

Journey to Bethlehem

CG MIDTOWN ADVENT 2020 DEVOTIONAL

Observing Advent at Home or in Your House Church

This devotional can be used individually, as a family, or as a house church. Each week follows the same structure and is best used alongside an Advent Wreath.

An Advent Wreath is a wreath that contains five candles—four in a circle, one in the center—each representing a different aspect of Advent (hope, faith, joy, peace, love). Three candles will be the color purple, representing personal preparation and royalty (the coming of a King). The color pink will be used once (3rd week) to indicate that the Advent journey leads to celebrating Jesus' coming. Lastly, the color white is used to announce that the Light has come.

Each devotional begins with a preparation time of your choosing, then a candle is lit on the wreath, and is followed by:

- Scripture reading from Gospel
- Reflection questions
- Prayers for the week

Lastly, for families with younger children, consider using the Jesse Tree Devotional Guide and Symbols. The Jesse Tree is a tree branch decorated with symbols representing the stories of people in Jesus' family tree. Each day during December, a story from the Jesus Story Book Bible is read before a symbol is hung on the branch. The Jesse Tree devotional guide is available on our [Advent webpage](#).

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Focusing on the Holy Spirit

In the months prior to Advent, CG Midtown has been reading Matthew 5-7. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' vision for the Kingdom life—a picture of what a transformed life looks like. Jesus invites us to become “a certain type of person,” but it can't be attained through our own power. Only the Holy Spirit has the power to change the posture and receptivity of our hearts so we can be formed by Jesus' vision. Additionally, the work Jesus calls the church to do in the world cannot be done in our own strength or wisdom. We need the Holy Spirit!

The Holy Spirit is an active character in Jesus' birth narrative and the journey to Bethlehem. His presence impacts and transforms many lives before Jesus is even born. To emphasize the importance of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the journey He has us on, we will focus on His activity during Advent.

Praying for and with the Holy Spirit

During the four weeks of Advent, our devotional reflections will focus on the following aspects of the Holy Spirit:

- Week 1 – The Holy Spirit provides us hope.
- Week 2 – The Holy Spirit increases our faith.
- Week 3 – The Holy Spirit sustains us with joy.
- Week 4 – The Holy Spirit guides us with His peaceful presence.

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Week One: Hope

Prepare: Take a moment to center yourself for communion with God. You may do so by signifying the presence of the Spirit with you, singing a hymn, saying a prayer, or simply sitting in silence before God.

Candle: Light the first purple Candle, the candle of Hope.

Read: Luke 1:5-25

Reflection: The journey to Bethlehem begins in the wilderness. Not a literal wilderness, but a personal wilderness. The story of John the Baptist begins with his dad Zechariah, a priest, who was in a personal wilderness. In Luke 1, we find him “advanced in years,” and he had never been chosen to go into the temple of the Lord to burn incense. This happened only once a year, and as a priest he was only allowed to offer incense once in his lifetime. He had been waiting.

He also had been waiting to father a child. The text says that Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth, was not able to conceive. You can imagine the pain they both felt, knowing their lineage was ending. They were in the wilderness.

It’s in this place of barrenness that Zechariah is given hope. The lot was chosen, his name was called, and suddenly Zechariah finds himself in the presence of an angel. Startled and fearful, Zechariah is overwhelmed and even more overwhelmed by the message.

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"Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord ... and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Jesus)."

The Holy Spirit would fill John. He would be a prophet. And he would grow up and live in the literal wilderness.

As you ponder this story, consider the following reflections:

- Recall a time of wilderness in your life. What made that time so challenging? How did that time prepare you for a particular transformation or a new perspective?
- Imagine how the prophetic word given to Zechariah gave hope to John when he was growing up. Have you ever received a prophetic word? How do prophetic words give hope?
- How did the literal wilderness shape John's life? What was the evidence that the Spirit's presence was with John?

Prayer: *Come, Holy Spirit. I ask you to meet me in this time of wilderness. I trust that even in this barren place, you see me and have words of hope for me. Help me hear your voice.*

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Prayers for the Week:

- Monday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Open the eyes of my heart so that I may know you better (Ephesians 1:17-18).*
- Tuesday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Show me my sin, how it has impacted my life, and kept me away from you (John 16:8).*
- Wednesday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Lead me into truth and wisdom so that I may know what to do and how to do it (John 14:26).*
- Thursday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Free me from the things that hold me captive (2 Corinthians 3:17).*
- Friday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Transform me so my character is shaped by your fruit (Galatians 5:22-25).*
- Saturday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Use the gifts you've given me to serve others (1 Corinthians 12:4-11) and to empower me to be your witness (Acts 1:8).*

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Week Two: Faith

Prepare: Take a moment to center yourself for communion with God. You may do so by signifying the presence of the Spirit with you, singing a hymn, saying a prayer, or simply sitting in silence before God.

Candle: Light a purple candle and then another purple Candle, the candle of Faith.

Read: Luke 1:26-45

Reflection: The journey to Bethlehem is marked by a difficult path. Yes, there was an actual physical journey of about 60 miles, but the real difficulty was the trust needed to take the first step. In Luke 1, it says that there was a woman named Mary who was pledged to be married to a man named Joseph.

Then, like Zechariah, an angel appears and announces to Mary something so disorienting, it's hard for her to imagine. She would give birth to the Son of God and His Kingdom will never end. Mary simply says, "How can this be since I'm a virgin?"

The angel's answer: "The Holy Spirit will come on you and His power will overshadow you. The angel concludes, "For nothing is impossible with God."

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Mary finds herself at a trailhead. She's not married yet. And she's supposed to give birth to the Messiah? Slowly, faith begins to take hold of her "overshadowed" body, and she takes the first step by saying, "May it be according to your word."

As you ponder this story, consider the following reflections:

- Recall a time of disorientation. What gave you faith during that time?
- How have you experienced the Holy Spirit's power in your life? Have you had an "overshadowing" type of experience?
- What did Mary have to let go of to begin her journey? What do you need to let go of in order to embrace what God has called you to?

Prayer: *Come, Holy Spirit. I ask you to give me the gift of faith. I want to take risk-taking steps with you in my witness of you, in my relationships, in my job, in my life. I want to follow where you lead me.*

Prayers for the Week:

- Monday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Open the eyes of my heart so that I may know you better (Ephesians 1:17-18).*
- Tuesday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Show me my sin, how it has impacted my life, and kept me away from you (John 16:8).*
- Wednesday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Lead me into truth and wisdom so that I may know what to do and how to do it (John 14:26).*

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- Thursday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Free me from the things that hold me captive (2 Corinthians 3:17).*
- Friday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Transform me so my character is shaped by your fruit (Galatians 5:22-25).*
- Saturday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Use the gifts you've given me to serve others (1 Corinthians 12:4-11) and to empower me to be your witness (Acts 1:8).*

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Week Three: Joy

Prepare: Take a moment to center yourself for communion with God. You may do so by signifying the presence of the Spirit with you, singing a hymn, saying a prayer, or simply sitting in silence before God.

Candle: Light two purple candles and the pink Candle, the candle of Joy.

Read: Luke 1:57-80

Reflection: The journey to Bethlehem can't happen in one day. The trail is difficult and having time to rest provides an opportunity for God to speak. That's God's vision for sabbath, and that's God's vision whenever we quiet ourselves to hear His voice.

Zechariah, the father of John, had been quiet for nine months. In his angelic encounter in the temple, he had been silenced because of his inability to believe what God was going to do through him and Elizabeth. Perhaps the silence gave him rest.

After resting his voice for months, the moment came to name his son, but he couldn't make a sound. He could only write, "His name is John." As he inked the last character in the name, his mouth opened and his tongue experienced a new kind of freedom, words of praise filled the air around him.

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In that moment, Luke says, “Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied.” His prophecy was a song of God’s deliverance, redemption, rescue, and words for his son John. He was filled with joy!

As you ponder this story, consider the following reflections:

- Have you ever experienced a time of being silenced? It may have happened in a relationship, at work, or been a physical issue.
- Imagine how Zechariah’s experience in the temple impacted the next nine months of his life. Do you think the joy he experienced after naming his son was only in that moment or do you think it had been building since getting the news from the angel? How can joy sustain us in our journey?
- Why is joy one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit? How can taking time for rest increase joy?

Prayer: *Come, Holy Spirit. I ask you to teach me how to be sustained by joy, so that I can be content in all circumstances (Philippians 4:10-13). I pray that the joy of the Lord would be my strength. I pray to have your fruit of joy characterize my heart and attitude.*

Prayers for the Week:

- Monday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Open the eyes of my heart so that I may know you better (Ephesians 1:17-18).*

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- Tuesday: *Come, Holy Spirit. Show me my sin, how it has impacted my life, and kept me away from you (John 16:8).*
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Week Four: Peace

Prepare: Take a moment to center yourself for communion with God. You may do so by signifying the presence of the Spirit with you, singing a hymn, saying a prayer, or simply sitting in silence before God.

Candle: Light two purple candles, the pink candle, and then the third purple Candle, the candle of Peace.

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

Reflection: The journey to Bethlehem is an invitation for all people. So far, we've walked with Zechariah, Elizabeth, John, Mary, and Joseph. As Hebrews, they were shaped by the story of the Creator God and knew how the Holy Spirit would occasionally fill their ancestors (kings and prophets). But now they too had been filled and impacted by the Spirit—perhaps something new was happening.

Matthew records that Magi, non-Hebrews, began their journey to Bethlehem because they saw a star. For the Magi, this star meant that a new king was about to be born to the Jews. How did they know and why would they go to Bethlehem?

In Genesis 1, it says that the Spirit of God was hovering over creation. From the beginning, the Spirit *was*. Could it be that the same Spirit that filled John,

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that overshadowed Mary, and that allowed Zechariah to prophesy was now speaking to the Magi through the created constellation of stars?

The Magi were convinced something new was happening and they had to go. There was something or someone to discover. Can you imagine that in the study and searching of the night sky, these stargazers were given a revelation and abiding peace to make a long journey to worship a newborn king? The Holy Spirit was guiding them.

As you ponder this story, consider the following reflections:

- Have you ever been surprised by the Holy Spirit? How did that surprise allow you to see something new about your life, your life with God, your life with others?
- How does the Holy Spirit speak to you in creation? Why do you think that is?
- The Magi were warned in a dream to not return to Herod. Have you experienced dreams that you would attribute to the Holy Spirit? How does the Spirit's revelation provide peace and guidance?

Prayer: *Come, Holy Spirit. I ask you to guide me with your peaceful presence. Speak to me through creation, through dreams, other people—however you wish. I long to experience an abiding peace that allows me to worship.*

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Christmas: Love

Prepare: Take a moment to center yourself for communion with God. You may do so by signifying the presence of the Spirit with you, singing a hymn, saying a prayer, or simply sitting in silence before God.

Candle: Light three purple candles, the pink candle, and the white Candle, the candle of Love.

Read: Luke 2:1-20

Reflection: As the Magi taught us last week, the journey to Bethlehem is about worship. It's to see something new emerging in the wilderness. It's to believe that what seems impossible is possible. It's to remember that our words are meant to express inner and outer joy. It's to realize that all people are invited to participate in this journey. All these discoveries on the journey are meant to point us to Jesus. To encounter the Messiah. Immanuel. God with us.

The Holy Spirit has led us here to this moment, to the manger. To see, to believe, to remember, to realize, to worship. So, worship! Worship like the shepherds. Worship like the angels. Worship. It's what we're made for!

And we're made to continue the journey by helping other people to Bethlehem to see Jesus. And we can be assured that the Holy Spirit will be with us as He was with those on that first journey. Come, Holy Spirit!

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Prayer: *Come, Holy Spirit. Thank you for opening my eyes to see Jesus. Keep my heart open to your leading so I can continue the journey Jesus has called me to live. And fill me with your presence as a reminder that Jesus will come again in His glorious second Advent.*