ready to sacrifice Isaac, God sent an angel to stop Abraham and save Isaac's life. Then Abraham sacrificed a ram as a way of honoring God, and to thank Him for saving Isaac's life. Today we put a ram on the Jesse tree to remind us that just as God saved Isaac by giving a ram, He saves us by giving Jesus, His Son.

• DISCUSS:

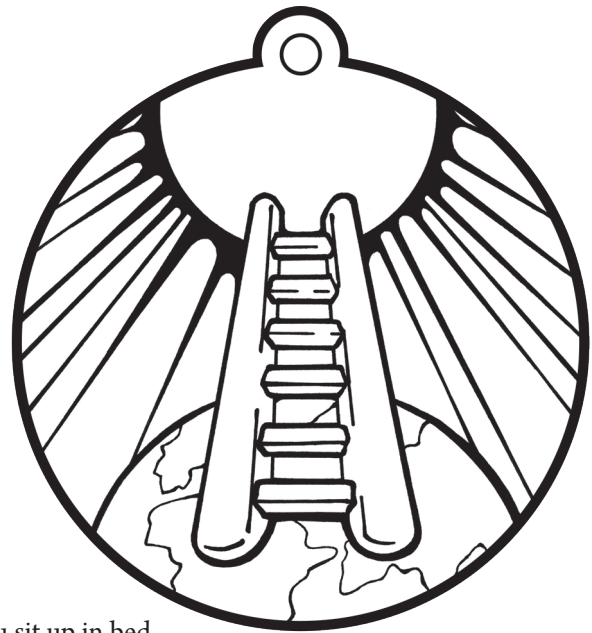
• Which rule is the hardest one for you to obey? Why?

• PRAYER:

• Dear God, Help us to listen to you and the Bible and do what you want us to do.

The Ladder to the Heavens
A SELECTION FROM GENESIS 28:10-22

And [Jacob] dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."



Have you had a dream like that—the kind that feels so vivid that you sit up in bed and start to act on it, as if the events of your dream had really happened? Except in Jacob’s case, they had. His dream wasn’t just the normal processes of a brain filing away the day’s events.

His dream was a vision deliberately given to him by God. In the dream, God reiterated the promise He made to Abraham, Jacob’s grandfather: “Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth ... and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” (Genesis 28:14). God also promised that He would remain with Jacob wherever Jacob went (28:15).

In response, Jacob determined that the Lord—the particular God of his father and grandfather—would be his God. He wouldn’t follow some other shoddy god. He also declared that this was to be the Lord’s house and that he’d give back to God a tenth of what God gave to him.

This is the pattern of the gospel: God makes a promise to us and commits Himself to us, and then we offer to God our allegiance and a portion of what we’ve been entrusted. During Advent, we anticipate the fullest expression of God’s promise to remain with us. At Christmas, Jesus comes as Emmanuel, God-with-us. As we wait for His coming, let’s consider where our allegiance lies and whether we’re offering back to God what’s rightfully His.

DISCUSS:

1. How do you know that God is always with you?
2. This holiday season, how can you demonstrate God’s love and presence to others around you?

PRAYER:

Lord, what a promise—to remain with us always! Through your Holy Spirit, point out to us the places where our response to your grace is less than adequate. Enable us to give ourselves fully to you. Amen.

**PRESCHOOL &
YOUNGER CHILDREN:**

Jacob, Isaac’s son, was feeling bad because he had been mean to his brother. He was running away, and stopped to rest. God gave him a dream. In the dream, there was a ladder going to heaven. God was at the top of the ladder. God told Jacob that He loved him and would take care of him always. Today, we put a ladder on the Jesse tree to remind us that God will always be with us just like Jacob.

DISCUSS:

How do you know that God is always with you?

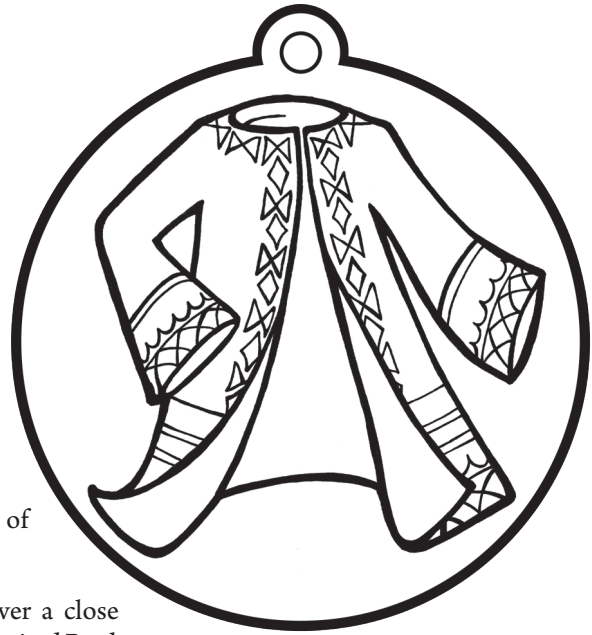
PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for being our friend and always being with us.

The Brother Most Loved
A SELECTION FROM GENESIS 37:1-36

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him...

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.



The story of Joseph and his brothers is not the Bible’s only story of betrayal and denial.

Judah, Joseph’s brother, isn’t the last person who values money over a close relationship—think of Judas, who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. And Reuben isn’t alone in his cowardice. Think of Peter on the night that Jesus was arrested: he too was too ashamed to stand up in defense of the innocent. Nor is Joseph the only person to end up alone in the pit of despair. Jesus himself knows what it’s like to be betrayed, ignored, and left for dead. He knows all about being at the bottom of a dark pit when you don’t deserve it.

The incredible thing is that whichever brother you’re most like—the traitor, the coward, or the one at the bottom of the pit—Jesus Christ loves you. If you’re a Judah or a Reuben, you are forgiven. God cherishes you as a precious child.

And if you’re a Joseph, the one deep down in the dark pit, Christ Himself is there with you. You’re not alone. Jesus is holding you close and loving you.

DISCUSS:

1. Is it difficult to forgive someone who has been unkind to you?
2. Joseph forgave his brothers of the wrongs they committed against him. Jesus offers forgiveness even though He was terribly wronged here on earth. How can you learn from their example and become more forgiving?

PRAYER:

Lord, what a relief it is that the Bible is full of real people, whose weaknesses are so like our own. Forgive us for our failings and assure us of your love and presence. Amen.

• PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

• Jacob had twelve sons, one whose name was Joseph. Jacob gave Joseph a colored coat. This made his brothers feel bad so they were mean to him. They sold him to a man who made him a servant and even put him in prison. But God had given Joseph a special gift of understanding dreams, and Joseph was able to use his special gift to help others. He was rewarded for his help by being given a very important job. While he was doing this job, he again met his brothers, who did not recognize him. Even though Joseph could have been mean to his brothers, he chose to help them. He knew that even though he had gone through some terrible times, God had been with him through everything, and God still expected him to do good things. Learning about Joseph helps us remember that we need to be kind to others even when they are mean to us.

• DISCUSS:

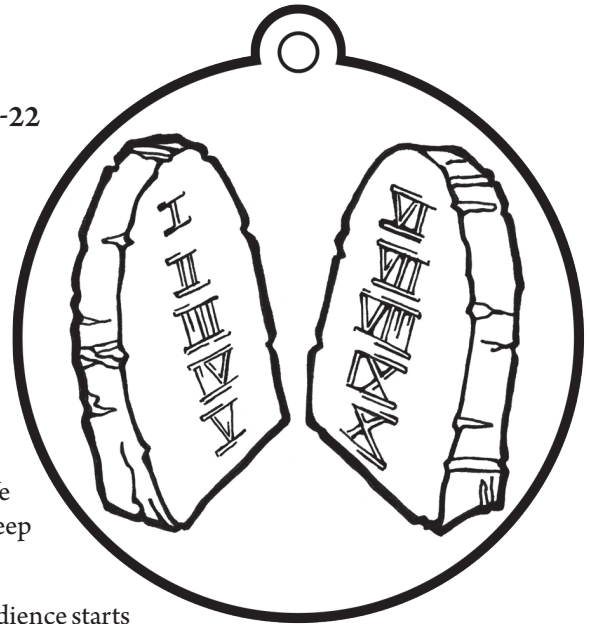
• Who can you be kind to today?

• PRAYER:

• God, help us to be kind to others just as you are kind and forgiving to us.

The Law of the Covenant
A SELECTION FROM DEUTERONOMY 5:1-22

And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the rules that I speak in your hearing today, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them. The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire.



On the one hand, the Ten Commandments seem fairly easy to keep. No idols—check. Don’t murder—check. Don’t steal—got it. We might get the impression that it’s within our power to do right, to keep the commandments, even to earn God’s love.

But as Jesus expounds upon the commandments in Matthew 5–7, obedience starts to seem less and less attainable. “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” Jesus says to the crowd (Matthew 5:48). Be perfect? That’s nigh impossible.

Until we remember how the whole thing works. Jesus is the true human. He’s the one perfectly reflecting the image of God (Colossians 1:15). And He hasn’t come “to abolish the law” (Matthew 5:17) by dismissing it as no longer relevant in an age of love and forgiveness. Nor has He come to make it ridiculously hard to keep, although we could stand to be reminded that we’re incapable of earning our salvation by perfectly keeping the law. Instead, says Jesus, “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Matthew 5:17).

Ah yes, that’s right. Jesus comes to fulfill the law, to keep the commandments that we fail to keep, to reverse the fall, and to break the curse. He does what we cannot. And when we are united to Him by the power of the Holy Spirit, we mysteriously keep the law, too. Praise God!

DISCUSS:

1. Have you ever done something you knew you weren’t supposed to?
2. Because God is perfect, He cannot overlook sin. God’s law reveals sin in people’s lives. What does it mean when Scripture says Jesus came to fulfill the law?

PRAYER:

Jesus, we don’t understand it completely, but we are so thankful that your life fulfills the law we daily fail to keep. Holy Spirit, work that mysterious process in us, and make us one with Christ. Amen.

PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

God gave the prophet Moses the laws by which He expected everyone to live by. The problem is, the people found it very difficult to live by God’s laws.

When we do something we aren’t supposed to do, we sin. God must punish sin. But God also loves us more than we could ever know. So He sent His Son Jesus to rescue us from our sin. Jesus lived by God’s laws perfectly so we could be forgiven of our sins.

DISCUSS:

Why is it important to follow the rules?

PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for teaching us to follow the rules and helping us learn to love you.

The Rope in the Window

A SELECTION FROM JOSHUA 2:1-21

And Joshua the son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." And they went and came into the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab and lodged there. And it was told to the king of Jericho, "Behold, men of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land." Then the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land." But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them...

Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men, "I know that the Lord has given you the land... For the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house... And the men said to her, "Our life for yours even to death! If you do not tell this business of ours, then when the Lord gives us the land we will deal kindly and faithfully with you..."

"Behold, when we come into the land, you shall tie this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and you shall gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your father's household..." And she said, "According to your words, so be it."

The family line of Jesus is full of unlikely people. They regularly forget, disobey, or betray God. They're sinners, not honorable, composed saints.

Rahab is one of these unlikely people. And she's more unlikely than most to be named in Jesus's genealogy (Matthew 1:5) because she is an outsider on three counts: she's (a) a woman, (b) a Canaanite, and (c) a prostitute.

In a genealogy that stretches from Abraham to Jesus, she's one of just five women named. In a patrilineal genealogy—a record of fathers and sons—she makes the cut. Just as shocking, she makes the cut despite being a Gentile, a non-Israelite, someone decidedly outside the family tree. And, of course, she's a prostitute.

And yet God finds her worthy of a place in His family. He invites her to play a role in the story of Israel claiming the land God has promised. And He grafts her into the family early enough that she gets to be one of Jesus's great- great- great-grandmothers.

What an encouragement to us! Not only does God want us in His family, He wants to use us. When we join the family, he'll put us to work, helping move this story along to its beautiful conclusion. Rahab got to play a part in Jesus's coming as a baby, but we get to join in as Jesus comes in glory.

DISCUSS:

1. Do you ever feel you're not worthy of love? Did you know God sees you with the same loving eyes He sees everyone else?

PRAYER:

God, your grace is astonishing! You could care less about our pedigree, and you're even willing to overlook our sin as you graft us into your family and your story. Would you help us to be faithful like Rahab as we do the work you've called us to do? Amen.



PRE-SCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

There was a woman named Rahab who lived in Jericho. She helped two of the Israelite spies as they got ready to march around the walls. She hid the two men in her house and then helped them to escape. She knew that God had promised the city of Jericho to Joshua and the Israelites, and she believed that God is a powerful God. Because she believed in God and helped His servants, God saved her and her family. When the men were marching, she put a red ribbon out her window, and they were brought to safety. Today we remember that God will help our faith grow, just like Rahab's.

DISCUSS:

Tell about a time that God gave you the courage to help someone.

PRAYER:

Please help us to have faith like Rahab, Jesus. Thank you for taking care of us.

The Redeemer of the Broken

A SELECTION FROM RUTH 3:1-4:12

Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do." And she replied, "All that you say I will do."



If you read the whole book of Ruth, you may notice where the action takes place: in Bethlehem. It's not the last time we'll find ourselves in that town this Advent. Maybe you know this story as a story about a woman uncommonly devoted to her mother-in-law. Or a story about a woman humble yet bold enough to find favor with Boaz, who could make life easier for these two widows. And certainly it is a story about Ruth's faithfulness. But it's also a story about Boaz's faithfulness, which points to the faithfulness of one who was born in Bethlehem years later.

In Israelite law, there was a provision for widows with no sons. The brother of the deceased man was commanded to take the man's widow as wife, both redeeming the man's land and providing a son to carry on the family name. Without this man, called a kinsman redeemer, the widow would be left with nothing, and the family would cease to exist.

In the book of Ruth, Boaz steps up as the kinsman redeemer, a relative of Naomi's husband with the power to redeem the land, marry Ruth, and carry on the family. Who else do we know who steps up as a kinsman redeemer? Indeed, Jesus Christ is our kinsman redeemer. By virtue of His humanity, He is our brother, our kinsman, and He is willing to become the bridegroom in order to redeem us. He faithfully steps up to save us. He lovingly joins Himself to us, impoverished though we are, and makes us His own. Thanks be to God.

DISCUSS:

1. Has someone ever helped you with a problem large or small?
2. Jesus is the redeemer God planned to bring to earth. Can Jesus' faithfulness in following God's plan help you be faithful in the things you have promised God and others?

PRAYER:

Jesus, how humbling it is that you would consider yourself our kinsman, a member of our family. And how humbling that you would pay the price with your life to redeem us. Thank you. Amen.

PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

Ruth and Naomi had lost all the people they loved. Naomi's two sons – one of them was Ruth's husband – had died, and Naomi's husband had died too. Naomi had been living in Ruth's country, far from her family, and so Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem. Ruth could have stayed in her own country with her own family, but she chose to go to Bethlehem with Naomi. They had to work hard so they could eat. One of Naomi's relatives named Boaz helped them. His workers would leave grain in the fields for Ruth to gather and make into bread. Boaz shared his grain with Ruth so she could take care of Naomi. Today, learn about Ruth to remind us that God wants people to take care of each other just like He takes care of us.

DISCUSS:

Tell about a time when you shared something with someone else.

PRAYER:

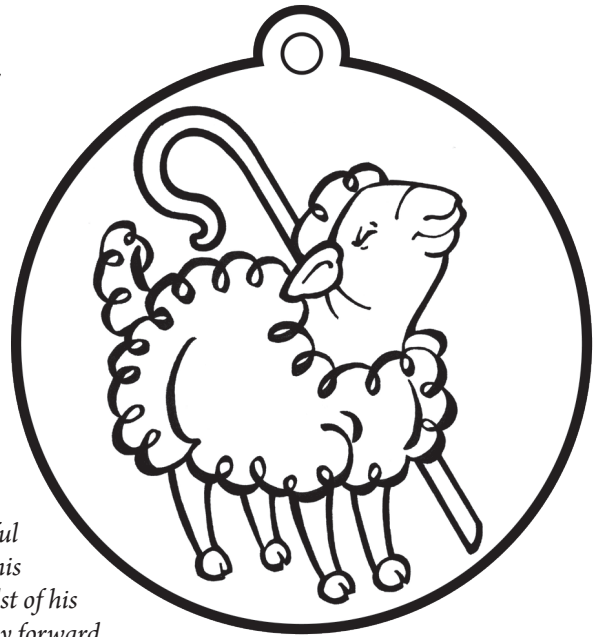
Dear God, help us to be kind friends who share what we have.

The Shepherd Who is a King

A SELECTION FROM 1 SAMUEL 16:1-15

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." ...

And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen these." Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here." And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And the Lord said, "Arise, anoint him, for this is he." Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon David from that day forward.



It's hard not to love the story of an underdog. Like so many people in Jesus's family history, David is an unlikely pick. He's not the firstborn. In fact, he's the baby of the family, the last of Jesse's eight sons. In his life thus far, he hasn't been much of a hero. When Samuel anoints him, David hasn't defeated Goliath. He hasn't created complex battle strategies. He's an unknown farm boy.

Yet it's David, the underdog, whom God chooses to lead His people. God subverts expectations, choosing a young shepherd, not an experienced politician. God has a habit of subverting expectations. David was an unexpected choice, as was Israel as a whole. If you wanted to bless the world, would you work through a tiny people group, often dominated by other nations?

And when you finally came to save your people and express your love for the whole world, would you come in the flesh as a member of that underdog nation? Would you be born as a baby, vulnerable and unknown? Would you work as a common tradesman, acquiring none of the experience or accolades of a political victor? Would you submit to humiliation, persecution, and even death at the hands of a powerful empire?

In Jesus Christ, descendant of Jesse and David, God's love for the whole world is shown. Jesus is the one anointed to be king, not just of Israel but of all people. In the greatest subversion of expectations, God makes Himself the underdog and triumphs over sin and death.

DISCUSS:

1. Do you ever feel like you're not ready for what God has planned for you?
2. Jesus entered the world in an unexpected way. Many had expectations for the Messiah that were not a part of God's plan. Are there ways God is asking you to trust that are unexpected?

PRAYER:

Thank you, Lord, for working in ways contrary to what we expect. Thank you for showing us the way of humility and self-sacrifice, in both your birth and your death. We rejoice that you rose from the dead and reign in glory, and we await your return. Amen.

PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

David was a shepherd when he was a young boy. He would use a staff to gently herd his sheep and keep them safe from wild animals. He learned to trust God from his dad Jesse. David often sang songs to show his love for God.

God chose David to be the king of Israel. Even though David was just a shepherd boy and no one expected it, God knew that David was perfect for the job.

When Jesus came to the earth as a little baby, no one expected that either. But God's plan was perfect and Jesus was also perfect for the job.

DISCUSS:

What do you do when something surprising happens?

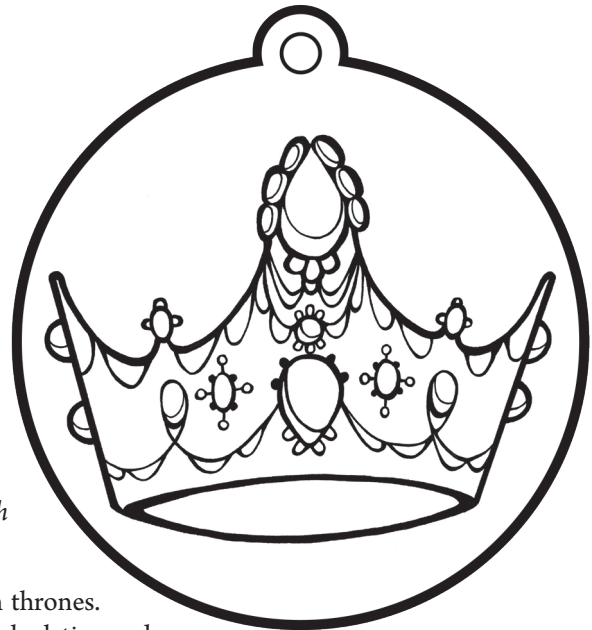
PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for choosing to love us in ways that surprise us!

The King Who is a Shepherd

2 SAMUEL 5:1-5

Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "Behold, we are your bone and flesh. In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the Lord said to you, 'You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.'" So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel. David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months, and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years.



King and shepherd: the two seem like polar opposites. Kings sit on thrones. They wear expensive clothes and talk to important people. They are calculating and political and oversee whole nations. Shepherds, on the other hand, stand on the hillsides. They wear clothes that can get dirty, and they talk mostly to sheep. They are cautious and patient and oversee a single flock.

David, though, was both. He was a shepherd whom God chose to be king. A quick review of world leaders might suggest that actually, a shepherd would make the best kind of king. A shepherd is humble and cares more about people than about power. David carried his shepherding spirit into his reign as king.

It's an honor for David to be called both "shepherd of my people Israel" and "ruler over Israel" because he's not the only shepherd-king in Scripture. In John 10, Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd, the one who knows all of His sheep and lays down His life for them. And He is also king, the one who is victorious over the powers of sin, death, and evil.

DISCUSS:

1. What responsibilities has God placed upon you?
2. A person faithfully serving a king would hang upon their ruler's every command and every word. Do you have a servant's attitude in serving Jesus, the King of kings?

PRAYER:

King Jesus, we praise you that you have the heart of a shepherd! How wonderful that you are both mighty and gentle, both self-sacrificing and victorious. Would you bring a spirit of gentleness and self-sacrifice to our family today? Amen.

PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

God gave David a big job. David was the king of a whole nation of people. That meant it was David's job to protect his people and make choices that kept them safe and well.

David ruled like a shepherd tends sheep. He was gentle, wise, and loved God.

Jesus is our king and He rules with love, gentleness, and forgiveness. He will always be king because He is the one who defeated sin and death.

DISCUSS:

How can you be more gentle and kind to others?

PRAYER:

Dear Lord, thank you for Jesus who rules over us with love, gentleness and kindness.

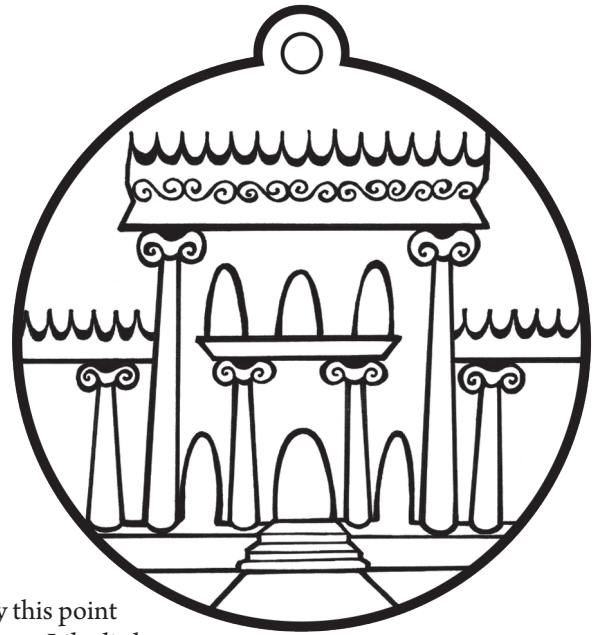
The House for God's Name

A SELECTION FROM 1 KINGS 5-6

"And so I intend to build a house for the name of the Lord my God, as the Lord said to David my father, 'Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house for my name...'"

Now the word of the Lord came to Solomon, "Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes and obey my rules and keep all my commandments and walk in them, then I will establish my word with you, which I spoke to David your father. And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people Israel."

So Solomon built the house and finished it.



The temple is more than a temple. You've probably figured that out by this point in Advent. All of these Old Testament stories point beyond themselves. Like little mirrors, they catch the light of Christ's birth, His life and death, His resurrection and ascension. Their reflective beams even give us a glimpse of what's to come—His ultimate return to set all things right.

So how is the temple more than a temple? Well, throughout Israel's history, the temple served as the meeting place for God and humanity. (Before Solomon built the temple, that meeting place was the leather-sided tabernacle, a tent that could be set up and taken down as Israel moved from place to place.) In the temple, in the holy depths of its interior, God lived. There, in the temple, God coexisted with humanity.

Eventually, the temple was destroyed by Israel's enemies. So now where would God coexist with humanity?

In Jesus Christ. In the person of Jesus, deity and humanity exist together. They are one. Jesus is the temple. Despite the efforts of the Jewish leaders to destroy that temple by crucifying Jesus, it was rebuilt—resurrected, risen.

And because of Jesus, we don't have to go into the inmost interior of a building to meet God. Through Jesus, we can know God directly. What a gift!

DISCUSS:

1. What are some ways that you honor God with your life?
2. Most of us have the option to go to church in order to worship God. However, because of the work of Jesus, do His followers need to be at the church building in order to worship Him? Why is it important to practice worship in every part of your life?

PRAYER:

Jesus, thank you for being the temple, the place where we can meet God. We don't have to trek for miles to a specific place where God dwells. By your Holy Spirit, we are connected with God as we are connected with you. Remind us of your presence this week. Amen.

PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

King David had a son named Solomon. King Solomon did what his father was unable to do. He built a temple to God so that people could come and worship.

Today, Jesus is what allows us to worship God anywhere we like. Can you think of anywhere you would not be able to worship God?

That's right. Anywhere we go, God is there. We can worship Him and show Him our love anywhere and any time.

DISCUSS:

When was the last time you prayed to God before bedtime?

PRAYER:

Dear Lord, thank you for letting us come to you any time we want to tell you we love you.

The Fire from the Heavens

A SELECTION FROM 1 KINGS 18:17-39

And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God."



Can you imagine such a showdown between God and some other god today?

Say the other god is happiness—well meaning, certainly, but not a path to salvation. Who would win in a competition between the Triune God and happiness? In theory, God. But in practice, we're used to seeing the gods of the world win out. Popular Instagram accounts seem to depict lives filled with so much joy. Books written by financial gurus make them seem so much more secure than we are. Even the gods of minimalism make their disciples appear to be far more content than those of us who worship Christ.

It leaves us wondering: Is God really powerful? Can God make me more joyful than happiness can? Does God hold my future more than good retirement savings can? Is it possible to be satisfied in Jesus even if I haven't thoughtfully chosen every object in my home?

The answer is a hearty yes! It may not always seem like it, but the God we worship is the same God Elijah worshiped, the God who sent the water-logged altar up in flames. Let's ask God with trust and conviction to show Himself to us and deepen our trust in Him.

DISCUSS:

1. Does God want people to just see Him as a way to be a good person? Does God want people to know He is all powerful and fully in control?
2. God demonstrates His power in amazing ways if we would just look. What is one thing you see that demonstrates God's ultimate authority over creation?

PRAYER:

Almighty God, I know in my head that you alone are God, but I don't always believe it in my heart. The gods of health and happiness are so seductive. Forgive me for putting my trust in them. Give me confidence in you and your power. Amen.

PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

Elijah was a man God chose to speak God's words. God sent Elijah to people who had turned away from God and chose to worship a false god.

Elijah told the people to build an altar to their god while he built an altar to the real God. He said, "If your god is real, have him send fire from the sky and burn up the offering."

The people tried and tried, but their false god never answered. Elijah gathered the people around him and prayed to the real God and fire immediately came down and burnt up the altar.

God showed that He is the only true God and He alone is worthy of worship.

DISCUSS:

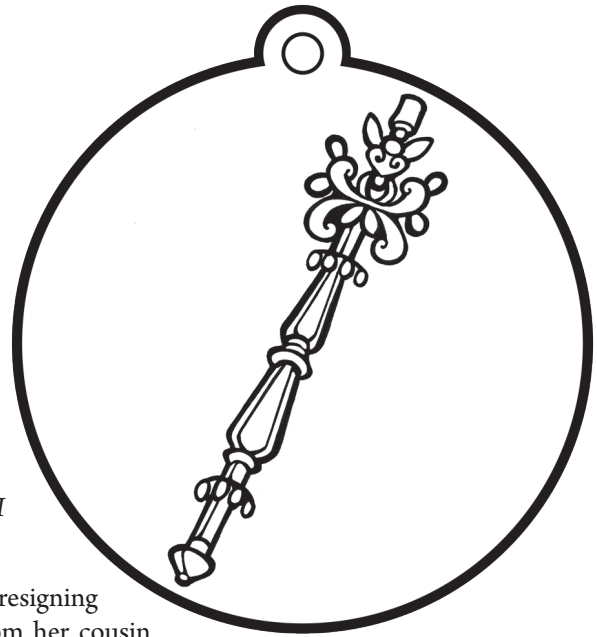
Have you ever talked to a friend about God?

PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for showing us your power and love.

The Queen Who is a Servant
A SELECTION FROM ESTHER 4

Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish."



You can hear the resolve in Esther's voice: "If I die, I die." She's not resigning herself to her fate; she's facing it head on. She has just learned from her cousin Mordecai that Haman is more than scheming to kill the Jewish people. Haman has convinced the king to issue a decree that authorizes the governors to kill all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day.

When Esther hears of the decree, she evaluates the situation. She remembers the fate of Vashti, another headstrong queen. Is it worth it to visit the king, uninvited, to see if she can do something about the decree?

Esther would be risking her life to appear before King Ahasuerus. The rule is that if anyone enters the king's inner court without being called, that person will be put to death. And Esther knows it. Since entering the king's harem, she has lost virtually all of her agency. Her life is not in her hands.

And maybe that's the whole point: her life belongs to the Lord. Maybe that's what finally persuades her to risk death and go before the king. Esther's life belongs to one who likewise gave Himself up to save his people. Jesus did more than risk death. He actually died. By virtue of our baptisms, we have, too, which frees us to take risks the way Esther did. We can look past our own security and make sacrifices for others. The risks we take may very well bring life for other people.

DISCUSS:

1. Have you ever given money, time, or something else to another person to help them?
2. Esther was willing to lay down her life for her people. Jesus did give His life for all sinners. Ask yourself: Have you given your life to God's plan or do you hold onto it as your own?

PRAYER:

Jesus Christ, you willingly went to the cross so that I could live. In baptism, I have died, too, so I no longer have claim over my life. Help me to die daily to myself so that I can be used by you to further your kingdom.

**PRE-SCHOOL &
YOUNGER CHILDREN:**

Esther was a beautiful Jewish woman. She lived with her cousin Mordecai, a high official in the king's government. After winning a beauty contest, she moves into the palace, becoming queen.

She never tells the king that she is Jewish. Some time later, Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman, another high official. Angry, Haman plots to kill Mordecai, as well as all the Jews. Mordecai hears of the plot and reports it to Esther. Esther asks the king to save the Jewish people. The king does. Esther's faith and courage saves her people. If God can use ordinary people like Esther to do great things, He can use you and me too.

DISCUSS:

What can you do to show God that you love Him?

PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for helping us do great things for you.

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The Light in the Darkness

A SELECTION FROM ISAIAH 9:2-7

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.*

Deep darkness is unnerving. Maybe you've experienced it while camping. The night is moonless, the trees thick overhead. Your campsite is at the far end of the road, and you've left your flashlight in the tent. The fire has died. You can see nothing. No silhouettes, no shadows, no specks of light in the distance. Nothing.

You don't know what's around you. You've lost your bearings. Your eyes strain to adjust, but the futility of it gives you a headache. The darkness is oppressive.

This is the kind of deep darkness the people of Israel walked in—disorienting, oppressive darkness. They had been walking in it so long, they'd lost hope. They'd nearly forgotten what it was to see.

It's into this darkness that the sun comes blaring over the horizon, heralding a new day. On this day, a Son will be born. He will be a righteous king, and with His reign of light come hope and peace. The atmosphere has changed completely. Rather than feeling disoriented, the people know which way is up. They are certain of what is right, of where they are headed.

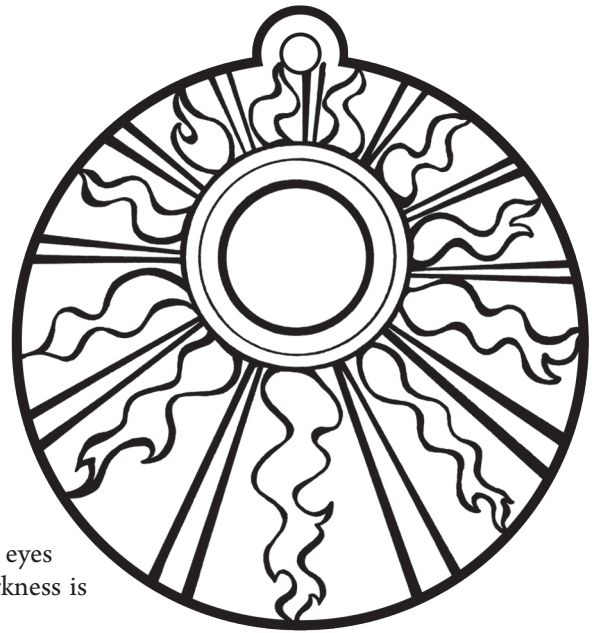
This is the hope of Advent. God promises that morning is coming. Whatever our dark, depressing circumstances, we can have confidence in this: a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace is on His way. God with trust and conviction to show Himself to us and deepen our trust in Him.

DISCUSS:

1. Where is your hope for your own future?
2. God's promises have always been and will always be kept. What promises have you found difficult to keep?

PRAYER:

God of all creation, we can't wait for your arrival. We pray that you would shine into the darkest corners of our world and of our lives, bringing hope and setting things right. Amen.



PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

Many, many years before Jesus was born, people called prophets would bring God's message to the people of Israel. The prophets reminded the people of what God wanted them to do.

God wanted them to be good and kind to others. The prophets told the people to worship only the one true God. Isaiah was a prophet who loved God very much. He wanted the people of Judah to obey and listen to God so they would be protected and blessed. When Isaiah was sad for the people, God gave him a promise that they would be saved when Jesus was born. This made Isaiah and the people very happy. We know God keeps His promises because He is faithful.

DISCUSS:

Have you ever made a promise to somebody? What was it? Did you keep it?

PRAYER:

Dear God, help us to keep our promises just as you always do.

The Peace in the Victory

ISAIAH 11:6-9

*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.
They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*



What a scene! Wolves wander alongside lambs. Leopards nap next to baby goats. A parade of calves and bears is led by a bright-eyed toddler, who stops to invite a snake to join the fun.

The scene has a fantastical, circus-like quality to it, so playful as to be silly. You can practically hear the honky-tonk in the background. Is it a joke? It's so far-fetched that it might as well be.

When in this dog-eat-dog world would a wolf ever restrain itself enough not to tear into a plump young lamb? When would a mother dare to let her child wrestle with a bear cub? When would a venomous snake lick a baby's hand the way a puppy might?

In this world, probably never. Even the most optimistic among us wouldn't expect a lamb to survive in a pasture with a wolf. But in the world to come, the world that's just over the edge of the horizon, this improbable parade will be the way of things. In the world where the Lord reigns, all of this improbability becomes not just probable but actual. Isaiah's scene is no fable. This is what we have to look forward to.

DISCUSS:

1. What does the word peace mean to you?
2. Jesus calms the raging storm in Mark 4:35-41. What areas of your life would you pray for Jesus to calm and bring peace?

PRAYER:

How eager I am for a world in which predator and prey play together. May your kingdom come, filling the earth with the knowledge of you. Amen.

PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

The prophet Isaiah wrote down the things God showed him. He saw a wolf laying down with a lamb. A lion letting a baby calf sleep on him. And in the midst of what we see as dangerous creatures, a young child would play safely among them.

Isaiah is helping us understand that one day, God will bring peace upon His creation. No one will get hurt. No one will ever cry in pain.

Jesus will be the king over everything!

DISCUSS:

If you could have a pet tiger or a pet bear, which would you choose?

PRAYER:

Dear Lord, thank you for being the God of peace.

The Prophet in the City
JONAH 3:1-5

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

Let's play a word association game: I say, "Jonah." You say, "_____."

If you said "whale," I don't blame you. That's the first thing that pops into my head, too. If you said "sackcloth," bonus points for you! Because the story of Jonah doesn't end in the belly of the fish. The story of Jonah is actually about calling the city of Nineveh to repentance, and that's exactly what happens. The story doesn't end until the people listen to Jonah's message about God, repent of their wrongdoing, and turn to what's right.

And their change only happens once Jonah listens to God, repents of his wrongdoing, and turns to what's right—namely, bringing God's message to Nineveh. It's a good reminder that we're capable of standing in the way of others' obedience. Once we obey, they can, too.

Thankfully, Jesus, who also spent three days in a dark, dank place, was obedient. His obedience, even to the point of death on a cross, has made it possible for the rest of us to be obedient, too.

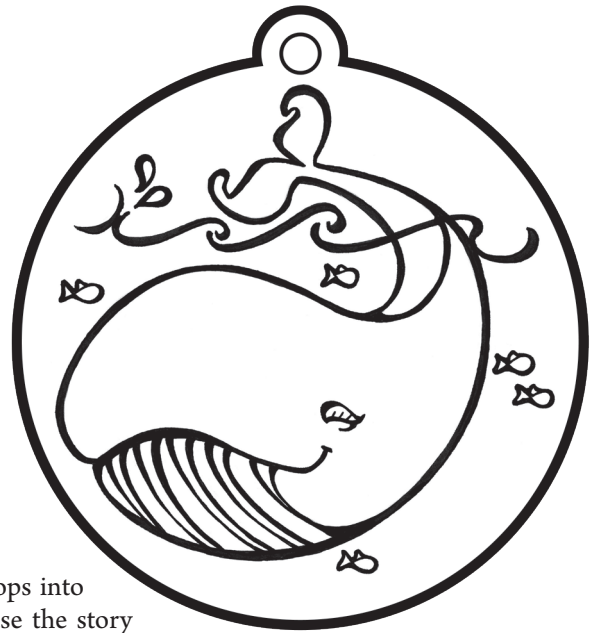
When we abide in Jesus, we don't have to scorn Nineveh and run the other way. We can proclaim Jesus so others can follow, too.

DISCUSS:

1. Have you ever been nervous or scared to do what was right?
2. Just like God gave Jonah a task to tell the city of Nineveh about God's judgment, we too have a task given to us by Jesus. In what ways are you working to tell others about Jesus?

PRAYER:

God, search our hearts and point out the places where we haven't been following you. We confess that we have fallen short. Help us, like Jonah and Jesus, to be obedient. To where or what are you calling us? We want to follow. Amen.



PRE-SCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

Jonah was one of God's special preachers, called a prophet. God asked Jonah to do a special and important job. God told Jonah to go to a city and tell them they needed to obey God. Jonah did not want to go. He got on a boat to run away. Suddenly there was a terrible storm. Jonah was thrown into the water and swallowed by a huge fish! Jonah prayed to God and the big fish opened its mouth and let Jonah out. Then Jonah listened to what God asked him to do. The story of Jonah helps us remember that God wants us to tell other people about Him and His love.

DISCUSS:

Who can you tell about God?

PRAYER:

Thank you for listening to our prayers, God. Please help us to tell others about You.

The Advisor in the Den

A SELECTION FROM DANIEL 6

Then these men came by agreement and found Daniel making petition and plea before his God. Then they came near and said before the king, concerning the injunction, "O king! Did you not sign an injunction, that anyone who makes petition to any god or man within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions?" The king answered and said, "The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked..."

Then the king commanded, and Daniel was brought and cast into the den of lions...

Then, at break of day, the king arose and went in haste to the den of lions. As he came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish. The king declared to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?" Then Daniel said to the king, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm."

Don't mistake Daniel 6 for a children's story. This is the gruesome stuff of nightmares—a sinister plot to trap Daniel in his singular devotion to the God of Israel, a pit full of hungry wild beasts, and in the end, the mauling and death of whole families, including children, by those lions.

The story reminds us of the risks of following God, of the very real consequences of dogged faithfulness in the face of a cruel, power-hungry world. It reminds us that to be a Christian is an obvious lifestyle. The fragrance of Christ is threatening to people who reek of selfish ambition and corruption. Daniel's insistence on "smelling" like the God of Israel nearly got him killed by people who couldn't stomach the aroma.

But he didn't get killed. And that part of the story reminds us of God's faithfulness to us when we are faithful to Him. God has promised that He will be with His people, so He doesn't shut the mouths of the lions from a distance. He sends His angel to keep Daniel company. In the Bible, angels are more than messengers, delivering God's words like celestial mail carriers; they are understood to represent God. It's as if God Himself is with Daniel in that den. The Lion of Judah tells those lions of Babylon who's boss.

What encouragement for us when we feel like we're surrounded by bloodthirsty lions—whether it's a competitive work environment, a mental soundtrack that tells you you're just not measuring up, or an illness that threatens to sap all your strength. God, who delivers and rescues, is with you always.

DISCUSS:

1. What kinds of pressures do you feel each day from the world around you?
2. Read Romans 12:2. What tool of truth should we use to renew our minds?

PRAYER:

Living God, your kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world. You invert the usual power systems and provide a different set of rules to live by. Living in your kingdom can put us at odds with the world around us, but even when we feel under attack, you are with us. Amen.



• PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

• God wants to be the most important thing in our lives: more important than our family, more important than our things, more important than even our own lives. Daniel understood that; he worshiped God every day. A law was made that told Daniel that he had to worship a different king instead of the one true God. When Daniel did not obey this law and worshiped God, he was punished and put in with lions that would hurt him. God saved Daniel's life, so the king honored Daniel and God and changed the law. People learned of God's power because of Daniel, and many others worshiped God because Daniel had trusted and honored God. Daniel's story helps us to remember that our trust should be always on God.

• DISCUSS:

• Who do you love the most?

• PRAYER:

• It is not easy to love you the most, God, but help us to love you and trust you every day.

The Ruler in the Promise
A SELECTION FROM MICAH 5:1-5

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.
Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of his brothers shall return
to the people of Israel.
And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.
And he shall be their peace.*



Our ears aren't accustomed to hearing prophecies. We sure hear a lot of promises—campaign promises, wedding vows, promises from brands that buying their product will improve our quality of life. But those promises are so often broken that we start to think promises hold no real weight. And we might think the same is true of prophecies. They won't possibly come true, will they?

Don't let your skepticism about promises color your hearing of this prophecy: from Bethlehem will come someone who will rule, not the way those promise-breaking politicians do, but like a shepherd. He won't say one thing and do another. He won't disregard His constituency. No, this leader cares for His people the way a shepherd cares for his sheep. He'll stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord.

The people who heard this prophecy for the first time worried about the same things we do: what to eat for dinner, how to make amends with their mothers, whether their homes and land would be secure. And the prophecy can bring us the same comfort—comfort that we will live securely and in peace. The same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, fulfilling Micah's prophecy, will come again to reign as Prince of Peace. Come, Lord Jesus!

DISCUSS:

1. What promises do you find most difficult to keep?
2. God chose the small town of Bethlehem to play a huge role on the world stage by promising the Messiah would be born there. Later, God chose a people to be major players on the world stage: Christians. Are you preparing yourself for that job daily by reading God's Word and through prayer?

PRAYER:

Prince of Peace, we are eager for you to return. Some days, both the world and our lives seem out of control and beyond repair. But we are trusting you to keep your promise to come and rule like a good and gentle shepherd. Amen.

**PRESCHOOL &
YOUNGER CHILDREN:**

The small town of Bethlehem was not a place people talked about much. Yet the prophet Micah heard from God that the ruler people were waiting for would come from there. Micah wrote down what God said. The ruler would be gentle like a shepherd, great like a strong king, and strong.

God was talking about Jesus. Before Jesus was born, people did not know how God would save them from the wicked world. But today, we know that God sent Jesus to be our ruler. He rules with love, kindness, and gentleness. But He is also strong and perfect. Let's remember Bethlehem because it shows us that God kept His promise to send His Son, Jesus.

DISCUSS:

What is something small you can do to show someone you love them?

PRAYER:

God, thank you for keeping your promise to send Jesus as our ruler.

The Habit of Silence
A SELECTION FROM LUKE 1:5-25

And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John...”

And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.”



The punishment for Zechariah’s unbelief seems disproportionately harsh: no voice for the duration of Elizabeth’s pregnancy? Really? This punishment comes from a God who says it’s enough to have faith as small as a mustard seed (Matthew 17:20). Zechariah doesn’t outright reject the angel’s message, after all. He doesn’t laugh the way Sarah does when she overhears that she will bear a son in her old age (Genesis 18:12). He just asks how he can be sure the angel is telling the truth, a fair question to put to any stranger who promises to fulfill the deepest desires of your heart. So why is Zechariah prevented from speaking for the better part of a year?

Perhaps we can see Zechariah’s silence not as a punishment but as a gift. As the child grows in Elizabeth’s belly, he is given space to reflect quietly. He won’t run off at the mouth, crowding out the Spirit inside him with his own blathering. He’s saved from saying stupid things, from bragging about his encounter with the angel, from broadcasting his skepticism.

Rather than questioning the silence God imposes on Zechariah, we might consider adopting a habit of quietude ourselves this Advent. In a season of stimulation—lights! music! sugar!—we need to carve out space to reflect and prepare. In these final days before Christmas, find a quiet corner. Turn off the Christmas station. Set aside your phone. Open your Bible and listen. What is the Spirit saying to you?

DISCUSS:

1. What is a time you had to wait for something special?
2. How can you make quiet study and reflection on God’s Word a normal part of your everyday life?

PRAYER:

Speak, O Lord, for your servants are listening. Help us to quiet our buzzing thoughts. What do you want us to hear? What invitation are you extending to us today? Amen.

PRE-SCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

Zechariah was a priest who loved and believed in God. He had been waiting for God to send the King He had promised. One day, God sent an angel to Zechariah to tell him that he would have a son who would get the people ready for Jesus, God’s promised King. Zechariah wasn’t sure he believed the angel, and so God took away Zechariah’s voice as a sign of God’s power. Imagine if you had seen an angel who had told you wonderful, happy news and you weren’t able to tell anyone what had happened! Zechariah was sad to have lost his voice, but he was happy to know that he would have a son chosen by God to do important work. This son, John, would have a special job from God – to tell people to get ready for Jesus, the greatest gift God has ever given to us.

DISCUSS:

What is one of the best gifts you have ever received?

PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for sending Jesus to us and keeping your promise.

The Messenger in the Water

MATTHEW 3:1-6

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

*"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.'"*

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.



A lonely voice is carried down the centuries by a dry desert wind: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!

The voice prophesied by Isaiah is growing louder, clearer. Its source is coming into view. It is John the Baptist, calling out to the people of Israel. The years of waiting made the people nearly forget about God's promise to send a Savior, someone who would redeem the people from their lives of misery, sin, and oppression. But John the Baptist is here to refresh their memory. You might have forgotten, but God hasn't! A Savior is on the way.

John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus Christ to come. He invites the people to be baptized in preparation for Jesus's arrival. The people confessed their sins and were washed clean.

Like John and the people he baptizes, we can prepare for Christ's coming. We can confess and repent of our sins. We can ask God to make us clean, fit to be in the presence of our Savior.

John also had the privilege of baptizing the Son of God Himself. Because of John's faithfulness, we have an amazing occurrence where the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—in the form of a dove—are revealed together, cementing the message that hope has come!

DISCUSS:

1. What does repentance look like?
2. God sent John the Baptist to prepare the people for Jesus' ministry. He wants to send you to also speak His truth to others so they might be prepared to receive forgiveness for their sins. Where is God sending you?

PRAYER:

Lord, would you point out the places in us that are sinful? The places that are making it hard for us to encounter you? We confess those sins to you. Make us clean. Prepare our hearts to welcome you. Amen.

PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

Zechariah and Elizabeth's son grew up to be John the Baptist. He was Jesus' cousin because Elizabeth was Mary's cousin. God chose him to tell the people about Jesus. John wanted people to know that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior that God had promised the people so many years ago. He wanted them to believe in Jesus. John did not look like other people. He wore a coat of camel's hair and ate locusts and honey. Some people probably thought he was a little strange. But many people did listen to John, and they were ready to believe in Jesus. When John baptized Jesus, the Holy Spirit came down from heaven and looked just like a dove. Our ornament today reminds us that Jesus really is the Son of God like John said.

DISCUSS:

Talk about something you do that is wrong.

PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for forgiving us when we do things wrong.

The Mother of the Savior

A SELECTION FROM LUKE 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."



Imagine the ordinariness of this moment: Mary is padding around the house in her socks, wiping the crumbs off the breakfast table and washing the dishes. She stands at the sink, one hand plunged into the dishwater to clean the spoons, the other tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

Or maybe she's weeding the garden or assembling a bookshelf that's been sitting in a box in the front hall all week. Who knows—she might be walking to the corner store to pick up some cold medicine. Whatever she's doing, it's so ordinary that it's not worth mentioning. What isn't ordinary is the unexpected arrival of an angel, who interrupts her with his tidings. He breaks into her day, changing the character not just of that moment but of her life as a whole—and of every life, the ones that came before and the ones that would come after.

Her life won't be ordinary anymore. Mary might do ordinary things again—walk the dog, take out the trash, have the neighbors over for dinner—but those moments will be shot through with the reality that her son, Jesus Christ, is the Son of the Most High. History is changed. The God of the universe has just taken up residence in the womb of a human. This is the moment where God unites Himself to humanity in the person of Jesus. It's not just the angel who is breaking in; God Himself is breaking in, infusing all of history with His redemptive love. Knowing that truth, let's consider every moment holy.

DISCUSS:

1. When have you been surprised by what God has done or is doing?
2. What choices might God be giving you that would forever change the course of your life?

PRAYER:

Most High God, what an incredible thing you've done by entering into history as a human being and redeeming me as one of your own. As I go about my day, help me to remember that fact. Keep me attentive to the holiness of each moment. Nothing is ordinary anymore. Amen.

PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

God sent an angel to Mary. The angel told Mary that she would have a baby, whom she would name Jesus. Mary wasn't sure that she could be a good mother to Jesus, but the angel reminded Mary that God would be with her. Mary knew that being a mother is a difficult and important job, but she knew that God would guide her. She also knew that she loved God and wanted to do whatever she could to serve him. This baby was the gift that God had been promising His people; Jesus would save the people from their sins. She was so excited to have such a special job from God. Just like Mary, God gives us special jobs too.

DISCUSS:

What is something special you can do for someone else?

PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for loving us so much and sending Jesus to us on the first Christmas.

The Angel in a Dream

MATTHEW 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

*"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).*

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

A lonely voice is carried down the centuries by a dry desert wind: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!

The voice prophesied by Isaiah is growing louder, clearer. Its source is coming into view. It is John the Baptist, calling out to the people of Israel. The years of waiting made the people nearly forget about God's promise to send a Savior, someone who would redeem the people from their lives of misery, sin, and oppression. But John the Baptist is here to refresh their memory. You might have forgotten, but God hasn't! A Savior is on the way.

John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus Christ to come. He invites the people to be baptized in preparation for Jesus's arrival. The people confessed their sins and were washed clean.

Like John and the people he baptizes, we can prepare for Christ's coming. We can confess and repent of our sins. We can ask God to make us clean, fit to be in the presence of our Savior.

DISCUSS:

1. What scares you about God's plan in your life?
2. How might you say yes? How might you set aside your fears?

PRAYER:

God, thank you for inviting Joseph into your story, and for the example he sets for us. Where is a place that we are resisting following you because we're worried about how it might affect our reputations or relationships? Give us the courage to say yes to you. Amen.



PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

Joseph was part of David's family. He was a carpenter. He knew of God's promise that a star or special person would someday be part of his family. God sent an angel to talk to Joseph in a dream. Joseph was so surprised when the angel asked Joseph and Mary to be the daddy and mommy of Jesus, the special star from God. Joseph could have said, "I am too afraid." But he told the Angel, "Yes, I'll do what God says."

DISCUSS:

What are some things that scare you?

PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for helping me when I am afraid.

The Couple on a Journey

LUKE 2:1-5

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

Folks, we're on our way. We're on our way to that town that has come up again and again this Advent. We're on our way to Bethlehem.

We journey with Mary, uncomfortable in the final days of pregnancy. Our bodies are tired and pinched. We're aching and ready to give birth, to experience the life that lies on the other side of labor.

We journey with Joseph, anxious about what's ahead. We're nervous about the birth itself, as well as about the responsibility of caring for this new life. We don't know what to expect.

Like Mary and Joseph have been waiting, preparing as Mary's belly swells, we've been waiting, too. We're waiting for Jesus to come, too, this time in a different way. The labor pains are still there—so much about our lives keeps us awake at night and wears us down and makes us want to cry in exasperation. It makes us impatient. Don't make us wait longer than we have to, Lord. Be merciful. We want this new life to be here! We're antsy with anticipation. Come, Lord Jesus. Come and be born. Come again and stay. Come and light up the darkness. Come and breathe new life into everything. Restore the broken friendships. Heal the diseased bodies. Fulfill the longings.

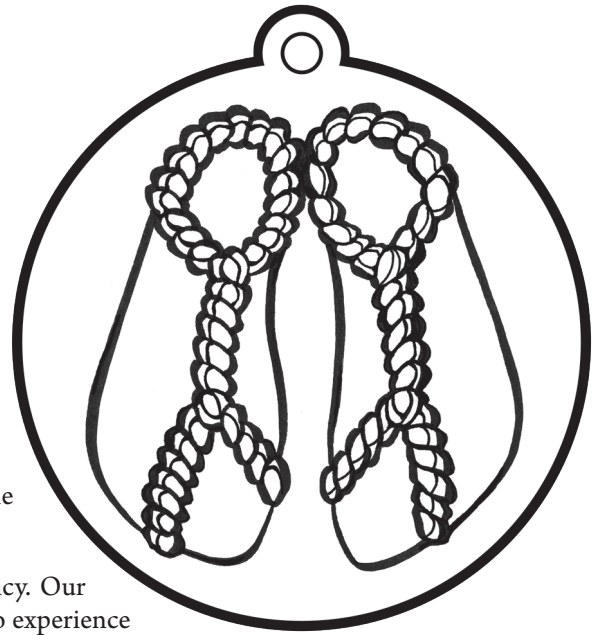
We are ready.

DISCUSS:

1. The world waited for some sort of deliverance. They did not know they were waiting for Jesus' birth. What are the things you are anticipating? Is God's plan a part of the things you are anticipating?
2. Where might God lead you and your family so that you too could be a blessing to others?

PRAYER:

Come, Lord Jesus. Be our peace as we anticipate celebrating your birth. We pray that you would use us to proclaim the good news of your birth, death, and resurrection so that others may also find peace in you. Amen.



PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

Mary and Joseph traveled a long way to get to Joseph's home town of Bethlehem. Mary was pregnant with the baby Jesus and the journey was difficult. But even though Mary was uncomfortable, she knew that God was going to do something amazing with the baby she carried.

Sometimes God asks us to be uncomfortable for a time. Like if we have to wait for something we really want or do things that might seem boring. But God promises that He will make everything good one day for those who love Him.

DISCUSS:

What is something good that you find hard to do?

PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for helping me through hard times.

The Baby in a Manger

LUKE 2:6-21

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Continued on next page...



Continued...

Into the darkness of that dank stable, a child is born. Into the darkness of the world, a light shines. From the knotty, gnarled stump of Jesse, a shoot springs up.

This is it. To you is born this day a Savior. A Savior!

The waiting is over. Hope is here. This is the olive branch in the beak of Noah's dove, the confirmation that all is not lost. Life will flourish again.

And who gets to witness it? Who gets the privilege of being called over to see the solitary green shoot, so fresh it hasn't yet unfurled?

The shepherds.

Not the clean, charismatic professionals with access to big marketing budgets and platforms to publicize the news. Just a shabby bunch of shepherds. Maybe it's because they share the vocation of the One who was just born; like Him, they tend and guide a dim-witted flock, prone to wandering. Maybe they're more likely to rejoice in His birth rather than feel threatened by it. Maybe they understand best of all what His coming means.

And guess what: today, you're among those shepherds. You get to hear the news, to be a witness. You're sent back to glorify and praise God for all you've heard and seen.

What a privilege! Cherish it.

DISCUSS:

1. How are you celebrating Jesus' arrival this year?
2. Who is one person you want to share the good news of God sending the Savior to earth with?

PRAYER:

Welcome, Jesus! How thrilled and grateful I am that you willingly entered into the darkness of the world to bring your light and life. The life you bring is just the beginning of a whole new creation in your Spirit. I can't wait to see what's yet to come. Amen.



PRESCHOOL & YOUNGER CHILDREN:

Today is Christmas – the day Jesus was born.

When sin first came into the world, God made a promise. Even when the people forgot about God and the promise, God didn't forget about the people. God guided the people, protected the people, and loved the people, even when they were sinful. God was faithful, and today the promise is fulfilled. God has given us His greatest gift ever so that we may be forgiven for bad choices we make and someday go to heaven to live with Him.

Jesus is the greatest gift ever and He was given to the whole world!

DISCUSS:

What is your favorite part of the Christmas story?

PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for giving us new life through your greatest gift of all – Jesus.



Jesse Tree

ADVENT DEVOTIONALS
FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY

Jesse Tree Ornaments

Each day of the Jesse Tree Advent Guide includes a corresponding ornament. They help us remember that God has had a plan to redeem sinners from the beginning of time. As a part of your daily Advent devotional, cut out the ornament, color and decorate it, reinforce the top hole with the included stickers, loop a ribbon or string through the top, and hang it on your tree.

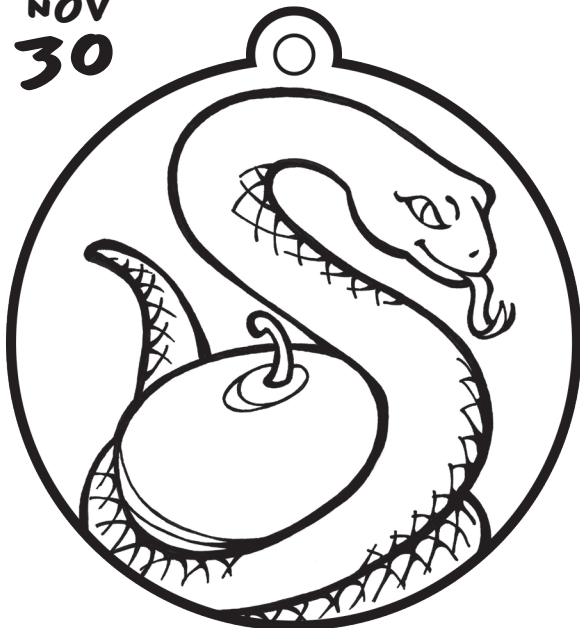
NOV
28



NOV
29



NOV
30



DEC
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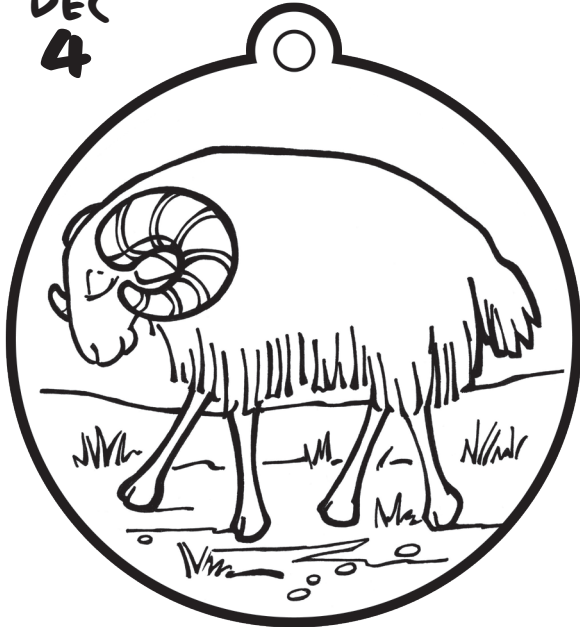
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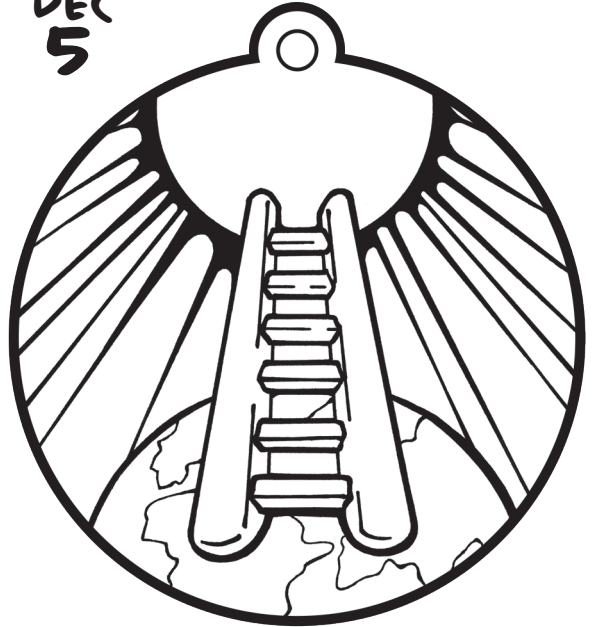
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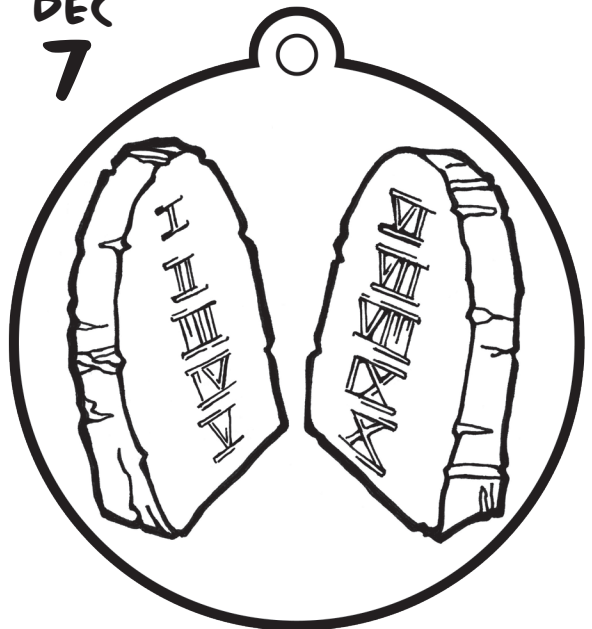
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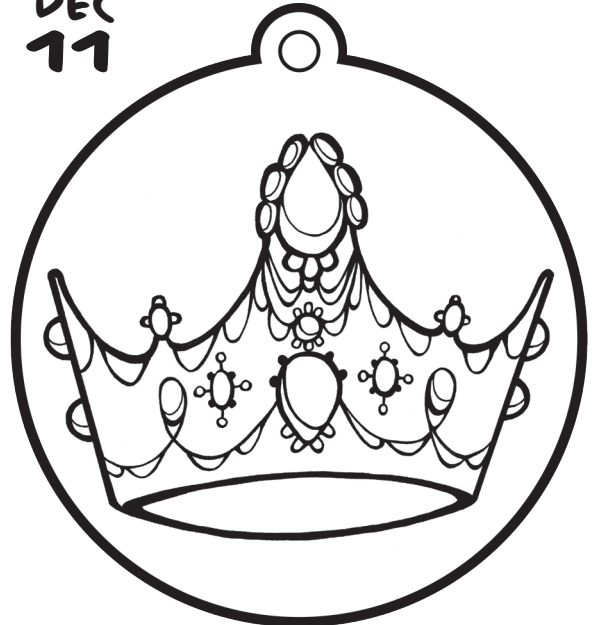
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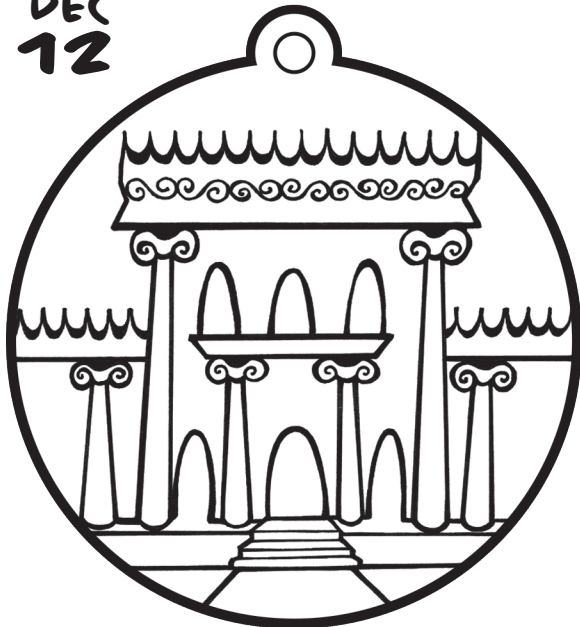
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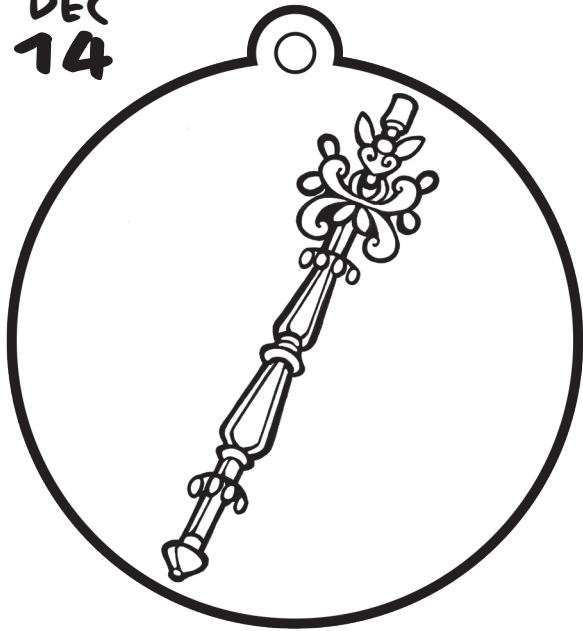
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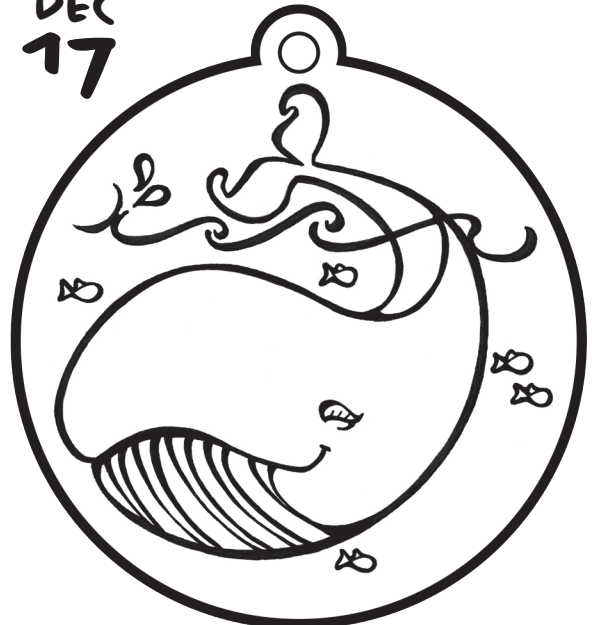
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DEC
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DEC
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DEC
20



DEC
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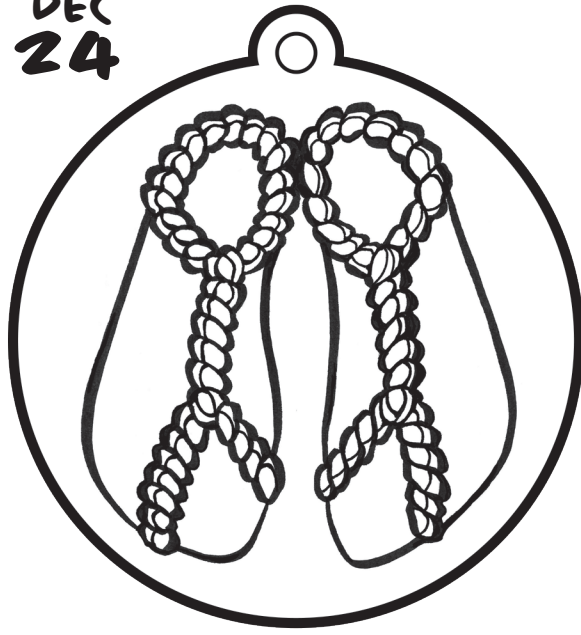
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DEC
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DEC
24



DEC
25

