

heaven and nature sing

DEVOTIONS FOR
ADVENT & CHRISTMAS
2021–2022



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HEAVEN AND NATURE SING

Devotions for Advent and Christmas 2021–2022

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Welcome

The story of Jesus’ birth in the Gospel of Luke is filled with song. Luke begins with the news that Elizabeth and Zechariah, despite their old age, will have a son who will prepare people for the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. This is a prelude to the singing that follows from Elizabeth and Zechariah; Jesus’ mother, Mary; the prophets Simeon and Anna; and even an angel choir!

This book continues the Christian tradition of setting aside time to prepare for the celebration of Jesus’ birth and to anticipate his return. The Advent season of preparation then unfolds in the joy of the twelve days of Christmas and the day of Epiphany. You will find daily devotions here for the first Sunday of Advent (November 28, 2021) through Epiphany (January 6, 2022). Each devotion features a scripture reading from Luke, accompanied by a photo, a quote to ponder, a reflection, and a prayer. The book also offers household blessings and prayers (see pages 84–94) to enrich your preparations and celebrations.

During these days of Advent and Christmas, may the good news of Jesus’ birth fill our lives and our world with joy and peace. Let heaven and nature sing!



December 5 / Advent 2

Luke 1:24-25

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me.”

To ponder

I have held many things in my hands, and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God’s hands, that I still possess.

—Martin Luther, in a letter to Justus Jonas the Elder

The gaze of God

For most of human history, the gaze of the gods—who were often seen as mischievous or vengeful—was a curse. When the

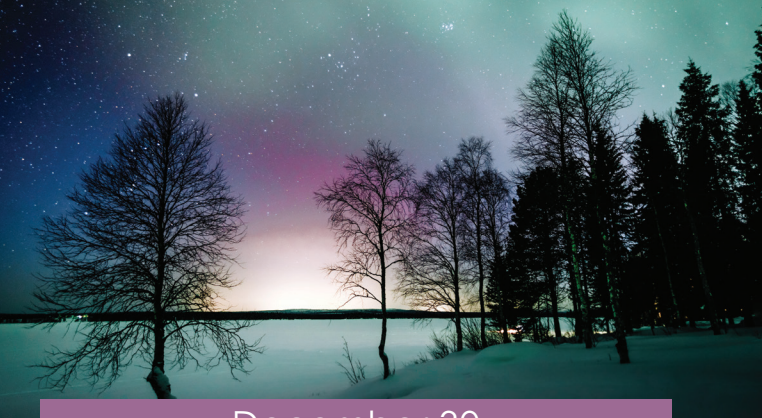
gods noticed someone, that person became their plaything or the object of their aggression. To draw their attention was to risk being the target of their frustration, boredom, or anger. To avoid their punishment required sacrifices and other acts of devotion.

In Elizabeth’s story we see something entirely different, as God looks favorably upon a woman who has endured barrenness her entire life. We encounter a merciful and personal God who apparently delights in the joy of an ordinary woman. God sees Elizabeth, and rather than experiencing God’s wrath, she knows God’s favor.

Our God is not like the gods of the ancient world. God is not vindictive, vengeful, or just plain mean. We are neither God’s playthings nor the objects of God’s anger or curiosity. God looks instead upon us and the world with love and care, delighting in the things that delight us and sorrowing over things that cause us pain. God enters into the heart of our suffering and challenges, bringing the promise of life and hope. God sees us, and with that gaze come attention, care, and transformation.

Prayer

Thank you, God, for seeing us. Thank you for your loving gaze. Amen.



December 30

Luke 2:17-20

[The shepherds] made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.

To ponder

Do you see this grain of sand / Lying loosely in my hand? . . . /
Can it be that God does care / For such atoms as we are? / Then
outspake this grain of sand / "I was fashioned by [God's] hand
/ In the star lit realms of space / I was made to have a place."—
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "A Grain of Sand"

Pondering, proclaiming, praising

The greatest and tiniest elements of the universe are equally miraculous: mountains and molecules, a far-off star or a grain of sand. Most of all, the newborn child who is also God incarnate—the creator of all, God-with-us.

How do we fit into this story of God's infinite and intimate love? Do we ponder like Mary, or proclaim like the shepherds? Should we pray inwardly, or praise outwardly? Stay at the manger, or go out into the world?

The manifold actions of the people around Jesus suggest that pondering, proclaiming, and praising are all important ways to respond to the good news. Perhaps this is a glimpse of another ordinary miracle, the community of faith—where pondering, proclamation, and praise are lifted up by a people diverse in gifts and callings, but one in Christ. Today I might need to ponder while you proclaim; tomorrow, I can praise as you ponder. When we join our faith together, like so many grains of sand or stars in the sky, we can be good news for a world in need of the reflection, reassurance, and renewal that the gospel brings.

Prayer

God of Mary and shepherds, sand and stars, you call us by name and invite us to ponder, proclaim, and praise your love. Draw us together in community and embolden us to be Christ's body in the world. Amen.



Household Blessings and Prayers

An evening service of light for Advent

This brief order may be used on any evening during the season of Advent. If the household has an Advent wreath (one candle for each of the four weeks of Advent), it may be lighted during this service. Alternatively, one simple candle (perhaps a votive candle) may be lighted instead.

Lighting the Advent wreath

May this candle/these candles be a sign of the coming light of Christ.

One or more candles may be lighted.

Week 1: Lighting the first candle

Blessed are you, God of Jacob, for you promise to transform weapons of war into implements of planting and harvest and to

teach us your way of peace; you promise that our night of sin is far gone and that your day of salvation is dawning.

As we light the first Advent candle, wake us from our sleep, wrap us in your light, empower us to live honorably, and guide us along your path of peace.

O house of Jacob, come,
let us walk in the light of the Lord. Amen.

Week 2: Lighting the first two candles

Blessed are you, God of hope, for you promise to bring forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse who will bring justice to the poor, who will deliver the needy and crush the oppressor, who will stand as a signal of hope for all people.

As we light these candles, turn our wills to bear the fruit of repentance, transform our hearts to live in justice and harmony with one another, and fix our eyes on the shoot from Jesse, Jesus Christ, the hope of all nations.

O people of hope, come,
let us rejoice in the faithfulness of the Lord. Amen.

Week 3: Lighting three candles

Blessed are you, God of might and majesty, for you promise to make the desert rejoice and blossom, to watch over the strangers, and to set the prisoners free.