

Astonished

FOLLOWING THE FOOTSTEPS TO THE MANGER

INTRODUCTION

We are so glad you are joining us for our Advent Devotional, *Astonished: Following the Footsteps to the Manger*.

When our devotional writing team first met in October, we all shared a desire to travel through the story of Jesus's birth from beginning to end. And although we chose not to frame the guide under any particular theme other than the story itself, we couldn't help but notice how many of the people in these chapters and passages were simply astonished at what they were seeing! And how could they help it?

During our draft workshop, where we read several of our first drafts aloud to each other, we were also excited to see the work of the Spirit moving in a flurry through so many of these stories, preparing the way for the arrival of our Savior.

Through it all, the story came alive to us again in so many ways, both new and familiar, and we are so excited to invite you into this journey with us.

We have included four readings each week, with the following options for Monday through Thursday:

- The **Spotlight Passages** are the passages on which our writers have focused their reflection.
- The **Prayer Prompt** is designed to help you center down in God's presence for a time of silence, reflection, and prayer.
- The **Candlelight Prayer** is a brief, scripted prayer. As you read, make these words your own.

On Fridays, we will provide another **Spotlight Passage** and steps to lead you through a spiritual reading exercise. In this way, we will balance Bible study with listening to the Lord through his living and active Word.

We hope that you find as much joy in this beautiful story of Jesus's birth, heaven uniting with earth, as we have had in preparing this guide. Our prayer is that each day will be a delight and an encouragement to you during this season, as we follow the footsteps to the manger.

The Devotional Writing Team

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Week 1 | SUNRISE

Luke 1:1-45

Spotlight Passage: Luke 1:12-18

We start our journey to the manger with this delightful and surprising story of Zechariah.

Imagine for a moment being Zechariah, and going about your daily tasks, only to be suddenly greeted by an angel. No wonder he was shaking and filled with fear! The news that he received, that he would become a father in his old age, was certainly an overwhelming amount of information to process in this moment.

Zechariah, a priest, was likely familiar with the story of God blessing Abraham and Sarah with a son in their old age. Genesis tells us that “Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’” (Genesis 17:17 NIV).

Zechariah’s response to the angel’s news that he would become a father in his old age is very similar to Abraham’s. However, the limitations Zechariah saw in his old age seemed to cause him to doubt God’s abilities. He even, in this moment, seemed to overlook the promise of the coming Messiah.

I have to ask myself, would I have responded in praise for the news that my prayers had been heard and with exuberance hearing that the Messiah was coming? Or would I have doubted - doubted that my prayers were actually heard, or even more so, that God could do what I thought was impossible?

How often do our own limitations interfere with our belief about what God is able to do?

Prayer Prompt: *Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.*

What challenges are you facing that might be a stumbling block in seeing God’s gift of grace in your life? Pray for the Holy Spirit to give you the heart to be aware of God’s work.

Candlelight Prayer: *“But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.” (Job 12:7-10 NIV)*

God, help me have an intimate awareness and trust in your plan, in your power, and in your grace. I pray that any limitations I see in myself would only give you more glory.

Week 1

MONDAY

How often
do our own
limitations
interfere with
our belief
about what
God is able
to do?

Week 1

TUESDAY

The promise of redemption that has been threaded throughout the entire history of humankind converges in this very moment with Mary.

Spotlight Passage: Luke 1:26-33

Let's bring ourselves to this moment in time as Mary, a young woman in the midst of wedding plans, is suddenly greeted by an angel. Like Zechariah in the preceding passage, she had a lot to process.

Can you imagine the weight of responsibility Mary must have felt when she realized what the angel was saying? She was going to carry God's Son and give birth to him!

The promise of redemption that has been threaded throughout the entire history of humankind, beginning in Genesis and continuing through the Old Testament, converges in this very moment with Mary. In Genesis, God gave his first promise of redemption, that one man from the woman's seed would destroy the works of the devil (Genesis 3:15). Then in 2 Samuel, God told David, of whose line Mary is a descendent, that through his lineage would be a kingdom that lasts forever (2 Samuel 7:16).

The fulfillment of God's promise of redemption alone is a reason for us to rejoice! But the way in which he chose to fulfill it, through this miraculous greeting and Mary's miraculous conception, should simply leave us astonished!

Prayer Prompt: *Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.*

Ask the Lord to help you rejoice in the good news of his plan of redemption and in the amazing grace he showed to us through his Son, Jesus!

Candlelight Prayer: *"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."
(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 NIV)*

Lord, thank you for your faithfulness and for your unending love for us in that you sent your Son to save us from our sins. Thank you, Lord, for the hope we have in salvation.

Spotlight Passage: Luke 1:34-38

Recall that months earlier, an angel had appeared to Zechariah in the temple and announced that he would become a father in his old age. Zechariah, blinded by his limitations, asked, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years" (Luke 1:18 NLT).

Here, the angel tells Mary how the baby will be conceived, and she asks, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin" (Luke 1:34 NLT).

Zechariah's response gets him silenced (Luke 1:19-20). Mary's response does not. Why is the angel's response to Zechariah and Mary so remarkably different?

As we learn from the angel's reply, Zechariah's response to the angel seems to contain an essence of doubt. As a priest, Zechariah would have likely known that such a thing was not beyond what God could do; God had given Abraham and Sarah a child in their old age (Genesis 21:2) and had performed countless miracles throughout Israel's history.

Mary's response, however, comes across less as doubt and more of awestruck wonder at the magnitude of what she has just been told. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, would later tell her, "You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said" (Luke 1:45 NLT). With this gentle spirit of faith, Mary tells the angel as he departs, "May everything you have said about me come true" (Luke 1:38b NLT).

Prayer Prompt: *Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.*

While praying, consider the questions - even the hard questions - you may want to ask God. Take heart that God invites us to come to him with our questions and true selves in humility.

Candlelight Prayer: *"Then Jesus told him, 'You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me.'" (John 20:29 NLT)*
Lord, give me a strong faith that believes without seeing and trusts without understanding. Give me a desire to surrender all to you, at any cost, as I put my hope in you alone.

Week 1

WEDNESDAY

Why is
the angel's
response to
Zechariah
and Mary so
remarkably
different?

Week 1

THURSDAY

Am I willing
and ready
to allow the
Holy Spirit
to work
through me?

Spotlight Passage: Luke 1:41-45

Let's be attuned to the work of the Holy Spirit in this passage.

The Holy Spirit was working through Elizabeth. She rejoices over Mary's news before Mary had even told her about the angel's announcement! In her joy, Elizabeth declares the baby inside Mary to be her Lord.

Miraculously in this moment as well, John even begins his ministry from within the womb, leaping for joy at the arrival of Jesus! This no doubt is the work of the Spirit as well, as the angel had told Zechariah that his son would be filled with the Holy Spirit even prior to his birth (Luke 1:15).

When we place our faith in Christ's finished work at Calvary, we too are filled with the Holy Spirit, a remarkable promise and gift from God to sanctify us of our sin, pray in ways we don't know how, and speak his praise when we may not know what to say.

Am I willing and ready to allow the Holy Spirit to work through me?

Prayer Prompt: Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.

Ask the Holy Spirit to restore and enhance your joy in the gospel. Take time today to reflect on all of the joys and uncertainties wrapped up in Mary and Elizabeth as they prepared for the births of their babies.

Candlelight Prayer: *"For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."*
(Romans 8:24-26 ESV)

God, help me be more aware of your presence. Give me a deep awareness of the gift of salvation and eternal life through your Son, Jesus.

Week 1

FRIDAY

Spiritual Reading

1. Ready

Take 60 seconds (or more) in silence as preparation for spiritual reading. Breathe deeply and center yourself on God's presence with you.

2. Read Spotlight Passage: Psalm 148:5-14 ESV

Read the Spotlight Passage using the text below or in your Bible. Listen to the text by reading it slowly. Reread up to three times if desired. Ask God to speak through his Word.

.....

Let them praise the name of the Lord! For he commanded and they were created. And he established them forever and ever; he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away.

Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word!

Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Beasts and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds!

Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and maidens together, old men and children!

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his majesty is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his saints, for the people of Israel who are near to him. Praise the Lord!

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3. Receive

Reflect on what word, phrase, or sentence speaks to you from the text. Write it down in a journal. Notice your reaction to this word, phrase, or sentence without judging yourself. Sit in silence as you listen to the Lord.

4. Respond

Pray in response to the words God has stirred within you or spoken to you.

5. Rest

Rest in the presence of God, allowing the Scripture to take root and the Holy Spirit to transform you.

Week 2 | PREPARATION

Luke 1:57-80

Spotlight Passage: Luke 1:57-58

Whenever I read the Bible, I like to envision myself as a spectator watching these stories come to life. Could you imagine watching the miracle of John's birth unfold before your eyes?

"God had overwhelmed her with mercy" (Luke 1:57-58 MSG).

In the Hebrew language, there are actually several ways to express the word "mercy." The word in this verse is the Greek word *eleos*, often translated as mercy and compassion. There is another word used throughout Scripture for mercy and it is *racham*, whose root comes from *rechem*, which means "womb". Like *eleos*, *racham* is also translated as mercy and compassion, but it carries with it the rich essence of compassion that a mother has for her baby.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were beyond childbearing years (some even speculate they were in their late eighties) when their prayer for a child was answered. But God overwhelmed her with mercy. A mercy that was shown to her through her womb. A mercy that was tender, full of compassion and grace. And a mercy that would make the way for the good news of Jesus to be known by all, the very hope of our salvation.

Prayer Prompt: *Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.*

Consider the ways the Lord has shown you mercy throughout a season of waiting. Elizabeth was barren but was blessed with a son. The desires of her heart were given to her, even in her old age. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you an area of your life where you are lacking trust in the Lord.

Candlelight Prayer: *"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:22-23 ESV)*

Heavenly Father, thank you for being so merciful. Thank you for fulfilling promises through and through. I know in my heart that I, like John, am destined for a purpose. I pray that the Holy Spirit reminds me to focus on what I know you can and will do for my life.

Week 2

MONDAY

God had
overwhelmed
Elizabeth
with mercy.

Week 2

TUESDAY

Uncertainty
is a door to
anxiety, but
a foundation
in the Lord
is a door
to peace.

Spotlight Passage: Luke 1:59-64

As believers, we are in a constant battle with our flesh's desires. One of those desires is a need to feel in control - whether in our work, our education, our daily choices, even our interactions with others. We may practice word-for-word what we are going to say to someone and we may freeze in terror if they respond off-script.

We seek control because we seek comfort.

Zechariah's tongue was imprisoned in preparation for him to be a witness of this miracle. The birth of a son, at his age, was entirely off-script. He didn't believe it could possibly come true. Zechariah silently watched the Holy Spirit aid in this preparation and watched God sow an abundance of blessings.

Zechariah needed to take a step back and watch the wonder unfold before his eyes.

Like many of us in times of uncertainty, Zechariah had succumbed to a lack of faith. Uncertainty is a door to anxiety, and anxiety feeds the flesh. But a foundation in the Lord is a door to peace, and that peace feeds our spirit.

Prayer Prompt: Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.

When we are in the midst of chaos and uncertainty, we desire to cling to something that we know is certain — that we know we can control. As believers, our confidence comes from God. We must let go of our desires for control and watch the Lord unravel the divine circumstances he has orchestrated for our good.

Candlelight Prayer: *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:4-7 ESV)*

Heavenly Father, you are a God who gives peace beyond understanding. Thank you for anchoring me in a season where I cannot see the shore. I know that you are steadfast and your Word will keep me afloat in my moments of uncertainty.

Spotlight Passage: Luke 1:65-75

At the time of John's birth, Israel was ruled by King Herod, a man who ignored the laws of the Lord and often followed his own desires. He is known for having caused great distress for the Judean people. We know him for infamously sending out a team of murderers to seek out the newly born Messiah.

Israel's beloved land had also now been occupied by the Romans for several decades, and the frequent cultural clashes that ensued caused the Israelites to slowly descend into bitterness and despair.

All of this, after four hundred years of prophetic silence.

It is no wonder that there was a "deep, reverential fear" (Luke 1:65-66 MSG). Here was the birth of John, an answer to a prophecy given centuries before his time. An answer that arrived in the depths of great anxiety and despair.

Malachi prophesied the words of the Lord: "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty" (Malachi 3:1 NIV).

John was a miracle baby, preparing the way for the gift of Jesus to the world. "Clearly, God had His hand in this" (Luke 1:65-66 MSG). When we fear, we must remember this gift - a gift of eternal life, of redemption, and of grace from a God who loves us deeply.

Prayer Prompt: *Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.*

Today, consider what areas of your life bring you anxiety. Pray for the Holy Spirit to give you perspective over these circumstances and an awareness of his presence with you. May it lead you to peace.

Candlelight Prayer: *"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows." (Matthew 10:29-31 ESV)*

Lord God, you are sovereign. You are the same God who gave us the miracle of John the Baptist and you never change. I thank you, Lord, for your patience when I cannot find the words in my times of anxiety.

Week 2

WEDNESDAY

John was a miracle baby, preparing the way for the gift of Jesus to the world.

Week 2

THURSDAY

We, like
John, are
ambassadors
of this grace
to a world
yearning
for light.

Spotlight Passage: Luke 1:76-80

Whatever the Spirit had been teaching Zechariah in those months of his silenced tongue, it all seems to erupt in this triumphant hymn of joy and worship. Luke brilliantly captures his breathless release of praise, as Zechariah stacks phrase upon phrase like a young child excited to tell a favorite story.

While the first half of his hymn gazes up to his Father, the last half of his hymn gazes down upon his newborn son, as he lovingly commissions John to his holy work of preparing the way of the Lord.

Jesus would later give similar honor to John the Baptist, telling the disciples that “among those born of women none is greater than John” (Luke 7:28). But in the same breath, and same verse, he follows this by saying, “Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

How could this be?

Jesus’s second statement is not a repudiation of John’s character. Rather, it is an astonishing reminder to us that as believers in this age, we are witnesses to a fuller picture of God’s glorious story of grace than even John had experienced. We, like John, are ambassadors of this grace to a world yearning for light.

Prayer Prompt: *Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.*

Take a moment today to consider and give thanks for the gospel, that Jesus willingly gave his life that you might live. Reflect on the tender mercies of God and his goodness to you. Pray for ways to carry this light to everyone you meet throughout your day.

Candlelight Prayer: *“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:6 ESV)*

O Father, help me to cleanse my hands and purify my heart. Spirit, search me and know me, and see if there is any wickedness within me, and lead me into the way everlasting.

Week 2

FRIDAY

Spiritual Reading

1. Ready

Take 60 seconds (or more) in silence as preparation for spiritual reading. Breathe deeply and center yourself on God's presence with you.

2. Read Spotlight Passage: 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 ESV

Read the Spotlight Passage using the text below or in your Bible. Listen to the text by reading it slowly. Reread up to three times if desired. Ask God to speak through his Word.

.....

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

.....

3. Receive

Reflect on what word, phrase, or sentence speaks to you from the text. Write it down in a journal. Notice your reaction to this word, phrase, or sentence without judging yourself. Sit in silence as you listen to the Lord.

4. Respond

Pray in response to the words God has stirred within you or spoken to you.

5. Rest

Rest in the presence of God, allowing the Scripture to take root and the Holy Spirit to transform you.

Week 3 | ADVENT

Luke 1:46-56

Matthew 1:18-25

Luke 2:1-7

Spotlight Passage: Luke 1:46-55

I can only imagine how much joy Mary must be filled with in this moment. Throughout her song, she fills each verse with awe and deep admiration of God's faithfulness and the joy of God's promises being fulfilled through her and her baby.

God, in his goodness, gives many promises to us in his Word. He promises us peace (Philippians 4:7) - not necessarily peaceful circumstances, but peace internally *despite* the circumstances and peace with God through Christ's finished work. He promises us perspective - wisdom when we ask for it (James 1:5). He promises us eternal protection through faith in Christ Jesus (John 10:28). And among many more wonderful gifts, he promises us his presence with us always (Matthew 28:20).

Like Mary in this psalm of praise, take time each day during this season of Advent to reflect and appreciate the many promises God has given, and rejoice in them!

Prayer Prompt: *Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.*

What promise has the Lord put on your heart? What promise can encourage you today even in spite of your circumstances? Today, as you reflect on the promises of God, give thanks for his lovingkindness and mercy.

Candlelight Prayer: *"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." (Hebrews 10:23 ESV)*

Father, you are a promise keeper. I praise you for your faithfulness, that you complete the work you begin and fulfill the promises you make. Help me to be faithful and kind to those around me today, that your kingdom would be glorified.

Week 3

MONDAY

Take time
each day to
reflect and
appreciate
the many
promises
God has given,
and rejoice
in them!

Week 3

TUESDAY

Joseph
was likely
swimming
upstream
against
every logical,
cultural, and
emotional
reaction that
he must have
had to the
news.

Spotlight Passage: Matthew 1:18-25

Consider for a moment the gravity of Joseph discovering that the woman he pledged to marry was pregnant. Likely he felt betrayed, perhaps deeply so. Beyond the sadness and disappointment, there were also societal implications to consider. Both his and her reputations, and those of her family, were in grave danger.

All of these emotions - fear, shame, betrayal, disappointment - are fertile soil for bitterness and anger. But Joseph, in his gentleness, chose otherwise.

In choosing to obey the voice of the angel and stay with Mary, Joseph was likely swimming upstream against every logical, cultural, and emotional reaction that he must have had to the news. What a wonderful example of obedience, even in the face of difficult circumstances.

From the remaining stories we have of Joseph, he continues to demonstrate this humble obedience, showing us the power of a heart that is faithful and dedicated, even in times of great uncertainty.

Prayer Prompt: *Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.*

Spend time with God today and ask him to show you areas of your life where you find it most difficult to obey. Then, ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to help you stay faithful.

Candlelight Prayer: *"I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death." (John 8:50-51 NIV)*

Lord, help me be sensitive to your Spirit, to hold your Word in my heart in all of my goings, that I may not sin against you.

Spotlight Passage: Luke 2:1-5

Imagine the anticipation of Mary and Joseph in these last few days of her pregnancy: the heavy burden of traveling to Bethlehem, the fruitless search for lodging, and now, preparing to meet this child, conceived by the Holy Spirit, "the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32 ESV).

At times, our lives can seem to be spiraling in many directions. Like Mary and Joseph as they enter Bethlehem, we may find our best efforts are fruitless, or worse. Or we might find ourselves buried under the weight of endless demands.

If Mary and Joseph were not careful, they could have come undone from the many burdens they faced - the need to find lodging, the need to register for the census, the approaching birth.

But these three unrelated circumstances were actually beautifully interwoven, like notes in harmony. Apart from each other, they were merely obstacles. Together, they made a symphony, fulfilling prophecy and giving us the wonderful glory of the manger.

When circumstances threaten to overwhelm you, listen closely. You might just hear the whispers of a magnificent Composer.

Prayer Prompt: *Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.*

Take time today to consider circumstances that are consuming you. Pray for perspective, for the Lord to guide you into deeper understanding, and for the strength to persevere.

Candlelight Prayer: *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'" (Isaiah 55:8-9 NIV)*

Father, thank you for listening to me, and drawing close to me in my time of need. I find rest in the knowledge that you can see what I cannot.

Week 3

WEDNESDAY

These three
unrelated
circumstances
were actually
beautifully
interwoven,
like notes in
harmony.

Week 3

THURSDAY

.....

Their baby
boy was
here now,
and he was
beautiful.

Spotlight Passage: Luke 2:6-7

Mary - did you know?

The same One who spoke the mountains into existence, the same One who ushered light into darkness by the sound of his voice, through whom and by whom all things consist, has come to earth as a swaddled infant in a lowly manger.

In this moment, Mary is seeing her baby for the very first time. Did she understand the full weight of why he came, or that the plan of redemption would be paved with suffering? Did she long to speak with the angel again, to understand exactly how she was supposed to raise this child?

All of those questions, thoughts, and prayers would likely come in time, no doubt. But in this moment, as she holds Jesus in her arms, I imagine they all fled away.

Their baby boy was here now, and he was beautiful.

Prayer Prompt: Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.

Spend time today reflecting on this story of Jesus's birth. Consider that all the richness of heaven was swaddled in a manger. May it lead you to rejoice. Our Savior has come!

Candlelight Prayer: *"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." (Philippians 2:5-7 ESV)*

Father, who are we that you would show such mercy to us? Thank you for your Son, Jesus, who came to earth and forsook all the riches of heaven that we might be saved. My heart bows in adoration and thanksgiving for your lovingkindness.

Week 3

FRIDAY

Spiritual Reading

1. Ready

Take 60 seconds (or more) in silence as preparation for spiritual reading. Breathe deeply and center yourself on God's presence with you.

2. Read Spotlight Passage: Philippians 2:5-8 ESV

Read the Spotlight Passage using the text below or in your Bible. Listen to the text by reading it slowly. Reread up to three times if desired. Ask God to speak through his Word.

.....

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

.....

3. Receive

Reflect on what word, phrase, or sentence speaks to you from the text. Write it down in a journal. Notice your reaction to this word, phrase, or sentence without judging yourself. Sit in silence as you listen to the Lord.

4. Respond

Pray in response to the words God has stirred within you or spoken to you.

5. Rest

Rest in the presence of God, allowing the Scripture to take root and the Holy Spirit to transform you.

Week 4 | RESPONSE

Luke 2:8-40

Spotlight Passage: Luke 2:8-20

Shepherds in the field. A quiet, moonlit night. The soft bleating of the younger sheep of the flock, rustling against their sleeping mothers in the field.

And then a light. A great light. If similar in intensity to the light that Paul saw on his way to Damascus, then a light beyond the brightness of the sun. No wonder the shepherds feared!

We are not given the names of these shepherds. They are working, inconspicuously attentive to their job as they were each night. Given the possibility of their lower social status, they may have been known by only a few in town, perhaps by face and not by name. Likely, few had ever asked them for their story, their background, their upbringing.

Yet God could tell them, “this will be a sign for you.” He cared for them. He cared for their emotional wellbeing, “Fear not.” He cared for their spiritual wellbeing, “a Savior” has come, “who is Christ the Lord.” And he cared for their intellectual wellbeing, ensuring they would be able to confirm what they were being told through the sign of the baby in the manger.

God cared for the dignity of their entire person, mind, body and spirit. Today, rejoice and take heart. God cares for you as deeply and tenderly as he did those nameless shepherds on that magnificent, starry night.

Prayer Prompt: *Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.*

Today, reflect on the lovingkindness of our Lord and his attentiveness to you. He knows you fully and loves you deeply. If such a thought is difficult for you to grasp in this season, pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal small truths of his grace in which you can find delight.

Candlelight Prayer: *“That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God..” (Ephesians 3:17b-19)*

Father, your love and your grace is too wonderful for me to comprehend. Thank you for the kindness you showed to these shepherds. Today, I pray that I will be vigilant to see the dignity of every person I meet, just as you see them.

Week 4

MONDAY

God cared
for the
dignity of
their entire
person,
mind, body
and spirit.

Week 4

TUESDAY

They simply obey, as fit to the “Law of the Lord,” careful and attentive to the details of what they must do and what they have been asked.

Spotlight Passage: Luke 2:21-24

In Proverbs 30, Agur asks God to give him “neither poverty nor riches,” but rather to be fed “with food convenient for me.” His reasoning: that both riches and poverty can lead us to become self-absorbed and turn away from God.

In this passage of Luke, we see both riches and poverty. Riches, in the miraculous conception of Jesus in the womb and his divine nature as he brings into unity “all things in heaven and on earth” (Ephesians 1:10 NIV). And poverty, in Mary and Joseph’s offering of a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons, a sign of their lowly estate.

But throughout, Mary and Joseph do not turn inward. They do not become self-absorbed. Their great blessing of raising the Messiah does not cause them to become self-important. Their poverty in giving birth in a manger and bringing the lowliest offering does not lead them to self-pity.

Rather, they simply obey, as fit to the “Law of the Lord,” careful and attentive to the details of what they must do and what they have been asked. And through their obedience, they bring forth their son, the light and salvation of the world.

Prayer Prompt: *Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.*

Whether you are in a season of fullness or a season of need, take time today to recenter yourself on God’s presence with you. Give thanks for what you have been given, whether great or small, remembering that “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Psalms 24:1a ESV).

Candlelight Prayer: *“Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, “Who is the Lord?” or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.”*
(Proverbs 30:8b-9 ESV)

Father, all that I have comes from you. You are a God who gives abundantly. May my heart be overwhelmed today by your goodness and mercy.

Spotlight Passage: Luke 2:25-35

We are not told how old Simeon is when he meets Jesus in this moment, but through his prayer of joy, we sense a great exhale of relief. His wait is over, the promise of the Spirit has been fulfilled. He can depart in peace.

There is a powerful Hebrew word that is used over seventy times in the Bible. The word is *selah*, and it carries a powerful instruction: *pause and consider*. Selah is used to particularly great effect throughout many of the psalms, encouraging us to pause and consider what we have just read (or sung) and then, to prepare for what is next to come.

Writers, authors, designers, and composers use space and pause to elevate their art. Composer Claude Debussy even once said that “music is the space *between* the notes.” (emphasis added)

And yet, the pause, the wait, is oftentimes the hardest for us to endure. We long for action and resolve, and we can become uncomfortable, even devastated, in times of stillness and uncertainty.

But here, Simeon waited. He had probably waited for most of his life. But his wait was not idle. He pursued righteousness, Luke tells us, staying faithful to his Lord even through years of silence. And while he may have seen this moment in the temple holding Jesus as the pinnacle of his life, the Lord likely saw something even more beautiful - a life that had been dedicated to righteousness and kindness, even in the wait.

Perhaps then, music truly is the space between the notes.

Prayer Prompt: *Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.*

Today, reflect on the concept of *selah*. Although they may be difficult to endure, seasons of wait are natural rhythms of life. Consider the many men and women throughout Scripture who endured times of divine silence. Find kinship in their prayers, as they longed to see God move in their midst, and take courage in the heart of our God, that he has not forsaken you.

Candlelight Prayer: *“I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” (Psalm 27:13-14 ESV)*

Father, I am seeking, but not finding. I believe, O Lord, but help my unbelief. Draw close to me and surround me with an awareness of your presence. Have grace upon me, that I might have the courage and the strength to wait on you.

Week 4

WEDNESDAY

Music truly
is the space
between the
notes.

Week 4

THURSDAY

Herein lies
the hope of
Advent and
the grace of
God, that
from our
brokenness,
we find
beauty; from
death, we
find life;
and from
darkness,
we find light.

Spotlight Passage: Luke 2:36-38

Throughout the Bible, many of the men and women whose stories are well-known to us, whose stories of faith and courage have been studied and preached and beloved for centuries, traveled through periods where we know very little about their lives. These “years of obscurity,” as they are sometimes referred, often shaped and prepared them for what was to come.

Anna, introduced here in Luke, is at least eighty-fours years old, and not much is known of her life. Why did her husband pass? What pain, anguish, despair, and doubt did she travel through after he died? We aren’t told. We are only told that “she did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.”

Thirty-three years later at Calvary, Jesus commends the apostle John to take care of his mother, Mary. Her husband Joseph, it seems, had passed away at some point during Jesus’s life, and she was now a young widow herself. But the memory of Anna was likely still treasured in her heart.

A life that from the outside seemed obscure, quiet, and lonely, was actually rich with worship, service, and gratitude, and may have forever impacted the heart of a young mother bringing her baby to the temple.

Herein lies the hope of Advent and the grace of God, that from our brokenness, we find beauty; from death, we find life; and from darkness, we find light. *That* should leave us all astonished!

Prayer Prompt: *Spend 60 seconds (or more!) in silence.*

As we approach the celebrations of Christmas, take heart in these wonderful stories of joy. Be enraptured by the mystery of heaven uniting with earth in Christ, and the fullness of grace that was shown to us on that glorious night long ago.

Candlelight Prayer: *“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:20-21 ESV)*

Father, my heart overflows in worship from your goodness and kindness. You are worthy of all honor and praise. Thank you for the gift of Jesus, for the story of life and light that we find in his birth, and for the hope that we have through his resurrection.

Week 4

FRIDAY

Spiritual Reading

1. Ready

Take 60 seconds (or more) in silence as preparation for spiritual reading. Breathe deeply and center yourself on God's presence with you.

2. Read Spotlight Passage: Ephesians 1:7-10 ESV

Read the Spotlight Passage using the text below or in your Bible. Listen to the text by reading it slowly. Reread up to three times if desired. Ask God to speak through his Word.

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In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

.....

3. Receive

Reflect on what word, phrase, or sentence speaks to you from the text. Write it down in a journal. Notice your reaction to this word, phrase, or sentence without judging yourself. Sit in silence as you listen to the Lord.

4. Respond

Pray in response to the words God has stirred within you or spoken to you.

5. Rest

Rest in the presence of God, allowing the Scripture to take root and the Holy Spirit to transform you.