

## Welcome

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”—Luke 2:8-12*

An angel came to some shepherds watching their sheep one night. That would have been surprising, to say the least! Then the angel announced not just good news but *good news of great joy*, and not just for the shepherds but for *all people*: Jesus, the Messiah and Savior, was born.

The shepherds left and found the child in a manger and—of course—they were overjoyed and shared this wonderful news with others.

This devotional explores, shares, and celebrates that joyous good news by continuing a centuries-old 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.

*Good News, Great Joy* provides daily devotions for the first Sunday of Advent (December 1, 2024) through Epiphany (January 6, 2025). These devotions explore year C scrip-

ture readings (in the Revised Common Lectionary) for the Sundays of Advent and Christmas, as well as for the festival days of Christmas and Epiphany. Each reading is accompanied by an image, a reflection, and a prayer. The writers bring their unique voices and pastoral wisdom to these texts, and offer the voices of other witnesses in the quotations they have chosen for the “To ponder” sections. The devotional also provides household blessings and prayers (see pages 81–93) to enrich your preparations and celebrations during the Advent and Christmas seasons.

Jesus was born for you and for all. May the angel’s announcement fill you with great joy and send you out into a world longing for good news!



December 10

### **Luke 1:68-71**

[Zechariah said:]

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.  
He has raised up a mighty savior for us  
in the house of his servant David,  
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of  
old,  
that we would be saved from our enemies.”

### **To ponder**

To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.—Mary  
Oliver, “Yes! No!”

## God pays us a visit

When our kids were young and I was a new pastor, my mother lived an hour away. When she paid a visit, she never gave any forewarning. She often called me at church around noon: “I’m in town. Where’s lunch?” Once, when I had a yard project in mind, she called early on a Saturday morning: “Your uncle and I will show up shortly. Let’s do your project.” This often irritated me, but if I could make time, her visits were very enjoyable—and productive. The God we know in Christ shows up in our lives in similar ways: suddenly, unexpectedly, testing our openness to change. But as we embrace these visits, they change us for good.

Zechariah’s words kick off a longer prophecy (Luke 1:68-79). He praises God who has “looked favorably” on God’s people. The Greek verb used here is often translated as “visited.” In biblical writings, God’s visits are often favorable and bring salvation. The idea is this: God cannot save from a distance. In Christ, God draws near—pays us a visit—to save us.

Imagine Christ paying you a visit. How might God be drawing near this season—to assist you, help you hold it together, be there for you, or save you? Zechariah praised the One who “has visited and redeemed” us. In Christ, this God continues to visit us today.

## Prayer

O God, help us embrace the holy and unexpected ways you visit us this season, through Christ our Lord. Amen.



December 18

### **Zephaniah 3:20**

At that time I will bring you home,  
at the time when I gather you;  
for I will make you renowned and praised  
among all the peoples of the earth,  
when I restore your fortunes  
before your eyes, says the LORD.

### **To ponder**

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,  
thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;  
thou who hast by thy might led us into the light,  
keep us forever in the path, we pray.

—“Lift Every Voice and Sing,” ELW 841

## **Sure and certain hope**

Henri Nouwen tells a story about a man who was imprisoned. Without a clear timeline for his release, he began to despair. Nothing motivated him to press on. Then one day a letter came from a friend. It said, essentially, “We are waiting for you, and we look forward to seeing you again.” It changed everything. The man suddenly went from despair to hope, because he knew that someone was waiting for him beyond this season. He could live in hope, knowing that a better future was on the horizon.

The promise of a better future can move us from despair to hope as well. A great many things in our world weigh us down with anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and hopelessness. Some days it's tough just to get out of bed and keep going. But the God who, through Zephaniah and others, promised restoration to exiles—the God we know in Jesus Christ—promises resurrection on the other side of death. This God entered our hopeless world as a babe in Bethlehem to set us free from sin, death, and despair. This God promises us a future far superior to the sufferings of this present time.

Through Christ, God promises us a homecoming just on the horizon. This Christmas season, we celebrate that hope as our guiding star through nights of despair.

## **Prayer**

O God of life beyond death, help us to live in sure and certain hope that we have a glorious future in you. Amen.



## Household Blessings and Prayers

### **Advent**

In the days of Advent, Christians prepare to celebrate the presence of God's Word among us in our own day. During these four weeks, we pray that the reign of God, which Jesus preached and lived, would come among us. We pray that God's justice would flourish in our land, that the people of the earth would live in peace, that the weak and the sick and the hungry would be strengthened, healed, and fed with God's merciful presence.

During the last days of Advent, Christians welcome Christ with names inspired by the prophets: wisdom, liberator of slaves, mighty power, radiant dawn and sun of justice, the key-stone of the arch of humanity, and Emmanuel—God with us.

## **The Advent wreath**

One of the best-known customs for the season is the Advent wreath. The wreath and winter candle-lighting in the midst of growing darkness strengthen some of the Advent images found in the Bible. The unbroken circle of greens is clearly an image of everlasting life, a victory wreath, the crown of Christ, or the wheel of time itself. Christians use the wreath as a sign that Christ reaches into our time to lead us to the light of everlasting life. The four candles mark the progress of the four weeks of Advent and the growth of light. Sometimes the wreath is embellished with natural dried flowers or fruit. Its evergreen branches lead the household and the congregation to the evergreen Christmas tree. In many homes, the family gathers for prayer around the wreath.

## **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.*