

come let us adore him

Welcome to the story. The story that God started to write before time itself and continued throughout the generations, all leading up to and then because of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, His only Son, the greatest gift ever given.

As we embark on the Advent season, our prayer is that you are able to shift your hearts to discover how *joy, give, awe* and *view* can change the way you celebrate and remember Jesus, ultimately leading you to a new kind of wonder. A new kind of worship. A new kind of **responding to God for who He is and what He has done.**

This devotional contains three short sections for each of the four weeks of Advent, and they are meant to be read one at a time *after* hearing the corresponding sermon. Read them on your own. Read them with your family. Or read them with a small group. Engage in the way that helps you become more of a disciple, more like Christ in all of life, and to answer the call to consider a new kind of wonder. A new kind of worship. A new kind of responding to God for who He is and what He has done.

If you have children—from toddlers to teenagers—use the *family time* at the end of each section to start conversation about the various topics each week. Adjust the questions and activities based on the age of your children, and encourage older children (teenagers!) to read this entire Advent devotional for themselves.

To catch up on sermons in this series and view an electronic version of this devotional, please visit grace360.org/2018advent.

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joy, day one, cause + effect

She was determined. All the might she could muster as a 6-year-old little girl was focused on waking up early, so when the alarm set by her older brother went off, she bounced out of bed and ran downstairs as fast as her little legs would carry her.

She knew she wasn't allowed to interrupt Grandma and Grandpa's sleep before the sun came up, so she paced and played, sometimes erupting into spontaneous giggles because the joy deep down in her soul had to explode out somewhere. It just had to.

Her mom and dad heard her, no matter how quiet she thought she was, and slowly crept downstairs to join her, making coffee, reminding her to be patient and preparing for what was to come. Her brother was now awake, too. The house was starting to stir and it was almost time.

Those moments leading up to ribbons ripping, tape tearing and paper parting over what was surely to be "the-best-ever-toy-she-could-have-ever-wanted" lasted longer than normal ones. Waiting for what was to come was haaaard.

It was Christmas morning, and she knew it was going to be good, no matter what was unwrapped next to the twinkling lights on the tree and sleepy adults sipping coffee.

She knew she would be surprised. And she knew she could barely stand waiting any longer for the gifts given from gift givers out of love, even if stringing together that reasoning wasn't yet something she understood.

That joy. That explosive joy of a young child. That explosive joy of a young child on Christmas morning. If only we could bottle it up and take it with us to work when the days were dragging, infuse a little extra into our relationships that felt fizzled, and restore wonder to worship. True wonder.

Describe a time when you experienced childlike joy. Even if it was in decades past, write down what caused such great joy.

What does a child believe to be true about the gift givers that cause such great joy?

What does a child believe about gifts that cause such great joy?

ROMANS 15:13 // May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Great joy like that doesn't just happen. It just doesn't. Even if it is merely because of being reminded of something joyful that happened in the past or a seemingly small delight, there is still a cause of great joy.

These things that potentially cause great joy sometimes happen without us even noticing because we can't see clearly, are too distracted or aren't paying attention at all. We live in a world full of too much "so much" all the time and everywhere. Abby Odio, in her 2016 sermon at Menlo Church, suggests three things everyone can do to increase the joy factor in life and reshape the way we respond to who God is and what God has done and is doing.

1. Turn around. Change directions. Go in a new direction. Repent. Repentance doesn't conjure up images of smiles and happiness. Oftentimes, we associate the practice with lamenting over specific past mistakes. However, sometimes, when we are failing to experience the joy that the Lord has for us it is because we are needing to change course with our behavior and attitudes. Pride, selfishness, a lack of forgiveness, entitlement, greed and other sinful behavior and attitudes tend to

destroy relationships—our relationship with God and our relationship with others, stealing our joy and the joy we could be sharing with others.

Do people associate you with the word joy? Why or why not? Of what do you need to repent that prevents you from experiencing more joy?

2. Too full? When our lives are too full—“too much of a good thing”—we miss out. We often have to give up things to make space for joy. Joseph had to give up expectations for his future wife and how she would have a baby that was not his before marriage. Mary had to give up her body and her own expectations for marriage. In the Old Testament, Abram had to walk away from everything he ever knew to go where God wanted him to be. The Israelites had to leave slavery to go wander in the desert, and there were times that they thought staying in slavery would have been the better option. It’s not an uncommon theme in life; to take on and walk into what will be, we must walk away from what was, creating space. Perhaps it’s making yourself so busy with social obligations that you aren’t able to spend time with your own family or closest friends this Christmas season? Participating in community and attending parties are good things, but if God is calling you to spend more time with your family or to invest in a few, specific relationships, than giving up the social engagements could lead you to a new kind of joy that God has for you.

Where is your life too full? What might God be calling you to give up so that you can receive what He has for you, even if what you are giving up is a good thing?

3. Eyes up! Within seemingly weeks of smart phones becoming a thing in our culture, there were viral videos of people focusing on electronics and walking into trash cans, walls, each other and anything else in their way. Metaphorically speaking, we do that with our whole lives. We stop paying attention to where God is already moving and working. Take time to look up and open your eyes to what God is doing. In the New Testament, many of the stories about Jesus' miracles begin with "He saw." He had to first see people around Him to even know that there was a need to meet or a miracle to perform. Look up!

How could you look up to see people and what God is doing around you?

Spend time praying today asking God to open your eyes to see joyful moments in your day. Then, when you see joy—true joy—it's hard not to notice. And it's contagious. Ask Him also to help you realize what are the roadblocks to experiencing joy in your life and how you might begin to shift habits and patterns, allowing you to experience more joy on a regular basis.

Specifically, for the next 24 hours, when you see great joy, take note. Start a joy list in your phone. Text it to a friend. Make a list at the end of the day.

We'll continue tomorrow by looking at how a few of the characters in the Christmas story reacted to Jesus being born—the cause of truly great joy—and how they worshiped, responding to God for who He is and what He has done.

joy, day two, the shepherds

Joy. Great joy. The things that cause great joy. It is easy to get too busy and too distracted to notice the things that could cause us great joy.

In Luke 2, we read about the birth of Jesus. Joseph and Mary were there, obviously. Perhaps there were other women helping Mary give birth. What we do know is that the word about Jesus' birth spread quickly, and today, we'll discover how the news started and spread through some of the most unlikely characters: the shepherds.

Open your Bible to Luke 2. Begin by reading verse 8.

Where were the shepherds? What were they doing? When were they doing that?

These might seem like simple questions with simple answers. In the fields. Nearby. Keeping watch over their flocks. At night. No big deal. Just shepherds. Just watching sheep. Just standing in fields. Just one night.

But who were these men and how did their role position them to be in the exact time and the exact place doing the exact thing that would prepare them to experience something that would cause them—and the entire world that day and for generations to come—great joy? Shepherds. Being a shepherd was not a glamorous job. It was stinky. It was at night. It was dangerous. It was isolating.

They worked at night because that was when there was the greatest risk that the sheep would be attacked. Someone had to stand guard and protect them. They couldn't lean back against a tree and take a nap. They were actively keeping watch over their sheep, taking a big risk themselves against the elements and the other animals out there.

There were no 24-hour diners where they would take breaks and then get back to work. They didn't have a smart phone to check. There were no books they could take with them to pass the time. They were there

continuously, making sure that those sheep were safe. They missed out on much of everyday life in a culture that didn't have the technology to stay awake at night. Life happened during the day, and they were not part of it.

These isolated shepherds were guarding the sheep that would eventually be sacrificed in the Temple, used for worshiping Yahweh, the God of the universe. They were guarding important things used by important people at important times. Yet they themselves were not important. They were so not important that by the nature of being around those dirty animals, they were actually considered unclean and were forbidden from participating in the worship for which they guarded the sheep. They were isolated from their faith community.

What areas of your life relate to being a shepherd? Not glamorous? Dangerous? Isolating? On a different schedule than others in your own life and than you'd prefer? Feeling a little stinky?

It's likely that there is something that you wish would be different. We live in a fallen world, far from perfect. Sometimes it's messy, dark and quiet. We might feel like we are standing in a field with stinky sheep and being excluded from seemingly more important things when in reality that's exactly when God is sitting on the edge of His seat about change everything.

From what the text tells us, the shepherds were nearby when Jesus was born. They didn't know that they were that close to the miracle that changed the trajectory of humanity for everyone ever created before and after them. They were simply doing what they were always doing at night, watching over their sheep, and in the exact place at the exact time doing the exact thing that they always did...and about to be the first people told about THE miracle of all births.
Read Luke 2:9-20.

Picture this scene for a moment because when you let it play out in your mind it's absolutely crazy: Besides the sound of the sheep and any other shepherds that might be nearby, it's quiet. There was no music playing on a speaker or TV buzzing in the background. Not a peep coming from anything but perhaps animals and the wind blowing. Only the moon and the stars light up the sky, if it wasn't cloudy that night, but their light is blurry and from a distance. There are no city lights because electricity hadn't been invented yet. There was no confusing the shining glory of Lord with a drone, blimp, airplane or anything else that they could have never imagined. They responded how you would have: they were terrified.

This is where it gets good. God has the angels tell *them*, the shepherds, the men who weren't even allowed to worship in the temple because they were unclean. That's who God chose to tell in the middle of the night when no one else was around and when they were probably not expecting it. It was then and there in that moment that the angels brought "good news that will cause great joy for all the people."

What was the good news that the angels had for them?

Jesus is the creator of the good news that caused the great joy, and the shepherds *responded* to God for who He was bringing into the world and what He was doing. These shepherds were not summoning the angels, and they did not ask to be told first. They were simply keeping watch over their sheep in the middle of the night when they heard something that was worth dropping everything to see for themselves. Scripture tells us that they then "returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen."

What did the shepherds go do after hearing the good news? How did they do this?

What did others do because of what the shepherds did?

They hurried to go see the baby and His parents. Then they went and told people. And people were amazed.

It's quite simple when you think about it. When you hear about something amazing happening, the natural thing is to go check it out for yourself—even if you have zero doubt that it's true, you want to see it, hear it, smell it and touch it. You want to enter the story and be a part of it. Because it's *that* good. Standing on the sideline is not an option because who wouldn't want to be a part of something so wonderful? You are compelled to get up and go.

And go immediately. When there's chocolate cake in the break room, you don't finish going through emails, make a phone call and think about going to eat some delicious dessert. You get up and go before it's gone. And that's just chocolate-cake-sized news. Imagine life-changing, eternity-altering news. News that Yahweh *Himself* announced to you in a field. At night. When it was dark and quiet. You move and move fast.

You also go tell other people about it. You don't keep it all to yourself forever, even if it doesn't affect anyone else. Of course, there are circumstances where you may hold on to something wonderful for a time or share it only with a small group, but eventually, the things that cause great joy in our lives tend to explode all over everywhere, inviting others to participate in experiencing the great joy with us.

How have you taken action because of something wonderful God has done in your life that you did nothing to cause?

How has your life been changed because someone else shared the good news with you?

**How have you shared the good news of Jesus being born with others?
How could you do so this Advent season?**

They were just shepherds. They lived in the fields. At night. When no one else was around. They stunk, too, because they were surrounded by animals. Yet they were the ones who had the privilege of being the mouthpiece for the greatest news ever told. They were the first to whom God announced Jesus' birth. They were invited into the story, shared the story and overflowed with great joy from this good news.

Consider where God is using you today. Pray about how you are positioning your heart and mind to pay attention to what He is doing in you and through you in what might seem like the mundane things of everyday life. Then, when you see God moving in ways that only God can move, tell someone. Share the good news, and attribute it to the One who causes such great joy.

joy, day three, joseph

The greatest gift ever given in the history of the world by the only perfect gift giver was given over 2000 years ago in the form of a baby born to a teenage mom in what was an unconventional pregnancy situation. And that gift—illogical and inconvenient—sparked great joy in the lives of those who heard of it and were part of it. The birth of Jesus, the cause of such joy, was truly unexpected and spurred those closest to the situation to worship, responding to God for who He is and what He had done.

Because they were ready for it.

Before this first “Christmas,” the people closest to the situation had the opportunity to be prepared for it. It was their perspective of God and their trust in Him that allowed them to be ready and, therefore, to respond the way that they did...before they knew how the story would unfold.

Mary and Joseph. It’s easy to think that their response to God telling them about the birth of Jesus was normal and appropriate. We know what would happen next. We know that Joseph doesn’t leave Mary. We know that when Jesus was born, people came with gifts and to worship. We know that Jesus grew up and eventually had brothers and sisters. We know that Jesus lived and died and lived again. We know the end of the story.

But they didn’t. They were young: full-fledged adults in their culture but youth by today’s definition. Their relationship was not their own, probably at least partially orchestrated by older relatives in their lives.

They had agreed to get married, and that’s all we know. They aren’t living together, and when we meet Joseph for the first time, he is told that his fiancée is pregnant with GOD’S SON and that he should still marry the girl.

Read Matthew 1:18-25

What was Joseph's response to the angel of the Lord?

“He did what the angel of the Lord had commanded.” He chose to obey. He took the information he was given, and chose to act on it. We don't know if he was doing cartwheels and shouting from the mountain tops with confidence in the gift God was giving...or if he scratched his head the next morning and tip-toed around awkward social situations avoiding eye contact as people whispered about his pregnant fiancée.

What Scripture does tell us is that “he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him.” He obeyed.

Obedience is one of those funny little words that is sometimes associated with a negative attitude and that sometimes reminds us of homework assignments. It means chores and must-do's instead of want-to's. But it's only when we obey that we get to the good stuff. Joseph obeyed, and he became the husband of a woman like Mary and the earthly father to Jesus, the God who created him.

This man—and many others throughout Scripture (read Hebrews 11!) didn't know what would happen *after* he obeyed. He only knew that the God who loved him enough to create him and was faithful and inviting him into something that he couldn't yet see, and he chose to walk faithfully into that something, not knowing if it would be awesome or awful.

Our actions, our mindset and our decisions are how we respond to God for who He is and what He is doing. When we obey, we are worshiping God with our response. Worship is not passive, as we saw with the shepherds. They worshiped and got moving. And oftentimes, it isn't until after we obey that we are able to discover the great joy that God had prepared for us well in advance. It isn't always the shallow happy feeling of things going the way that we had hoped. However, as we grow more as disciples, becoming more like Christ in all of life, we grow in the way that we experience God's presence and in relationship with Him, which ultimately leads to great joy, true joy.

When is a time that you chose to obey whatever it was God wanted you to do, and you were surprised by something that caused great joy?

When is a time that you chose to obey whatever it was God wanted you to do, and even though it didn't work out as you had hoped or expected, you were able to find joy in how God was growing you and deepening your faith?

We read the story of Jesus being born, Mary and Joseph being chosen to be His earthly parents and all the events surrounding this, knowing the end of the story. It's easy to be numb to their profound and bold response to what God tells them because we know how it worked out for them.

But in our own lives, we live in the middle. We live in the middle where obeying doesn't always feel as clear or as easy. We don't have angels arriving in our dreams dictating specific instructions. Sometimes, obeying isn't so clear.

Read Romans 12:2.

Scripture has an answer for what to do when the obedience isn't spelled out in an email or found on Google: Be transformed. By the renewing of your mind. *Then* you will be able to test and approve what God's will is.

Where are you living in the middle? How can you trust God by obeying and waiting on Him, and what joy might come from that?

Spend time allowing your mind to be transformed, whether it be through prayer, meditating on Scripture or worshiping. Specifically ask God to use this time to transform your mind so that you may boldly worship Him through obedience. Wait patiently to see how He will use your circumstances, even if they seem as crazy as someone's fiancée becoming pregnant miraculously with the Son of God. And choose to walk courageously, like Joseph did when he married and cared for Mary and this Child, who was the Savior of the world.

joy, family time

Ask your children to tell you about the BEST SURPRISE that they ever received and then share a story of your own.

As you share your story, talk about how great joy does not happen on its own; something causes great joy—whether it be a surprise or good news.

Ask how they feel about Christmas and whether or not it is easy to wait to open presents.

Talk about how the people who were there for the first Christmas—Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth and everyone else—were part of a people who had waited hundreds of years for the Messiah. When Jesus was born, it was good news that caused great joy.



give, day one, peter

Words are funny things. They seem so simple yet are collections of letters specifically arranged that can suddenly carry the weight of the world behind them. Their power is defining and can shape our thoughts, actions and relationships, whether we acknowledge it or not.

What is the word CHRISTMAS filled with for you?

What does the word WORSHIP mean to you?

If worship is responding to God for who He is and what He has done, then it matters who we think God is and what we think God has done. It will shape our response to Him.

Who do you see God to be? What are the pieces of your story that have shaped who you see God to be?

What do you believe that God has done for you?

Read Matthew 16:13-16. It is a conversation between Jesus and one of his disciples and closest friends, Peter. Peter has known Jesus at this point for a while, and it is here where Peter tells Jesus who he thinks He is.

How does Peter see Jesus?

How was Peter able to come to this conclusion?

Most good things in life take work. Relationships that are healthy and growing take time, vulnerability and intentionality. Graduating from school takes studying and doing the work. Getting promoted requires you to do your job with excellence. There is not a lot outside of faith that isn't earned. But God breaks all those rules. Until we realize that Jesus truly was a gift, we aren't able to fully grasp how deep and how wide His love is for us.

JOHN 3:16 // For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Circle the fourth and ninth words in the verse above.

Why did God do what He did? What did He give?

How does receiving a gift from God shape your definition of worship?

God gave Himself. He didn't give things or new jobs or a winning lottery ticket. He gave Himself. Responding to this gift—nothing we can earn or deserve—of God Himself shapes the way we respond to Him in worship and giving.

Spend time praying today and thanking God that He *gave* us the gift of His Son, knowing we could never earn salvation on our own.

give, day two, the first gifts

The first Christmas presents. The Magi brought them to Jesus because they responded to the good news with great joy by giving specific gifts to Jesus Himself. These men who gave the gifts were men considered to be ancient priests who used patterns seen in the sky to seek wisdom and direction. They were not Jewish. However, they would have been aware of the Jewish Scriptures; therefore, when they looked at the skies and took into consideration the knowledge that they had, they took action.

Read Matthew 2:1-16.

The Magi were not physically sitting still. Where did they go?

Why did they take these actions?

How did King Herod respond?

How did the Magi respond to hearing about Jesus' birth when they went to see Jesus for themselves?

Worship leads to giving.

The gifts the Magi brought would have represented more wealth than someone born in to a family like Jesus' would have earned in their lifetime. Scripture says that they were "overjoyed" to give the gifts. Couldn't keep the joy inside. Couldn't contain it. They had an opportunity to give, so they gave.

The Magi brought gifts because they discovered a very different kind of God. They were from a different culture—the Ancient Near East. People in their culture sought gods for protection and assistance, not a relationship. You couldn't know the gods, and they certainly didn't love you. But Yahweh is different; He gave life and Himself. In fact, the primary action the God of Israel takes in the Bible is GIVING. Yahweh is drastically different from the other gods with which the Magi would have been familiar.

No one wakes up and perfectly loves others and loves God in the way that they live generously. It takes practice. Just like a marathoner doesn't start out running 26.2 miles without training, we don't immediately live generously.

Therefore, here are some ways that you can begin to practice living generously in reflection of the God who loves you enough to have given you His one and only Son, following the example of the Magi.

- Give financially. For you, it might mean putting your money where your mouth is. You have the resources, and God is opening doors for you to be financially generous.
- Be an encourager. Even if you are not naturally one to use words to encourage others, look for ways to tell those around you what you appreciate or see in them. Rarely do people remember what you said or did, but they always remember how you made them feel.
- Give the gift of time. Be less scheduled so you can be more available to the people around you, or schedule time specifically with those who matter to you most.
- Give assistance. Who needs help hanging pictures? Getting a ride to the airport? Having a babysitter for date night? Look at those around you, and ask yourself how you can help them this week.
- One at a time. "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love," Mother Teresa said. There is overwhelming need in the world, and there is no way that you could meet the needs of every person who you know. However, there is likely one person with one need over time who you could serve by giving.

- Give in community. There are sometimes needs that you can't meet on your own, but you likely could do something to serve others by serving with others. If you are involved in a Life Group, a Community or have a large family, consider how you could pool your resources to live generously with others.

How else could you give?

Which of those ideas above are easy and natural for you?

Where could you “stretch” a little to grow in giving generously?

Spend time praying and asking God to reveal to you how He wants you to give. Talk with your spouse, family or friends, and commit to taking one step to give generously this Advent season as a way of responding to God for who He is and what He has done.

give, day three, that blue shirt

THAT BLUE SHIRT

I used to have a long-sleeve, light blue workout shirt. It was one of those non-cotton things that was great at keeping me warm when it was cold out and cool in hotter weather because of the material. The color coordinated well with other workout clothes. And it fit perfectly. I loved that shirt! One of the reasons I loved it so much is because my mom bought it for me. It was a cherished gift because she's not nearly as outdoorsy as I am and only goes to REI when she's shopping for me. Buying this gift for me meant that she not only knows what I love to do and wants me to have the gear needed for such activities but also took the time to go to a place that she wouldn't typically go just to pick out a gift for me.

I really loved that shirt. I wore it all the time, more than any other long-sleeve shirt in my workout collection...for about seven months.

My final appearance in that shirt was on a seven-day hiking trip in Africa. And I didn't lose it.

At the end of our epic trek up a big mountain, we—the seven of us who embarked on the adventure together from the United States—had an opportunity to donate gear to the amazing, humbling, inspiring porters (guides) who were the only reason we all made it up to the top. They served, encouraged and supported us in ways that are unfathomable. There are no words that do justice to the awe and gratitude felt toward this group of men, the 20 of them that the seven of us needed to successfully summit the 19,431-foot Mount Kilimanjaro.

When we arrived at the bottom of this mountain on the last day, shared a meal and stood around to say our good-byes, we all jumped at the chance to sort through our piles of gear—stuff that isn't available in Tanzania—to give to these guys who are out in the elements every week serving others. I had a pair of ski gloves with me that were my “old” ones, so I easily handed those over. I had purchased a new, fancy water bottle that had no memories marked by stickers collected, so I tossed that in the pile. There were a few other things, too: a short-sleeve shirt and a pair of socks.

And then I found myself looking at my blue shirt. My favorite blue shirt. I knew that it would fit one of the guides standing in that circle. I had another shirt that I didn't like very much, but I knew it would be too small for any of them. But my favorite blue shirt would be used. My favorite blue shirt.

I tossed it in the pile quickly without thinking. I knew if I hesitated even a moment I'd justify the decision and change my mind. We hugged good-bye and climbed on the bus. As we drove away from what surely will be one of the most incredible experiences I'll ever remember and seven days that provided hundreds of life lessons, I chose to stop thinking about the shirt, not thinking that it would be a big deal. It was, after all, only a shirt.

But it was a big deal. Not a life-changing big deal, but giving away my favorite blue shirt was a big deal because it taught me about gifts and giving.

It taught me that gifts were meant to be given away. God blesses us in abundance out of His love for us because He knows what we need and what we like, according to who He uniquely created each of us to be. But those gifts are not ours to own forever. Instead, they are ours to use to the best of our ability for a time—perhaps decades, maybe months and, sometimes, only for minutes.

It taught me that true sacrifice hurts, even if only a little, because if not, it wouldn't truly be a sacrifice. Yup. I learned that. Over a shirt. (It's a little embarrassing to put this into words on a page that other people will read, but it's true.) I still think about that shirt when I'm looking for something similar in my drawer of workout clothes. I wish, selfishly, at times, that I didn't give it away.

It taught me that I am selfish. I'm inclined to give out of convenience and ease but almost never give when it sacrifices my own needs and desires and comfort, at least in ways that I can't control. I budget my tithe, plan out my time and have margin in my life so that I can "give" when needs arise. But I rarely give anything in a way that pains me and is not what or how I intended to give.

This morning, when I went digging through my drawer of workout clothes and that blue shirt came to mind, I found myself wondering how amazing it would be if I made a habit out of giving abundantly with what God has given me...especially when it wasn't something I wanted to give.

What ways do you naturally and easily give to others?

Where do you see others giving easily that you wish you could emulate?

What is the “blue shirt” in your life that you could give generously this Advent season?

Close your time by spending some time asking God to give you His wisdom for when He is calling you to give generously during this Advent season.

give, family time

Read Acts 20:35 together. Have each person share about the best Christmas gift they were able to *give* and why they liked giving it.

Discuss about how your family could practice giving. You could give deliciousness by baking cookies for a neighborhood, give time by volunteering or give resources by having each person contribute to a financial gift to a nonprofit. Choose one to do together before Christmas.



awe, day one, big deals

2012 was apparently my year for going to big concerts. They were all amazing. Great shows with big lights, big sound, big energy, big crowds and big entertainment. Big shows that probably cost big money and took big amounts of time to set up, execute and clean up. There have only been a small handful of superstars or groups on stage, but they couldn't have done what they did without the hundreds of people behind the scenes to make it all happen.

That's a lot of effort for one night, if you think about it. Jobs, money, time, resources...all spent on a few hours of live music.

The book of Exodus contains the story of such a big show that DreamWorks made it into a movie: The Prince of Egypt. It's the fireworks display of God's great power freeing the Israelites from slavery. There are all kinds of crazy things that happen, the kind of crazy that gets the attention of middle school boys because it's "so cool" or "so gross." There's the poor little baby rescued by a princess, too, and the stuttering hero who gets help from a friend. It's a good story; God's fireworks display of miracles that show how powerful He is, how big He is and how important the Israelites are to Him.

End Act One of Exodus.

Act Two of Exodus is a little less exciting. At first glance, one might be disappointed by the second 20ish chapters of this book. Because it is a little disappointing. The Israelites have just witnessed this massive and awesome display of God's power, so one might think that their WOW! factor would be so off the charts that they couldn't help but praise God and stand in awe of Him. Alas, not so much. Or so it seems.

Similar to what we would probably do today, they forgot. Quicker than one might assume—or at least I assumed when I read this for the first time—they forget. They whine. They complain. They get impatient. They go as far as to ask Moses if they can go back to living in slavery because they don't know what God is doing and don't like how He's doing it.

God, you'd think, would give up. Or at least I would if I just freed all those people from slavery and their response was to whine.

Fortunately, God is God and I am not.

Instead, He starts telling them how to live. He also tells them how to worship. These people, who have been slaves for centuries now have instructions on how to worship this great big God who freed them from slavery with His fireworks style display of miracles. He gives them what takes up a dozen or so chapters in the Bible with measurements, listed materials, guidelines and a how-to manual for building items for worship. It consumes them. It gives everyone a job, according to what they like to do and at which they are skilled. It uses all of their valuable resources and takes up all of their time. Preparing for worship is their life.

As I read through the lists of cubits and clothes, plans and pomegranates, I started to think that this was a little odd, to be honest. I wondered why God, a God who doesn't actually need us but chooses to love us, a God who has no ego and is not dependent on the way we feel about Him, has the Israelites spend so much time and energy on worship?

Because it wasn't for Him.

Worship isn't for God as much as it's for us. God doesn't need an ego boost. He doesn't need people to remind Him how great He is or to recount the awesome things that He's done. He just doesn't. If He did, He'd be weak and pathetic. And that god wouldn't be powerful and big and worth any worship.

God doesn't need worship. But we sure do. We need worship.

We need worship to remember the One who is worthy of worship. We need worship to remember that we're not the ones around whom our lives revolve. We need worship to remember that our jobs, families, bank accounts, hobbies, dreams...our everything... hinges on one great big God who created us and is involved in our lives today. We need worship to put into perspective who God is. We need worship so we remember to depend on the One who gives us everything we need.

God placed the people who made up the Israelites in Exodus in that specific time at that specific place for those specific reasons. He gave them those specific gifts to use in specific ways to be a part of His plan specifically. God didn't need to do that, but rather He allowed people to be invited to be a part of the story He was writing and still is writing today.

You aren't one of those specific people. You were never meant to be, and you never will be. Your name isn't on the pages. And your character doesn't make a cameo appearance.

However, God did place you in this specific year with the specific gifts and specific people around you to give you specific opportunities to use all that He made you to be to glorify Him in specific ways. He is writing you into His story specifically. God continues to use people today just like He used people back then. His is wooing you with His irresistible love and grace so that you are invited into worshiping Him for who He is and what He has done. He loves you that much. You are chosen. You are His.

Where has God placed you today? Your job? Your neighborhood? The main characters in your life story? The talents, education, resources and experiences He has given you?

If worship is defined as responding to God for who He is and what He has done, how are you using all that He has given and made you to be for His glory?

Our church recently walked through a sermon series on The Church—The Bride of Christ. We talked about how Jesus established His Church, how we can participate in our local church and The Church, sacraments and other things. The sermon graphic on the bulletin cover and slides was created with a picture of the Cologne Cathedral in Germany.

Construction on that cathedral began in the year 1248 and concluded in 1880. No, those numbers aren't a typo. That cathedral took 632 years to build. The number of workers and dollars that went into creating a building whose sole intention was to worship and glorify God took over six centuries to construct. No one who began or originally envisioned this project could even kid themselves in believing they would see it come to fruition. It was bigger than them. It was to worship the God of the universe and the God of eternity.

We have very few physical representations of such works in our culture today. We get annoyed when a construction project takes more than a few months and don't understand why things take so long. Our perspective is infected with immediacy. The danger of this is that it sometimes infects the way that we worship. We want worship to stay in a one-hour box that is convenient, and we get annoyed when it runs a few minutes late causing us to hit more traffic when we head to a soccer game or wait in a longer line at our favorite lunch spot. With our lives controlled by all the modern conveniences, which are not bad or evil or wrong, we too easily forget that worship was never meant to be something that was to be contained.

How could making a BIG DEAL out of worship help shape your view of God and respond to who He is and what He has done?

Where might there be space to shift not only your mental focus but also your time? How can you make and keep worship a priority in your schedule no matter how busy you get on a daily and weekly basis?

Close your time today by thanking God for such a rich history that reminds us to worship Him. Thank Him for allowing you to live in a time and a place where you can worship freely. Lastly, consider adding worship to your daily life by the music you choose. Use the time you have and push pause to focus on Him by making corporate worship, focused worship and intentional worship a priority.

awe, day two, david

Each week in churches all over the world, Christians get together to sing songs together. They are songs of adoration, lament and history. And in some ways, this is not unique to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Music is part of every culture everywhere. There are songs for holidays, birthdays, countries, sports teams and cultural traditions. Children learn them at such a young age that they don't even remember not knowing them, and they can empower hundreds of thousands of fans at a time to rally behind a single team. Music has power.

What makes worship in Christian churches unique is that we are uniting not only with others in the same room but also with those adoring God who have been doing so since Yahweh created humanity and will do for eternity. Worship has unfathomable power.

When God was telling the Israelites how to live and how to worship in Exodus, part of what He had them do was build an ark, the ark of God. It was an elaborate box and home to the Ten Commandments, among other valuable things. This ark was carried and protected with the utmost care following the strictest guidelines.

Flipping forward more than a few books and more than a few generations to the book of 2 Samuel and the reign of King David, we discover some not-so-fantastic circumstances for the ark of God. Over the years, it had been stolen from and recovered by the Israelites while in battle, and there were times when those who had it in their possession regretted taking it. There was a common belief that gods were attached to physical things and physical places. Steal the ark, and you steal God's power and authority from the Israelites.

Read 2 Samuel 6:12-22. It is where we find King David bringing the ark back to Jerusalem.

What does this passage say that David was doing—specifically—while bringing “the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom”?

What did David do as he entered the city with the ark?

What things did all of Israel do in response to the ark entering Jerusalem in this passage?

As the story continued to unfold, what did David continue to do? How did Michal, his wife, respond to this?

Everyone is unique. Some experience the most meaningful worship while alone and on their knees with their eyes closed. Others embrace full-body worship with arms open wide singing off-key at the top of their lungs while jumping up and down in the front row of church every Sunday. We all respond with great joy differently.

The question remains, however, are you letting the truths of God's goodness—the miracle of Jesus and His love that led to the gift of His Son—truly sink in your heart this Advent season so that you are drawn to a place of worship?

How have you been drawn to worship God in the past?

How can you incorporate *that* kind of worship during Advent?

Consider “fake it ‘till you make it” if you are struggling to engage in worship on a regular basis or for the first time ever. Before writing that off as inauthentic, think about how putting yourself in a position of worship might guide you to deep and meaningful worship. You might sing worship songs in your car because saying the words aloud will help you consider what they mean. Maybe you'll raise your hands in worship on Sunday to put you in a physical position of surrender to God. Or you could kneel quietly in your bedroom as you meditate on a Psalm. Worship the LORD, unafraid and without a thought of what others will think, celebrating and responding to who God is and what God has done.

awe, day three, mary

As we discussed in week one—*joy*—the greatest gift ever given in the history of the world by the only perfect gift giver was given over 2000 years ago in the form of a baby born to a teenage mom in what was an unconventional pregnancy situation. It was a gift that sparked great joy in the lives of those who heard of it. The birth of Jesus and the cause of such joy was truly unexpected and spurred those closest to the situation to worship, responding to God for who He is and what He had done.

Similar to when we looked at how Joseph responded to God, we tend to think that it's the way it should be. Mary should trust God, go see her cousin and praise God. It's just what they did. It's the logical outcome of the story.

But was it? Really? *Really?*

There was no one else with Mary when the angel spoke to her. There was no warning that this angel would come. And the news delivered wasn't your typical sort of message that all of her friends would have heard.

Today, we know how the story unfolded and how it all worked out. But Mary didn't. Mary was in the story, living it out in real time, not knowing what would happen next.

Read Luke 1:26-38.

What are the ways that Mary could have responded to this angel?

How might her perspective on who God is have shaped her response?

The story goes on to say that Mary did what most women would do in this sort of situation: she went to see a close friend. This friend of hers was Elizabeth, her cousin and the mother of John the Baptist. As they talk, Elizabeth celebrates with her.

Read Luke 1:39-55.

What truths about who God is and what God has done are claimed and celebrated in Mary's song?

As with most of Scripture, we read it from a what-has-happened perspective; it's history. We know the end of the story. But those who were writing those stories with their own lives had a drastically different view. They didn't know the outcomes. Mary had no way of knowing what exactly would happen when she gave birth, how her marriage would be affected and perhaps even what people would say about the unwed-yet-engaged pregnant woman. Nonetheless, *she chose to worship*. Her response to the God who called her into this role was to articulately worship Him for who He is and what He had done.

How can you or have you worshiped God for who He is and what He has done when you were living “in the middle” of a story that was not playing out as you expected it to be?

Perhaps your life right now is bursting with joyful worship. Christmas is your favorite. You have watched *Elf* a dozen times, make cookies once a week and can't fill your calendar with enough parties with people you love. Things with your family have never been better, you love your job and you are excited about going on vacation. You are living the life that people typically only have on social media.

Or perhaps life is not so picture perfect. Work is stressful, family is hard and this time of year is draped with despair and disappointment. You wish you could wake up on January 2 and be done with the holidays. All of them.

Likely, you fall somewhere in the middle. Not everything is perfect, but there are some pieces of the puzzle that are fitting well. This is where you can leverage the middle; remain rooted in worship now so that you are positioned in the future to anchor yourself during the storms of life and, on the flip side, humbly give credit to God for who He is and what He is doing when you are overflowing with celebration.

Take a few minutes to write down your own version of Mary's song to close your time today. Remember *who* God is and *what* God has done not only in your immediate life and circumstances but also for you historically and eternally.

awe, family time

Ask your family about the most awesome thing they have ever seen or experienced—anything. Be prepared to share one or two of your own examples. Dig deeper by asking why this was so awesome.

Talk to your kids about that word “awesome” and how if you switch the parts of the word, it’s actually a pretty good definition of what that word means—you experience “some” “awe” when something is “awesome.”

Those moments of “awe” remind us of who God Himself is; they prompt us to worship. Pray as a family and thank God for those awesome things, how awesome it was to give us Jesus and for other awesome things about who God is and what God has done.



view, day one, chosen

This week, we are talking about mindset, the way we view God and others. Our perspective. Our view. The way we see things radically determines the way we think, speak and act.

There's a cartoon with two pictures of the same scene from different perspectives. The cartoon square on the left has a person on a desert island with one palm tree in the middle of the ocean who sees a boat. They yell, "BOAT!" as loud as possible and with all the energy they have.

This same cartoon has a similar square on the right side. This square has a person on a tiny boat in the middle of what appears to be a large ocean. They see the island ahead—the same island with the person mentioned above—and they yell, "LAND!" as loud as possible and with all the energy they have.

The caption under both cartoon squares: "It can be hard to change your perspective."

Changing perspective is a seemingly insurmountable challenge, and it takes an incredible amount of maturity to do so.

But Jesus.

But Jesus came and changed everything. For those of us who believe that Jesus is the Son of God who was born, lived, died and lived again, conquering sin for all eternity, Jesus changes everything. He delivered on His promise to send His Spirit to invite us to let Him work in us and through us. We are His; we are chosen. We respond to who God is and what God has done by the way that we, therefore, view other people. We are chosen people called to live like chosen people.

Read Colossians 3:12.

How does Paul describe God's people?

When was a time that you were chosen for something or by someone that has influenced your life in significant ways?

How does having the mindset that you are chosen, holy and dearly loved by God, change the way that you view and treat others?

Paul tells God's chosen people to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. These are all things we are called to be that require human interaction. If there's no one to whom to be kind, then what's the point of kindness? When we are kind to another person, we are loving God by loving that other person. This is an expression of worship—responding to who God is and what God has done—because what God has done includes making us more like Christ in all of life and that means loving others like Christ loved people.

Look back at the verse and the list. How might you worship by the way you set your mind and heart on treating other people? Take a personal inventory. For each of the five listed, take time to remember how Jesus has loved you in these ways and then consider how your relationships would be different if you chose to see people through these filters.

Jesus has shown me His compassion by...

I can reflect His compassion by...

Jesus has shown me His kindness by...

I can reflect His kindness by...

Jesus has demonstrated His humility to me by...

I can reflect His humility by...

Jesus has demonstrated His gentleness to me by...

I can reflect His gentleness by...

Jesus has demonstrated me His patience by...

I can reflect His patience by...

Perspective matters. This Advent season, don't forget that perspective includes the way that you view others. Before you even encounter someone in your day, the fact that you choose to love them, following Jesus' example, will shape your interactions.

Close your time today by praying that God will give you His eyes to view others. Thank God, also, for how He has chosen you, views you and interacts with you—for it is only by His grace that we are able to reflect His love.

view, day two, grateful

When something is given to us or done for us that is significant or unusual, it is easy to be grateful. But when something happens that is routine, we begin to take that something for granted, and we forget to be grateful. Our attitude becomes one of entitlement because instead of being grateful for the things in our life, we unintentionally assume that we are so important that we deserve or have earned what should be “gifts” from God or others. That kind of pride is toxic to all relationships, with God and others.

Therefore, to become someone who has a mindset of gratitude, we must remember to consciously and intentionally be grateful.

God knew this would be hard for us. He knew that we are a forgetful people and would need help to remember to be grateful. The Psalms are a great place to start for this. The Psalms were songs written in all kinds of circumstances to express worship to God for who He is and what He has done. And they help us remember these things.

Remember Abraham. And Joseph. And Moses. Remember what God did with the Egyptians. Remember the manna. Remember the water from the rock. And the stars at night. Remember the good kings. Remember how He spared David’s life. Remember the consequence of sin and God’s mercy. Remember how God created and called the Israelites to be. Remember how God blessed his people with land. And worship Him for it.

Remember to worship God for who He is and what He has done.

It seems so easy, right? Just remember.

But apparently, it’s easy to forget. All these Psalms—prayers and praises and heart cries—written by people thousands of years ago helped them and others remember. When you’re lonely and out in the desert, claim God’s truths, worship Him for what He’s done and trust that He will rescue you. When you go to celebrate, retell the story of God’s great faithfulness, remember His majestic power and unfailing grace, and you can’t help but be drawn into worship from a place of gratitude.

The Psalms remind us of His faithfulness. They spark worship. They draw our eyes to gaze at His creation and the beauty of what He has done and is doing, inspiring unstoppable awe. They generate confidence to trust God even though today's concerns may seem overwhelming and frustrating. They remind us to remember.

Read Psalm 136.

What does the psalmist praise God for that God also does for you?

What are specific things that God has done for you over the course of your life? During this Advent season?

Practice being grateful. Write a thank you note. Say thank you as many times as possible to your family members and coworkers in the next 24 hours. List all the things you can remember that God has done for you in the past year and thank Him for that. Send an email or text to three people who have helped you this month. Notice how these intentional expressions of gratitude cause you to experience a feeling of great joy and lead you to respond in worship God for who He is and what He has done.

view, day three, choice

There is a story that circulated around social media over the course of the past year, and whether or not it was true, it can teach us something about how choosing our perspective intentionally can lead us to worship, responding to God for who He is and what He has done.

This story was told of an elderly woman whose husband had passed away and who was not able to live on her own. Moving into an assisted-living center was her only option. Hobbling along slowly with her walker and on the way to her new room, she asked the young lady helping her to describe this space that she would soon call home. The young lady with her talked about the colors of the curtains, mentioned the size of the bed and listed the furniture that was included.

“I love it!” exclaimed the elderly woman, interrupting.

“But how could you love it?” the young lady asked. “You haven’t seen it yet.

“That doesn’t have anything to do with it,” she replied. “Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. Whether I like my room or not doesn’t depend on how the furniture is arranged, it’s how I arrange my mind. I already decided to love it.”

Sometimes it’s our mindset, the way we view the world, that gets the best of us. We think about the stressful schedule on our work calendar, and we look at the day as if it is terrible. Then, guess what? It is!

Similar to how we talked about choosing to live as chosen people in the way that we view others, how we choose to view our circumstances can determine our ability to respond to who God is and what God has done. Consider the person you know who always complains in advance about how something will be. Then, no matter how it turns out, they still have a negative attitude about what happened. On the flip side, those who seem to naturally experience more joy and respond in worship tend to have an open mind to what God is doing and see things differently. It isn’t simply a “glass half-full” perspective; it’s trusting Jesus’ words, despite circumstances in everything—the minor details and the major milestones.

Toward the end of His ministry before the cross, Jesus spends some time sharing important truths with His disciples. It makes sense. Before children head off to college, parents share their wisdom. As someone is about to be married, friends gather and pray to encourage. When we know that things are shifting or that time is short, important things are said. Of course, Jesus knew that this was not the end. He knew that He would not stay dead. He knew that His words would not only encourage the disciples in the midst of His crucifixion (before His resurrection) but also be carried with them as they continued to share the good news of His life for decades to come.

JOHN 16:33 // “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” —Jesus

What does Jesus say *will* happen?

What does Jesus promise that His disciples *will* have?

When a person is deeply rooted in the peace of Jesus, it is difficult to have a mindset that steals joy. Even in the darkest of days, Jesus promises that His love is greater. He is in control.

What can we do during this season of Advent to position our hearts to have a mindset ready to worship, ready to trust God for who He says He is and to trust Him no matter what He is doing? John Ortberg from Menlo Church in a 2016 sermon series suggests four ways that you can help your heart be guided by God and into worship.

1. Start right. Once you have one piece of candy from that bowl at work, it's hard to stop. You've already ruined the day, so why not a few more? If it's rainy when you wake up, it's easier to not exercise and move on with the rest of your day. How you start matters. It does. It just does. Scripture tells us that God's mercies are new every morning. *Every morning*. Not only on Mondays. Not just every January 1. And not when you feel like it. Every. Single. Day.

What can you do to prepare your heart and mindset for the day ahead in a way that invites you to more naturally respond in worship to who God is and what God is doing?

2. Ask questions. One billion questions. That's how many your average 4-year-old asks. Before breakfast. About things that most moms and dads don't care or don't know. *But why? How come? When? Who does that? What is it?* And then you tell them. Sometimes, it dribbles off them like them like milk from their cereal on their chin. But other times, those moments of "WOW!" when all you do is simply say that the Summer Olympics happen every four years or that they, too, will be able to ride their bike without training wheels—that's when they get it more than adults do. They have an intense curiosity that truly wants the answer. They aren't asking because it's polite or because they need the answer. Their curiosity fuels their awe.

How can you remain or become intensely curious about Jesus?

3. Worship when it's hard. Ortberg points out that the first Christmas is full of problems...yet they worship. Mary chooses to trust and worship God despite the fact that she is a pregnant, virgin, unmarried teenager. Joseph obeys and worships, even though his fiancée and then new-wife is pregnant. Jesus is born in a place designed for animals, not people, to live. Yet they worship. They continue to worship. This is not necessarily the most easy response. The muscles needed to respond in worship during the most difficult seasons of life sometimes get stretched in ways that might not feel natural.

Read James 1:2-4.

James doesn't write "if" you face trials; he says "whenever." You will face trials.

What does facing trials do to your faith?

What does perseverance do in you?

What mindset does James say you should have toward trials?

How can you worship God for where He has you today—trials and all?

4. Spread the word. Sharing good news makes it feel more real. It just does. Even if it is only one person, telling that one person something good that happens in your life can't help but make you smile. And when you hear about something good happening in someone else's life, it is difficult not to be happy for them. As Ortberg says, "God becomes more alive in you when you let Him out to those around you."

This includes good news and *the Good News*. For some, sharing about Jesus, who God is and what God has done, is easy. It's natural; conversations about shoes turn to Jesus as naturally as breathing. For others, it takes a little more intentionality (and dare we say, courage?). Sharing your faith story, who God is to you and what God has done for you, can be powerful and life-changing.

How can you make sharing good news more of a habit and how might that impact your mindset this Advent season?

Who is one person with whom you could share who God is and what God has done? How could you do this?

Look back at the four ways that can help your heart be guided into worship. Write down the one where you most feel like God has molded and guided you. Thank Him and praise Him for working in your life in the past—for who He is and what He has done. Worship.

Next, write down the one way in which you could consider growing. Where might you start right in the days ahead? Pray and thank God for how He will continue to work in you and your life through the Holy Spirit, making you more like Christ in all of life.

Close your time today by asking God to give you His eyes to view Him, the people around you and your circumstances from His perspective.

view, family time

OPTIONAL: If you have a nativity scene in your home, gather around that together.

Read Luke 2. Assign characters in the narrative to each family member. Have each person study the story themselves and then retell it to the group in first person from their character's perspective.

Talk about how each character would have experienced Jesus' birth differently and felt different feelings. Next, ask them how their own perspective or attitude can mold how they see God, their circumstances and others. With older children or teenagers challenge them to choose their perspective in circumstances that are difficult. With younger children, consider playing "dress up," and act out the scene in costume.