

Travel Light

Advent Devotional 2019



The word *Advent* comes from the Latin word “adventus,” which means the arrival of someone notable or important. During the four-week season of Advent, which leads up to Christmas Day, we gather together to remember the greatest arrival of all – God in human form. Over the next few weeks, we eagerly anticipate the arrival of a tiny baby wrapped in a manger.

Advent is a time for reflection, a time to evaluate where we’ve been, where we are, and where we want to be, both as a family and as individuals. It is a time to share stories of the blessings and the hardships. It is a time to slow down in the busyness of the Christmas season and savor the present moment. Advent is a time to hope for what is to come.

Traditionally, the church has marked the Advent season by lighting one candle each week to represent the characteristics of Jesus: peace, love, joy and hope. We hope that each week as you light a candle and follow the readings in this book, you may begin to see how those characteristics of Jesus also reside in you. You may begin to see that you too are part of the larger story.

This devotional is an opportunity for you to reflect. The following pages can be read out loud to your children, quietly to yourself, or with a friend or spouse. Ultimately, we hope that this tool helps you build a deeper relationship with those God has placed in your life this Christmas and to the God for whom this season exists. Our theme this year is to “travel light” – to pack in this season only what is necessary, only what is good, only what makes this season (and our lives) richer.

From all of us at The Grove, we wish you a Merry Christmas.

Love,

The Grove Team

WEEK ONE

Unpacking Peace

December 2

Peace. When we think about the holidays, peace doesn't really come to mind. Kids are on Christmas break, projects are wrapping up at work, and family is coming to town. There are meals to plan, gifts to buy, trees to decorate. In the busyness of the Christmas season, peace isn't really part of the plan. In fact, when we think about the holidays, the word we most likely use is *stress*. Lots and lots of it. When Thanksgiving ends and the Christmas season begins, we've prepared ourselves for what's coming - all of that busyness just waiting to be unwrapped.

When we plan the busyness of Christmas, part of what we bring along are our expectations of the ideal Christmas. We want perfect Christmas dinners, perfect holiday parties, we want to make perfect memories. If we're packing our bags to prepare for the holidays, we're packing this expectation of an ideal Christmas along with us. For you, it might be that your family finally gets along or maybe it's that it might be that you get every present you asked for. It might be that the job promotion finally comes, or the meal looks perfect, or you have the perfect vacation. Whatever it is, it's what you are bringing with you to the holidays. But these expectations actually rob us of the one thing we really want: peace in the busyness.

This week in Advent, we're looking at one family in the Christmas story who were bringing their own baggage into the season and found themselves fighting for peace. And as we look at their lives, we'll be looking a little more closely at ours, too. Because what we want, and what God wants for us in this Christmas season, is to let go of some of our baggage and travel a little lighter.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ What are some expectations you're carrying into the holidays?
- ✦ When you think about your and/or your family's life, where do you most feel the need for peace?

Questions for the Kids:

- ✦ What does the perfect Christmas look like to you?
- ✦ If somebody asked you what "peace" was, what would you tell them?

Light the first candle (The Peace Candle) on your Advent Wreath.

Unpacking Peace

December 3

“Many people have already applied themselves to the task of compiling an account of the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used what the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed down to us. Now, after having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, I have also decided to write a carefully ordered account for you, most honorable Theophilus. I want you to have confidence in the soundness of the instruction you have received.” (Luke 1:1-4)

It might come as a surprise to you that the Christmas story begins like that - with a note from the author. And this note comes with some mystery: not many people know exactly who Theophilus was (some people think he was a Roman officer, some think he was a government official, some people even think it was a name used for a group of Christians at that time). But whoever Theophilus was, we know that Luke, the author of this particular telling of the Christmas story, wanted to make sure the reader knew one thing for certain: that every word written can be believed because it's true.

Before we begin unpacking peace, we need to sort out the unnecessary baggage from the essentials in our lives. We know we're carrying those expectations into the holiday season, but we might be left wondering, "What if my expectation is something good I want for my family and myself? What if I'm wanting to restore a relationship? What if I want to build stronger relationships with loved ones or with God?" That's why you need to look at what's true in your own life and the life of your family.

Before we unpack peace, let's unpack our expectations for this season. What's important? What's weighing us down? Just like Luke, we examine our lives and the life of our family and look at our priorities, our beliefs, and our dreams for each other and for ourselves. We decide which expectations are too heavy to carry into the season and which are good for us. The Lord wants peace for us-- he doesn't want us to be weighed down by the unnecessary expectations but to be able to travel lightly with what we know is true. So, let's examine what's true for us in this holiday season.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ Examine what you and/or your family prioritize. What are some dreams you have for yourself and/or your family this season? What beliefs do you and/or your family feel strongest about?
- ✦ Revisit your expectations from yesterday. Were there any that are rooted in what's true for you and/or your family (beliefs, priorities, and dreams)?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ What's something you want for your family this Christmas?
- ✦ Why is it important that the Christmas story is true?

December 4

“During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord’s commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old. One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. Following the customs of priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord’s sanctuary and burn incense. All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering.” (Luke 1:5-10)

When King David established the priesthood hundreds of years before Zechariah and Elizabeth, he wanted to make sure there would always be people serving in God’s Temple. So he organized groups that would be responsible for worshipping God in the right way for years to come. These priests followed the laws of God and the order of worship exactly the way King David said they should. As you can imagine, this was a sacred and serious job that was only given to certain people. When we read, then, that Zechariah was a priest in God’s Temple, we can know that he had a reputation of being a righteous and a holy man. And he wasn’t alone in this, either. His wife, Elizabeth, could trace her family line all the way back to Aaron - the brother of Moses who helped God’s people escape from slavery in Egypt. Her family, like her husband’s job, was recognized as being holy and set apart. That’s why it’s such a surprise when we read that she couldn’t get pregnant. In those days, being childless was seen as a curse from God. It was embarrassing for Elizabeth and Zechariah and it probably resulted in a lifelong struggle for peace.

Like us, Elizabeth and Zechariah were most likely approaching the Lord’s Temple that day with their own expectations for their lives. They were visualizing themselves with a baby. They saw their community begin to accept them. They saw their reputation be restored, their families happy, their home finally having peace. But the reality was that what they so desperately wanted

wasn't happening. They loved God and obeyed him, but it seemed their expectation wasn't God's plan for them at all. And so when Zechariah was chosen to be a priest in the Temple that day, he was bringing his baggage with him.

How often do we find ourselves in a similar situation to Zechariah and Elizabeth? We approach what should be a peace-filled season with an overflowing suitcase that's weighing us down. Our vision of what should be is robbing us of peace and we can feel out of our control. But the joy of Advent is this: that even when we're at our heaviest, God is there to lighten our load. And that's what we'll see tomorrow.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ How are you feeling weighed down by your expectations in this season?
- ✦ Are there any areas of your and/or your family's life where you're seeing the effects of the heavy baggage you are carrying?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ Is there anything that's disappointing you right now?
- ✦ Why do you think Elizabeth and Zechariah wanted a baby so badly?

December 5

[When Zechariah was in the Temple] an angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear. The angel said, 'Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord's eyes. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth...He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah said to the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old.' The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and bring this good news to you. Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen.'" (Luke 1:11-20)

It happened. The expectation that had been weighing Elizabeth and Zechariah down for so long was finally being unpacked - and in the most miraculous way possible! When Zechariah carried his baggage into the Temple that day, the last thing he expected was an encounter with an angel from God. And even though Zechariah's load was lifted and the desire of his heart was being fulfilled in such an incredible way, *he had lived so long with his heavy load that he couldn't let it go*. When it came time to receive the peace, he found himself pulling back and questioning if it was really possible, if God could really work in his life like that. He had grown so accustomed to the weight of his own expectation that when it came time to give them to God, he didn't want to let them go.

As we've examined our own lives and looked at the baggage we're bringing into the holidays, we might have come face-to-face with a similar outlook as Zechariah. We might be wondering if God is really able to lighten our load this Christmas season and bring us the peace we want so badly. When we separated the truth in our lives from the baggage we've been carrying, we might have realized we weren't quite certain God was able to answer

our prayers or help our family walk in step with our priorities and beliefs.

But God has a unique perspective into each of our lives. He was so certain that Zechariah and Elizabeth would have the baby, he silenced Zechariah *until the baby was born*. And he went above and beyond lightening their heavy load - he promised them a baby that would play a very special role in the life of his Son, Jesus. There is peace in the Advent Week in this: that God is faithful to work in our lives regardless of the weight of our baggage. And he is promising he'll be there with us and see us through this season.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ Are you feeling similarly to Zechariah this holiday season? Are there any dreams and prayers you have for you and/or your family that you feel won't be answered by God?
- ✦ Have you grown accustomed to the weight of your baggage in this season? How do you know?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ How would you feel if you were in Zechariah's place and saw an angel standing in front of you?
- ✦ How do you think Zechariah felt when he saw the angel? Why do you think he didn't believe what the angel said?

December 6

“Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they wondered why he was in the sanctuary for such a long time. When he came out, he was unable to speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he gestured to them and couldn’t speak. When he completed the days of his priestly service, he returned home. Afterward, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant. She kept to herself for five months, saying, ‘This is the Lord’s doing. He has shown his favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people.’” (Luke 1:21-25)

There’s a lot of debate among Bible scholars as to why Elizabeth “kept to herself” for five months after becoming pregnant. Some people say it was because she was embarrassed at being pregnant at an old age; some say she wanted to make absolutely certain she was pregnant before telling other people; some people think she was enjoying the promise fulfilled and spending time in reflection and prayer. Regardless of why Elizabeth kept her miraculous pregnancy to herself, we know something about her that’s very profound for us today: when God brought her peace, she accepted it with her whole heart.

The author doesn’t tell us she kept questioning God, wondering if this was really happening to her. He doesn’t tell us she was doubting his work in her life or doubting it was God who gave her the baby. When God finally lifted her load, Elizabeth received it gladly and didn’t question if God was going to take it away or stop it from happening.

One of the most surprising things about human beings is that when something wonderful has happened to us, like a prayer being answered or experiencing success, we end up waiting for God to swoop in and stop it. We wait for something awful to happen that will rob us of our peace again. And in all of the worrying and the unwillingness to accept it, we end up losing the peace that was given to us! What Elizabeth does in our Christmas story is accept what God has done for her and embrace it. She allows herself to feel the joy and the peace that comes from the work God has done in her life. We can learn from that.

As we finish unpacking peace, we remember: we all have that expectation in our minds that weighs us down, acting like extra baggage in the holidays. Once we've uncovered what those expectations are, we sort them out from the truth in our lives - what we want for our family and for ourselves, what we believe, what grounds us. The peace comes from having confidence in God, that he is able to help us unpack, remove that extra baggage, and travel a little lighter. And during this holiday season, when we look around at something wonderful that's happening, we embrace it - with nothing holding us back.

The expectation of perfection robs us of peace. But God shows us through this part of our Christmas story that he is with us, helping us carry our baggage and unpack all the unnecessary, lightening our load.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ Is there something good happening in your and/or your family's life that you've not been able to fully embrace? Why is that?
- ✦ What steps can you take to make sure you'll embrace the good in your and/or your family's life this holiday season?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ How do you think Elizabeth felt when she finally got pregnant?
- ✦ Why do you think God likes giving us good gifts?

Unpacking Peace

WEEK TWO Unpacking Love

December 9

We've all experienced it. That feeling of dread that creeps in when we're not looking forward to something. Maybe you have a relative that always creates controversy during the holidays. Maybe your relationship with your mother, father, or in-laws isn't quite what you think it should be. Maybe you're afraid the kids will misbehave or a conversation about politics will begin or you won't be able to be patient with your family for the week that they are in town. Regardless of what it is, we all get a little afraid of what's waiting to be unwrapped during the holidays. If we are honest, the joy of the holiday season can lose its spark because of that knot in our stomachs or that thought in the back of our minds. We're waiting for the difficulty that's bound to come up during Christmas time and it's weighing us down.

What we all want during the Christmas season is *love*. We give gifts out of love for each other. We make the holiday meal out of love for family and friends. We decorate the tree because we love what it means - that Christmas is finally here. We want the kids to be loving toward one another, we want to be loving toward our spouse or significant other, we (mostly) want to be loving toward our extended family. After all, the simplest and most profound part of our Christmas story is the idea of love wrapped up tightly and laid in a manger. It is because of love we have the Christmas story at all, and its message isn't lost to us when we read it over again each year.

What this Advent week will show us is when anxiety about what's to come takes up space in our hearts, we lose the ability to carry love with us into the holidays. When we become so wrapped up in dreadfully anticipating what's coming, we lose sight of what's already been given and the knowledge that when we walk forward, we're not walking alone. Because what we want, and what God wants for us this Advent season, is to travel lightly with love.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ Is there anything you are dreading this holiday season?
- ✦ How long have you been feeling weighed down by this anxiety? Why do you think that is?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ What do you love most about the holidays?
- ✦ Is there anything you don't want to happen during the holiday season?

Light the second candle (The Love Candle) on your Advent Wreath.

December 10

“When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David’s house. The virgin’s name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, ‘Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!’ She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, ‘Don’t be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob’s house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.’ Then Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this happen...?’ The angel replied, ‘The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. He will be called God’s Son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled ‘unable to conceive’ is now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God.’ Then Mary said, ‘I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.’ Then the angel left her.” (Luke 1:26-38)

In Jesus’ day, Nazareth had a population of around 400 people, which meant that nothing of significance really happened there. But in this passage, we read that in this tiny town, there was a young girl who was engaged to a man that had, like Elizabeth, an incredible family tree. Joseph could trace his family line all the way back to King David, which in those days was a very big deal. King David was considered the greatest king to ever rule over Israel, and before he died God promised him that one of his descendants would sit on David’s throne forever and establish peace for all people. What King David and his descendants never considered was that this promised king would come from a backwater town like Nazareth. So when an angel delivers a life-changing message to an unmarried girl in a small farming community in Galilee, it was the last thing anyone (including Mary) expected.

As Mary listened to the angel describe her future, we can imagine the questions and worries that must have been going

through her mind. When she looked at her future, all she felt was fear. For an unmarried woman to have a baby was even worse than Elizabeth's inability to conceive. How would she tell her family? How would she tell Joseph? What will everyone think of her? But astonishingly, her response in the face of fear was one of love. When it came time to face the fear that was within her, Mary chose to trust that in spite of all that waited for her in the coming months, God would be with her, sharing her heavy load.

Although none of us have found ourselves in the same situation as Mary, we have all experienced the feeling of fear when we look at the future. We're not quite sure how we'll make it through this week or this month or this season. But the Christmas story reminds us that we have a choice in the face of fear: we can choose to allow fear to weigh us down or we can choose the way of love. Choosing the way of love looks as simple as trusting God to work in our lives even when it seems scary. God is with us, helping us move forward.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ What would it look like for you and/or your family to choose the way of love this Christmas?
- ✦ Do you feel God's presence with you this holiday season? Why or why not?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ How do you think Mary felt when she heard the angel Gabriel's message?
- ✦ What can you do when you are afraid of something?
- ✦ Is God with you when you're scared?

December 11

“Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, ‘God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill the promise he made to her.’” (Luke 1:39-45)

When Gabriel delivered his message to Mary, he ended it with news that would comfort her and help her in the face of fear: he told her that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant as well. We see that God working in Zechariah and Elizabeth’s lives was for more than just for their peace - it was a means of encouragement to Mary when she was faced with fear. But more than that, God would use Elizabeth to show us a very important lesson in choosing love over fear: when we’re overwhelmed, we need to surround ourselves with people who will help us move forward.

We notice that the first thing Mary did when she heard the angel’s message was leave her small town and journey eighty miles to see her cousin, Elizabeth. Mary knew that in order to process through what happened and face her fear of the future, she would need a strong support system around her. We’re not meant to walk through our lives alone. In fact, we’re encouraged by God to be with like-minded people who will help us move forward when we’re scared and standing still.

We see through Elizabeth’s encouraging words and joyful perspective on Mary’s situation that she was being used by God to help Mary unpack the baggage of her fear and walk in love. Mary came to Elizabeth full of questions, confusion, and fear. She was tired from her journey and needed a fresh outlook on her situation. Elizabeth helped strengthen Mary for the future ahead of her.

This Christmas, let's surround ourselves with a few people who we know will listen to us when we're fearful about the future, encourage us through our fears, and help lighten our load. When we're wrestling through questions, doubts, and concerns we have about our future, we can be confident knowing that not only is God with us, but that the supportive people God places in our lives are with us, too.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ Can you identify two or three people in your and/or your family's life who could act as your "Elizabeths"?
- ✦ If the thought of confiding in another person is difficult for you, why do you think that is? What are some truths you know that can fight against that?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ Why do you think Mary hurried to Elizabeth right after she heard the angel's message?
- ✦ Who is your best friend? Do you ever talk to them when you're feeling scared?
- ✦ Do you talk to your parents when you're confused or scared?

December 12

“Mary said, ‘With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham’s descendants forever.’ Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned to her home.” (Luke 1:46-56)

Mary’s prayer (sometimes called *The Magnificat*) might come as a surprise to us. It seems a bit strange that her response to Elizabeth’s encouragement would be praise to God for all the things he promised he would do in the past. But if we read between the lines, we can see how Mary uses this prayer to express her confidence in God’s future for her.

We read in Gabriel’s message to Mary that the baby she would deliver would be the promised king - the descendant of David that would sit on the throne forever. This promise was well known among the Jews and knowledge of it was passed down through multiple generations. God spoke of this coming king through his prophets, and those promises were recorded and read every week in Mary’s life. So when Mary praised God for “filling the hungry,” “showing strength with his arm,” and “lifting up the lowly,” she was thinking of all the promises God made (and kept) in the past.

In the face of her fear, Mary chose to remind herself of all the ways God had been faithful to his people in the past. She named all the good (and miraculous) things God had done and she was strengthened by it. She was encouraged by Elizabeth in the

present and she was encouraged by God's faithfulness in the past.

Our history of God's faithfulness might look differently from Mary's, but it is there. We all can look back on what God has done - his gifts, his provision, and his protection - and it can give us courage when we're overwhelmed by life. If God was with us then, we can be sure he's with us now. Looking behind us and remembering the good is a powerful tool of love.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ Looking behind you, what are some examples of God's faithfulness in your and/or your family's life? What good things have happened that can strengthen you today?
- ✦ This holiday season, is there a way that you can praise God for his gifts? What are some activities you and/or your family could do together as a way to encourage others this season? (*Serve a meal to the homeless, donate to charity, etc.*)

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ What are some gifts God has given you?
- ✦ How can you thank God for what he has done?

Unpacking Love

December 13

“When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father’s name. But his mother replied, ‘No, his name will be John.’ They said to her, ‘None of your relatives have that name.’ Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him. After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing, ‘His name is John.’ At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God. All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened. All who heard about this considered it carefully. They said, ‘What then will this child be?’ Indeed, the Lord’s power was with him.” (Luke 1:57-65)

The author interrupts Mary’s story to update us on Elizabeth and Zechariah. We left Zechariah at the steps of the Temple, unable to speak and very much afraid. When it mattered most, Zechariah was unable to give God the baggage of his expectations. As a result, God silenced him until God’s promise was fulfilled in the form of his very own child. For nine long months, Zechariah had been silent. In all of this time, we can imagine how fearful Zechariah must have been and how guilty he must have felt. He had let everyone down. His fear impacted his family, his community, and his reputation. In his fear, he must have felt like a failure.

But when God looks at us, he sees past the fear and failure. When we understand that God loves us *within* those things, we can come to him with our baggage and trust that he will carry the load. Zechariah made a courageous and love-filled decision: he named his son John, just like the angel Gabriel commanded. In doing so, he finally surrendered the weight of his fear. He chose to walk a little lighter in love, confident that his past mistake no longer mattered to God.

This Christmas, let’s consider the times in our own lives when we have responded out of fear, both past and present.

Remember how it felt to carry that fear? As Zechariah shows us, when we take on the heavy load of fear, it is nearly impossible to walk in love the way God wants for us. But luckily, Zechariah also shows us that all it takes is giving those feelings up to God for the load we carry to feel a lot lighter.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ Have you been carrying around fears or feelings of failure? How does that impact your life?
- ✦ How can you give up that baggage to God?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ Do you ever feel like you messed up? What do you do when you feel that way?
- ✦ Is it hard to admit you made a mistake? Do you think God still loves you even when you messed up? Do you think your parents still love you?

WEEK THREE

Unpacking Joy

December 16

We sing about it, we wish it on others, and we see it in all the Christmas decorations: **JOY**. When we think about the holiday season, we think about the joy it's going to bring. We see all of the traditional Christmas activities in light of the joy we'll experience: Christmas caroling, decorating Christmas cookies, throwing the annual Christmas party. We know that watching our kids or our loved ones open their presents will bring joy and we can't wait to be a part of it.

But what if this Christmas season isn't quite what we were expecting? What if there's something happening in our families that's causing us to worry? What if something happened in our community? What if our Christmas season looks completely different from the one we were expecting? What then?

When we find ourselves expecting one thing and experiencing something else, the first thing we lose is joy. We know that Christmas is the season of joy, so why are we so disappointed right now? Why are we confused? Why do we feel like something is missing? When what we expect isn't what's happening, we feel weighed down not by adding something to our suitcase, but by something being taken away. Joy makes our burdens feel less burdensome, so when it's not there we feel like we're heavier than ever.

This Advent week, we'll be looking at a journey that blasted through every possible expectation Mary and Joseph had. When Mary and Joseph began their journey, they expected one thing and were continually met with something else. And at every turn, they struggle to keep their joy alive. But what we will find is that in spite of the unexpected, joy can always be found.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ Is there something about this Christmas season that isn't turning out the way you expected?
- ✦ Do you feel like you and/or your family are missing joy in some way?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ What do you think is the most joyful thing about Christmas?
- ✦ Is it hard when you don't feel like you have joy? How?

Light the third candle (The Joy Candle) on your Advent Wreath.

December 17

“In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. The first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled.” (Luke 2:1-3)

It's important to remember that in the time of Mary and Joseph, Rome (under the political rule of Caesar Augustus) had become the greatest and most powerful empire in the world. After years of wars, political turmoil, and upheaval, Caesar Augustus was victorious and became the emperor not only of Rome but of all the surrounding nations, as well. This meant that even those 400 people living in the tiny town of Nazareth were under his rule. If he made a law requiring them to do something, they had to do it, no questions asked.

So when this powerful leader of the invading empire decided to make everyone he ruled register their families for tax purposes, everyone had to obey. This meant that every household had to travel to their hometown in order to be enrolled for taxes. So if the husband or the father wasn't born in Nazareth, the family had to pack up and travel to his hometown. We can imagine that when the people of Nazareth heard the news, they began making preparations, getting everything in order for the registration. Luke, the author, tells us this wasn't a new law for them; Quirinius, a Roman governor, had also made this decree. But for Mary and Joseph, this could not come at a worse time.

We can imagine that when Mary heard the news, she was scared and disappointed. She was far along in her pregnancy, and the knowledge that her family wouldn't be with her during the most precarious part of the pregnancy must have been terrifying. What if she had the baby while they were traveling? What would she do without her mother? We don't know if Mary had ever been to Joseph's hometown before, but making a long trip without your family when you're due to have a baby is not the way you want to spend your holidays.

Fear, disappointment, and worry weighed Mary and Joseph down in the days following the decree, as they prepared for the

journey of a lifetime. When our holiday season isn't happening the way we expect, we too can be weighed down by disappointment, fear, or worry. We can lose the very joy we hope for in this season. But we'll learn from Mary and Joseph that our joy isn't wrapped up in our expectations - it's wrapped up tightly within us, among the love God has for us.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ Is there something happening right now that is causing you to question God's plan for you and/or your family? If so, why?
- ✦ Are there any expectations you have for yourself and/or your family that you feel aren't being met?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ How do you think Mary and Joseph felt when they learned they had to leave their home?
- ✦ What would you have done if you were in Mary and Joseph's shoes?

December 18

*"Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant."
(Luke 2:4-5)*

In those days, Bethlehem was known as the "City of David" because it was there King David was born and raised. This was significant to the Jewish people because (as we learned before) King David was regarded as the greatest king in all of Israel's history. And they were traveling there with hundreds of other people, all journeying for the same purpose - to be enrolled in their hometown for taxes. But for Mary and Joseph, the journey was one of questions and fear: would they make it in time? Would everyone be safe? Why was this happening?

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was ninety miles, longer than the journey Mary made to Elizabeth. In the days without planes, trains, and automobiles, that was a serious undertaking and probably took about a week. They would have had to carry all the necessary supplies by hand or on their backs, so by the end of a day's journey, they must have been exhausted. We can be sure they were fighting for joy. They were hot, burdened, and struggling. They were frustrated and afraid. This wasn't going the way they expected.

The author doesn't tell us anything about their journey other than that they had to make it. We don't know what they were thinking or feeling, what conversations they had, what prayers they prayed. Were they looking behind them, just as Mary had done in her prayer months and months before? If they were, they would have been looking to a promise God made through one of his prophets about the king who would rule over his people forever. The promise was this:

"As for you, Bethlehem...though you are the least significant of Judah's forces, one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you. His origin is from remote times, from ancient days." (Micah 5:2)

God promised his people thousands of years before Mary was visited by an angel that their promised king - his Son - would come from the small town of Bethlehem. And here, in the most unexpected times and in the most unexpected of ways, God used a Roman Emperor to do what he promised his people.

We may be fighting for joy this Christmas season. We might be looking around us in disappointment and confusion, wondering why things are going so wrong, feeling burdened by the weight of our baggage. But we need to remember that nothing is unexpected to God. He can use the most surprising of circumstances to work for our good and the good of those around us. We fight for joy when we look at what's happening and we believe that God has a purpose. We can look behind us and remember what he's done. And that's the joy that only comes from within us this Christmas.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ What do you see around you that can sometimes cause you to lose faith in God's plan for you and/or your family?
- ✦ What are some things that have happened in the past year that you see God using today? Are there any lessons you've learned, insight you've gained, or ways in which you've grown?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ What do you think Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem was like?
- ✦ What supplies would you want to bring on the journey to Bethlehem?

Unpacking Joy

December 19

“While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby.” (Luke 2:6)

Of all the times to have the baby, this was definitely not the ideal. Mary and Joseph had just finished the long and difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, they were in an overcrowded city surrounded by hundreds of people waiting to be registered for taxes, and they were far from Mary’s family. They were surrounded by strange and unfamiliar faces, without the comforts of home. While they were waiting for the baby’s birth in Nazareth, they never imagined he would come like this - away from safety and comfort. And God hadn’t prepared them for this, either. Mary knew, because of the angel’s words to her months before, that this was the Son of God. This was no ordinary baby but a child that would fulfill all of God’s promises to them. This was the most important baby ever to be born, and he would have to come like this? We can be sure they felt weighed down, struggling for joy in the midst of the unexpected.

We know that God works in the unexpected, but sometimes when we’re in the middle of it we can lose sight of his handiwork. When we focus our attention - our thoughts, our time, and our energy - on our unmet expectations, we miss the joy that can be found all around us. Sometimes, the joy is on its way to us, just as it was on its way to Mary and Joseph. Sometimes the joy is right in front of us. What matters is recognizing when we are spending our energy on what is not happening instead of being present to what is.

This Christmas season, God is at work in you and your family. You might not see it because it does not look the way you expected, but he is there. When we unpack the baggage of disappointment, fear, and worry that failed expectations can bring, we can make room for joy.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ Are you focused on the unmet expectations in your and/or your family's life right now?
- ✦ Do you feel that God is with you and working in your and/or your family? Why or why not?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ Do you think this was a scary time for Mary? Why or why not?
- ✦ Is it a surprise to you that God's Son would come at a time like this?

December 20

"[Mary] gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom." (Luke 2:7)

Our Christmas story has taken us on quite a journey - we watched God give Elizabeth and Zechariah a miraculous baby, we saw the angel Gabriel tell Mary about her frightening and incredible future, and we walked along Mary and Joseph as they journeyed through their own fight for joy. But this moment of our story is the most amazing and inspiring so far. Of all the unexpected things to happen, this is it.

There are a lot of theories as to where exactly Jesus was born. The most common is that he was born in a stable surrounded by livestock. Some people say he was born in a cave right outside the town. Some say he was born in an "overflow" room right outside the inn. Regardless of the exact structure, there is one thing we know: Jesus was born in a place not fit of the king that he was.

Mary experienced many failed expectations throughout her pregnancy, but giving birth to her son in an environment of rejection and despair must have been startling. Being without the comfort and familiarity of home and family was difficult, but experiencing labor in a cold and uncomfortable place must have felt impossible to bear. During the Christmas season, we sing about it, read poems and books about it, tell the story over and over again, but we never really focus on how lonely and frightening that moment must have been for Mary.

But in the middle of the unexpected and alone, there was joy. There was joy in Mary's simple act of love - wrapping Jesus comfortably and warmly and finding a bed for him to rest. Mary took what was difficult and unexpected and made a place of warmth. She looked around her and recognized the potential of the ugly and ordinary items in her situation, and she made use of them for herself and her son. She made room for joy.

Sometimes, our baggage feels too heavy to carry because we have become numb to our surroundings. We have grown accustomed to where we are, who we are with, and why we are there. We have stopped considering how useful they might be for our joy - and how God might use them in our lives. In the moment when it mattered most, Mary embraced God's unexpected for her and her family. She recognized the potential in all of the difficult and unexpected things that were happening and her perspective changed. Even in this moment, Mary chose the way of love - and in so doing, replaced her failed expectations with joy.

This Christmas, as we consider the baby wrapped snugly in the manger, let's remind ourselves that joy makes our burdens less burdensome because it gives us a fresh perspective. This season, there is joy to be found in our circumstances - whether we expect them or not - and it's just waiting to be unwrapped.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ Have you grown numb to the "ordinary" things in your life? In what way?
- ✦ What do you think you need to remove from your suitcase this season, in order to replace it with joy?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ Do you know what a "manger" is? Why is it unexpected that Mary had to put Jesus in a manger? (*A "manger" is a feeding trough for horses and cattle.*)
- ✦ How do you think Mary and Joseph felt when they found out Jesus had to be born away from a comfortable house?

Unpacking Joy

WEEK FOUR

Unpacking Hope

December 23

Since Christmas falls near the end of the year, we often find ourselves looking ahead to what the future will bring. Even in the chaos of planning and finishing Christmas, we know we are nearing the end of the year and are about to begin another one. For some of us, this is a relief. It has been a difficult and challenging year, and the weight of our baggage going into the holiday season seemed especially heavy to carry. For some of us, we might be looking to the future with anxiety. Jobs are going to be busier, school is going to begin again, schedules will need to be reorganized. There are questions you are still waiting to be answered or relationships that still need some work. The future brings feelings of worry. And for others, the ending of Christmas brings feelings of sadness and loss. This season was a break from what life has been and the knowledge that the distractions of the season will be gone soon makes us feel overwhelmed.

When the presents have been unwrapped and the guests begin to leave, we start to doubt. We doubt if this year brought any significant, positive change. We doubt if next year will be any better for us or our family. We doubt our ability to manage the stress of work again. And all of this doubt robs us of the most powerful tool of Advent: hope.

What Advent brings us is a reminder of the hope we always have because of Jesus' birth. In the midst of our doubt, hope opens our eyes and shows us there is more to come. Advent helps us remember what God did in the past so we can look forward to the future. When we find our suitcase cluttered with doubt, both in ourselves and in God, we weigh ourselves down. But when we unpack the doubt and make room for hope, we realize that the peace, love, and joy of Advent are not gone just because the tree has been put away and the decorations have been taken down.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ Are you carrying doubt with you into the end of the Christmas season?
- ✦ Have you shared these doubts and concerns with a friend, a spouse, or a parent? If not, why?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ Do you feel sad when Christmas is over? Why?
- ✦ Are you looking forward to the new year? Why or why not?

Light the last candle (The Hope Candle) on your Advent Wreath.

Unpacking Hope

December 24

“Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord’s angel stood before them, the Lord’s glory shone around them, and they were terrified. The angel said, ‘Don’t be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you - wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David’s city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, ‘Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.’ When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, ‘Let’s go right now to Bethlehem and see what’s happened. Let’s confirm what the Lord has revealed to us.’” (Luke 2:8-15)

Just because an angel delivers a message to you, doesn’t mean you are going to believe it. That truth is repeated over and over again in the Christmas story. Zechariah questioned the angel when he heard Elizabeth would bear a son. Mary questioned the angel when she learned she would have a baby outside of marriage. So when we read that angels once again appear in the Christmas story, we assume that the shepherds will have some questions, too. And yet their response is completely different: they trusted the message and believed.

In the days of Mary and Joseph, shepherds did not have the greatest reputation. They were commonly regarded as dishonest and thieving. They lived away from society, wandering with their flocks through fields and pastures. Being a shepherd was not only dirty and unglamorous, it attached you to a reputation that wasn’t exactly honorable. But it is lowly shepherds who first hear about the birth of Jesus. While we can never be certain why God chose shepherds to hear the good news, we can learn from it this Christmas - no matter who we are or where we come from, we all have within us the ability to believe.

For the shepherds, hearing that the savior of the world was lying in a feeding trough must have seemed crazy. And yet after hearing the news, they made a decision not to ignore it but to search it out to see with their own eyes if what they heard was

true. When they did see a baby lying in a manger just as the angels had told them, it was the hope of what that baby could bring that gave them the strength to believe.

When we carry doubt in our hearts, we become hardened to the wonder that beliefs can bring. We become cynical and skeptical. Because for all of us, the fear of having our hearts broken by disappointment or loss is more frightening than living a life without hope. And so we doubt and question without really examining for ourselves what possibilities hope could bring.

As the Christmas season comes to a close, let's ask ourselves: how have we allowed doubt to creep in and make us lose our wonder? How can we reclaim it and trust and believe as the shepherds did? How can we see as they did that because of that baby, we have every reason to believe?

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ Examine yours and/or your family's life: where do you see cynicism that's crept in as a result of doubt?
- ✦ What is there in your and/or your family's life that gives you reason to believe? How can this fuel your hope?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ What do you think life was like as a shepherd in Mary and Joseph's day?
- ✦ Is it hard to believe in God sometimes? Why?
- ✦ How do you think believing can give us hope?

Unpacking Hope

December 25

"[The shepherds] went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told." (Luke 2:16-20)

Not all of us have our questions answered so quickly. Sometimes, when we are examining our lives and trying to believe, the clarity just does not come. We are left waiting and wondering if our hope is wasted, if we are wrong to be so expectant. After all, what if it takes a long time to know for certain and we end up being wrong? What then?

The shepherds find out their hope was not misplaced. They were given a clear sign and received a definite answer immediately after they heard the message. But for Mary, that was not the case. Although she held the promised baby in her arms and heard of the shepherds' encounter with the angels, she still had a lifetime of waiting in front of her. She had hope that her son was the savior of the world, but he was just a baby. She would not know until he was older if what God said about him was true.

And Mary did not realize just how painfully her hope would be tested. As we read beyond the Christmas story, we know what happens once Jesus grows up. We know that Mary would have to watch her son suffer and die - the ultimate trial of her hope. But what strengthened her then, and what strengthens her now, is *remembrance*. Mary determined to remember everything that had happened to her: from the moment she was visited by the angel until the moment she was visited by the shepherds. And this remembrance gave her what she needed to believe, which filled her with hope for the future.

Our lives might not look the way we want right now. We might have frustrations and fears and feelings of failure that we carry with us every day. But this Advent, we can know for sure: God

loved us so deeply he came so we might have the ability to live lives of hope. We can look to the future and believe because we look to the past and remember. We remember what God did on a starry night in Bethlehem and we remember what God has done this Christmas season.

We are all on a journey. It might not look like Mary and Joseph's journey, but we are walking forward nonetheless. And on this journey we are carrying a suitcase filled with everything we think we need to succeed and press forward. What we don't realize is that the things that weigh us down don't have to be so heavy - what God offered us in Advent and what he offers us today is to travel light in peace, love, joy, and hope.

May you be full of these this Christmas season.

Questions for Adults:

- ✦ What will you remember about this Christmas season that gives you hope for the new year?

Questions for Kids:

- ✦ What has been your favorite part of this Christmas season?

Unpacking Hope

Make plans to join us at one of three services
this Christmas Eve.

2PM 4PM 8PM

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