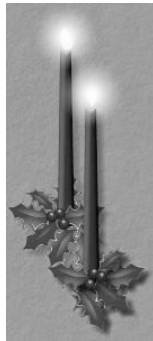


Golden Gate Advent Reader

2007



Week One By Tom Loebig Giles

Luke 2: 8-20

It's 4 a.m. and I am staring at the ceiling, mulling demands of the coming week—deadlines, appointments, and—oh yeah—we need to get a tree, hang lights, give gifts. Out of nowhere come thoughts of the shepherds.

Why were these sentinels encamped in the fields outside Bethlehem suddenly intruding on my early-morning urban angst? Maybe it has something to do with my yearning for peace at the holidays, my own search for a Christ who is sometimes hidden.

Many of the tasks on this mental list are part of my attempt, however circuitous, to find Jesus at the holidays. Check off a box; make Christmas happen.

Contrast this Type-A Noel with the shepherds' experience. They're in the fields, minding the flock, when an angel appears to tell them how to recognize Jesus. They're terrified at first, but then they drop everything to see what's happened. Once they've found this baby, they share the news with anyone who will listen.

These unwashed field hands don't strive or strain to bring about an experience of Christ. They're not accomplishing tasks in a drive to make Christmas happen. Christmas happens to them. It terrifies them and moves them to set aside all else to find this Christ. Then it compels them to tell others, and they come away changed men who go back to their day jobs glorifying and praising God.

Do you strive to make Christmas happen? How?

Does it bring you closer to Christ?

Think about some of the other background characters in the story of Jesus' birth, such as Simeon and Anna. Where and how do they find the hidden Christ?

How might you let Christmas intrude upon you and your plans this year?

What will you tell others about what you find in Bethlehem?

Matthew 2:1-2

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east^[b] and have come to worship him."

An Advent Interview with Josie Vignos

What's important about Jesus being born?

He was born to show people the right way to do things.

Why was there a star over the manger?

So everyone could see the star. So more people would come to see Jesus.

Why did people want to see Jesus?

He was the only one who knew how to do the right things. We should listen to Jesus because he knows better than us.

How would you have felt if you were there when Jesus was born?

I would want to pick him up and hug him.

Why do you think God sent Jesus to be born?

God was trying to tell us that you should believe in God and not other people.

Why should we believe in Jesus?

Because he knows what's best. Because he's bigger and has the power to do things. Because he has the power to heal us.

What's the difference between Jesus and Santa?

Jesus knows more.

Who do you love more – Jesus or Santa?

Jesus.

Why?

Because sometimes Santa gives me lots of presents and that makes me feel a little spoiled. Jesus just protects me.

Questions for Reflection

Can Jesus show you the right way to do things, in every facet of your life? Is his light bright enough to lead you through the darkness? Would you be willing to walk through a strange and dangerous land, in the dark, with only his starlight to guide you? Isn't this just what it's like to follow Jesus in our times?

Can you imagine being at once in awe of Jesus and at the same time ready to give him a huge hug? How do you feel "spoiled" by your American lifestyle? Does Jesus offer the antidote?

By Micah Rice

Matthew 2:14-15

14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, **15** where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

I don't really think of Jesus as a refugee, and I definitely don't associate the Christmas season with issues of immigration and hospitality, but maybe I should. I'm thinking about how Joseph and Mary left in a hurry in the middle of the night and fled the country. I don't know what crossing a political border was like back then, nor if the holy family had all their papers in order, nor if they spoke the local dialect, but I'm guessing it wasn't that much different than today: a difficult journey with hazardous consequences, economic and relational hardship, and full of the fear of the unknown. Like I said, this is all conjecture, but I doubt it was anything less than terrifying, and I'm not sure much has changed.

I'm told there is a whole tradition of miracles and happenings that has grown up around the time that Jesus and his parents spent in Egypt, but I wonder what kind of reception they got when they showed up; when they ran out of money, when they tried to barter for clothes for their baby, or get meaningful work. I wonder how those unknowing Egyptian men and women reacted to another working-class couple seeking shelter in their local economy.

Christmas is usually a time that I devote to conversing with family, stuffing my belly and unwrapping gifts. I wonder what December 25th 0000 AD was like for Mary, Joseph and Jesus. I wonder what it's like for people now.

How would I have treated the holy family?

How do I treat my neighbors?

By Liz Zarr

Is. 43:15 - 21

John 2:1-11

Ex. 12

(Well, maybe not Exodus 12, but I wanted something about God desiring his people to commemorate sacred events through pausing to feast and celebrate with family and community. - What do you think?)

During this time after the harvest and before the spring, it's easy to feel like nothing is happening, or like so much is happening that you get lost. On the one hand, the earth is going into a dormant season of cold and gray, leaves are falling and there is a hush about things because of the weather and the darkness. On the other hand, there is frenetic external energy all around - shopping, greeting cards, parties, cooking, family visits, etc. It can seem that Christ is absent from both of these scenes. The earth seems almost dead, and the man-made retail atmosphere seems like false life, a pretender. Is it possible that Christ is hidden in both? I find I need to look more closely at the earth during this season to find signs of life - the birds that still sing and hunt, the ocean tides, the kindnesses of the people around me. And, I need to draw back from the activity long enough to get the bigger picture of Christ's activity in the world, the way lives are transformed and people have hope and joy and a desire to celebrate together. Whether I perceive it or not, Christ is always present. A joy I can rediscover during Advent is that Christ is hidden in me and that I have hope because of this. This is true all the year round, and Advent is a gift of time to find this truth again. I pray that the mystery of Christ's presence will surprise you in the darkness and in the tinsel this Advent, and that you will find ways to weave this truth into your life long after Advent is over.

Worshiping the King
By Marcy Wigeri van Edema

1. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2. and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him"

9... they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh... Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11

It's hard for me to grasp the concept of worshiping a king, humanly speaking, especially since I have never lived in a culture that serves one. And when I say that it is difficult for me to grasp worshiping a human king, I must admit that it's a stretch to know how to worship a heavenly king. Thankfully, as I look at the story of the Magi I see tangible human examples that help me understand spiritual parallels. First, I noticed that the Magi were not Jews. They had not grown up in the church (synagogue) so to speak, and yet they knew enough about him that they longed to worship him. Second, they were so eager to pay homage to Jesus that they willingly set out on a journey to find him. Third, they followed the sign, *the star*, which they had seen in the east until it rested over Jesus. Fourth, when they found him they were overjoyed. It's amazing and somewhat of a mystery to me that the joy they experienced over his presence was so great, it moved them to fall down and worship him. *He* was a gift to them! And last, they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts. They couldn't help but give Jesus what was precious to them. Perhaps you will discover more as you study the passage and ask God to teach you to worship him.

Questions for reflection:

Like the Magi, do I long to find and worship Jesus? What is hindering me? Do I view Jesus as a gift? What steps might I take on the journey to know and serve him more? Am I searching His word to find answers to these questions? Like the star, how can I point others to Jesus? How will I honor Jesus, king of kings, as I walk through this holiday season and beyond?

Week Two
The Shepherds Had It Made
By Travis Culwell

Scripture: Luke 2: 8-20

Shepherds are perhaps the plainest of all people, who in going about their business learned the significance of Jesus' birth in a bedazzling show of the supernatural. Imagine them hanging out, singing Kum Ba Yah around a campfire, when suddenly an angel multitude appears, announces the arrival of the Christ, gives them evidence in a miraculous spectacle, and tells them to go see Jesus.

Others at this time watched and waited for the Christ. They journeyed across the world, toiled through long and barren years, endured the silence of God and waited a lifetime to see him so that they could die in peace. Not so with the shepherds. They had it made.

A curious omission is that the angel didn't tell the shepherds what to do -- in their life, with their faith, in the world -- he told them only to go see Jesus. Perhaps this is the one universal calling in this Christian life: Go see Jesus.

Maybe after being in the presence of Jesus, like the shepherds, we would know what to do next. Here is what they did next: "And the shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them."

Questions

When has God surprised you with His presence? Not because you were seeking, waiting, enduring, striving, but just going about your business?

As you look toward Christmas (with its plans and preparations, its youthful joys, its vague adult letdowns), what would it look like to go see Jesus?

By Laura Igram

“They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” Revelation 21:3b-4

I never felt more desperate for the hope of God’s redemption of creation than when I worked with street kids in Rio de Janeiro. Living and working there was the hardest thing I have ever done. A few months into my stay, I realized that I searched for Christ among these poor children because I had to in order to maintain hope. Below is an excerpt from my journal in March of 2005 during my stay in Brazil.

I forget that many of the kids chose to be here. Freedom from responsibility and parental authority is too alluring. Despite the pain and rejection, they choose this life. They buy drugs instead of food, antagonize the police, demand things from us without appreciation, and are neglectful of their children.

And then I remember that they are children themselves, with no guidance or kindness afforded to them. Then I am willing to forgive anything. I won’t say a word about the glue and paint thinner. I would be sniffing it too- at least then you can forget for a while. And how would I know my worth as a woman, Christ’s Beloved? I would turn to sex too, and I would feel needed and loved for a while. At least there would be a baby to love me later. I hate the police too for what they do to you, taking you to jail just to get you out of the way. Stares and disgust from upstanding citizens, concerned do-gooders, sniffing in horror and warning me to stay away.

But you are beautiful. You come running and jump in my arms. I rock you and hold your hands in mine. And you, you dust off your bed, invite me to sit with you. You don’t care that I can’t speak your language, and you smile at me, squinting out of your one good eye. I am accepted. And you, you return with food- who knows when you last ate? But you never turn way the toddlers who gather around for bites. And you, you offer me the best cracker. The last one.

And you teach me to dance, and you sing with me, and you make me laugh.

So I love you, because I can’t help myself. Later I will want to forget, because it hurts me too much. But now, now I see Christ shining in you, you who encourage me as I stumble through learning your language, then turn to sell drugs to a desperate user. You are beautiful.

Looking for Love . . . in Christ By Bonnie Wong

Scripture: Romans 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit

Reflections

Is looking for Jesus anything like looking for Waldo? Waldo is the kids (Ok, for some adults too) puzzle game book filled with all manner of people and things. The game or goal is to find Waldo in the midst of all the clutter. From Dayspring.com comes this message. “When you strip away all the tinsel and glitter, God’s real truth shines through.” How does our heart and spiritual being focus on what is really important?

Christmas and Easter are sanctified holidays – days made holy by God and set apart from earthly matters and human efforts. Thanksgiving Day is a prelude to the days where Christ is paramount, where only God can empower and enact His holy plan.

Question

If Christ were hidden, is it because we are not focused in our looking and seeing? Like the song lyric, “looking for love in all the wrong places, “ so we too can be looking for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self control in the world (Galatians 5:22), but not thinking or hoping to find it in Christ Jesus.

Prayer and Blessing

May you find all that you are looking for in this Christmas season and receive all of God’s abundant blessings that He has in store for you. Christ is the greatest gift any of us can receive. He is bigger and better than all the technology, cars, houses, trips, as wonderful as they are, and anything we can imagine. He is a free gift to us if we choose to receive Him. There are no taxes, shipping or handling fees. He can be ours! Praise the Lord.

Hidden Christ by Meghan Evans

Colossians 2:1-8: full read/story

Colossians 2:3 “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

So many times we get whisked away, possibly distracted, with the next best author, the greatest speaker or that pastor that is so amazing, perhaps those Christian friends who have logical pearls of wisdom. Sure, some do and some may speak the truth. Yet, if you are looking for divine wisdom and knowledge, search no more. Look to Jesus, for they are only found in Him.

Could it be that distractions may lead us down a path of potential danger? When dangerous errors confuse and disrupt, when false teachers cast their enticing nets, when spiritual leaders fall, when we seek the solutions to life...where are they to be found? Paul says they are “hidden” in Christ where they are preserved and guarded; kept safe.

The riches of wisdom cannot be found on the internet, self help books, Biblical commentaries, courses, amazing pastors, Christian friends, or Sunday school teachers. The riches can only be found and discovered through Christ. So many times, it is easy to get caught up in books by our favorite Christian author, listening to an incredible speaker/pastor, or entering into theological discussions w/ Christian friends. When it is through God’s word, the truth, we are led down a safe path, not one of danger.

Why does it matter what men/women say? God has spoken (Heb. 1:1-4). We do not need to depend on our own understanding or the understanding of “godly” people, because He has given us His Spirit so that we have no need should any man teach us (1 John 2:27). He alone is our Guide to the truth.

“In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” As we experience Christ this advent season, may you know the mystery of the Spirit. I encourage you to open your heart and ask the Holy Spirit to show you.

Questions:

The Bible is the book of truth, from where divine wisdom and knowledge comes. I encourage you to take a look at your daily schedule. How much time do you spend in the book of truth vs. other Christian outlets (discussion, books, speakers, etc)? Given time spent in the Bible and in prayer, is there a correlation to your spiritual life right now?

Rest and meditate on knowing the all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ. Ask the Spirit to speak to you and guide you as you seek to gain wisdom and knowledge.

Prayer:

Dear Lord,

Thank you for richly blessing us. As we yearn to grown closer to You, to possess your divine wisdom and knowledge, protect us from hallow and deceptive philosophy. Protect us from fine sounding arguments and teach us how to recognize false teaching. Teach us your divine wisdom and knowledge so that we may be more strongly rooted and strengthened in our faith; overflowing with thankfulness. As Paul writes, you are present in Spirit...may we seek to delight you in our firmly rooted faith. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

By Madeleine Giles

Matthew 7:7

The shepherds sought him in a crude stable. The Magi followed a star to a small backwater town. Where do you find Jesus?

Finding the Hidden Christ

Word search created by Madeleine Giles

D H K I D W P P W A Q R E K S
O D W G W D I N P M E M B H Y
T H U A L H R R A R J N E P O
S U F M S G A D I A N G E L S
I M F R X I O T S U R T W T R
R Y O T S N T E H P O R P S I
H W M E N H J E S U S Z U D L
C E S A M T S I R H C R N R E
L M R R H P E S O J O V E E S
Q E Q A P Z L U X D D Q D H Z
I S R Y P G N K X K P Z D P D
B S O I M E V E I L E B I E E
P I N L L G R B R I N G H H V
I A O B K N P P K N E E L S I
I H H Q Q X B O Y K I N G R G

ANGELS BELIEVE BOYKING BRING CHRIST CHRISTMAS GIVE HIDDEN
HONOR JESUS JOSEPH KNEEL MADONNA MAGI MESSIAH OPEN
PRAISE PREPARE PROPHET SHEPHERDS TRUST WORSHIP

Week Three What Do You Want? By Larry Olson

When I was a kid my mother would take my sister and me to visit Santa in the Mall. You know the deal with Santa, you sit on his lap and he says, "What do you want - for Christmas". Daunting question when you are a kid, what don't you want when you are 11 years old.

It was a good question when I was little and still a great question today - what do you want?

I've always been a question guy. My family thinks its because I like to deflect attention from myself...therein I just ask questions of others so I don't have to talk about myself...However, I like to think that I've had a pretty normal life. Parents that loved me. Great wife. Good job. My life is pretty basic. It's much "funner" to ask about other people's lives and find out new things rather than talk to people about myself - saying things they I already know.

Now that we have established I am a questions guy, I have really been into the sermon series that GGF has been going through on the questions of Jesus. After talking with Don, he told me he got the idea from a book called, ironically, The Questions of Jesus.

In it, the author named John Dear (yes, like John Dear the tractor guy, but I don't think they are the same person - but I wouldn't put it past him) John says that Jesus asks 283 questions in the bible. He only gave answers to three of his questions. So it turns out Jesus is a question guy too. You can tell why Jesus likes questions so much by looking at his very first question. It is in John chapter 1 verse 38. He's talking to a couple of John the Baptist's disciples and he asks them, "what do you want"?

Absolutely piercing. I've been meditating on this question ever since I read it. The answer that I give explains who I am...more about that in a moment.

When Santa asks me, "what you do you want" - I say an iphone, tickets to a Warriors game, maybe a couple of CD's...

I don't think my answer is the same when Jesus asks me, "What do you want"? It would be silly to tell Jesus I want a blackberry....When Jesus asks me, "What do you want", usually I say I want peace to reign in my heart. I say I want to be loved. I want to be a better husband/father. I want to experience joy. I want to use the gifts God gave to make the world a better place. Because Jesus makes my world relevant, answering his question is easy.

So here's the rub, I want my answer to Santa to be the same one I give to Jesus. Wouldn't it be nifty if my holiday intentions were the same as my spiritual intentions?

I don't want to be an American consumer. I don't want to get caught up in the Christmas mania. I don't want to be at the mall buying stuff for family and friends because I feel like I have to. I don't want to be at every Holiday party because I have to please everyone. For crying out loud Christmas is supposed to be about celebrating Jesus birthday and all I'm doing is running around like a chicken with its head cut off.

It is no easy task to align my American/consumer self with my spiritual self. I repeat this will not be easy! In order to have a good time at Jesus' birthday party - all I have to do is wake up every morning between now and December 25th and remember my answers to Jesus when he asks me, "What do you want"? P.S. I don't hate Santa.

Pomegranate Christmas

By Lori Williams

When I was small, Christmas was rather...tropic. Not a lot of pine trees grew in Taiwan but we had pomegranate trees and hibiscus bushes that smelled like heaven. We would get boxes from America at Christmas time and my favorite treat was always red hot candy. We'd pour them in boiling apple juice and watch them pale to white as the cider got rich and sweet. Of course it was 85 degrees out, but we drank it in the spirit of Christmas, sweating but happy all the same. We also made a lot of fudge, sang carols in sundresses, wrapped presents, and attended Christmas pageants. Every year dad would read the same Christmas story "Christmas Every Day" and we kids would belly laugh at it. Every year. My parents definitely brought their Williams Christmas tradition with them when they left Texas and moved to Taiwan.

Now as an adult these memories literally warm my heart. Around the holidays a little wood-burning stove is working overtime inside me. But as Christmas approaches this year, there's so much more warming me. Amazing me. Shocking me. As a nurse I'm seeing God in places I never imagined. A thirty year old man at my hospital is waiting for a heart transplant. He smiles every day as he walks down the hall. Not just the tired smile of someone anticipating disappointment...he belly laughs and jokes with the staff like we're family. I see his joy, and I see a God that I want to know more each day. I see family members crammed around hospital beds. Hands touching grandpa. Soft prayers being spoken. Love so thick that the room brims with it. It's tangible. And I hear people say "I love you" to each other every day! I hear them say it in English, Farsi, Spanish, and Chinese...and it's so beautiful. It's usually said in an untamed, desperate way. It's just amazing. In every language it sounds pure. In every language it sounds reassuring. And in every language it reminds me of this sweet God in my life. He has been communicating with me for years and my prayer for this season is that I listen. That I watch. And that I linger in life's heavy moments with the hope that God is in it. For truly, He is in it all.

By Julie Morrison

"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. Matthew 2:11

I recently came across some of my old notes from a class years ago. One of the nuggets I read was that the longest distance we will ever travel is the 18 inches from our head to our heart. A few days later, I was in a group where our leader said this! I felt God was pointing this out to me. So, I pass this on to you as something to pay attention to as we go into this Christmas season. Sometimes we try to feel the joy of Christmas but have a difficult time getting there. We know in our head that Jesus came as a little baby born in a manger, no room for him at the Inn, and he came that we might know Him. The joy of this news reaching our heart can be a challenge. The Magi traveled far to find Jesus. When they found him, they gave their treasures to him. What are your treasures? What treasure will you give to baby Jesus? Picture yourself there, traveling far, carrying your treasure. Picture yourself joyfully giving it to Him.

Now make a plan how to give your treasure to Jesus in your life this Christmas. Is it your time, your resources, loving a person who you feel is making it difficult for you to love them . . . challenge yourself here! The more of a treasure it is to give away, I am convinced the more you and I will experience the joy of having given it to Jesus. For as He tells us, ²¹"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" Matthew 6:21

The Perfect Gift By Kurt Kilgore

Because of Your Love - Jason Ingram

*This here's my story of my testimony
A song to say thanks to my mom and dad
When I was a young boy
They gave to me the most precious gift
A young boy like me could ever have*

*It was not the words they said
But how they lived*

*Because of the love you poured out on me
You gave up your life to take care of my every need
And every night I saw you on your knees
Praying for me that I might believe*

*Because of your love, because of your love
Because of your love, because of your love
That I first believed*

*As I look back to my childhood
I never had the most toys or the biggest yard
The one thing much bigger that you gave to me
Was your love and your time and you lived your belief*

As Christmas approaches, we are often paralyzed by the quest for "perfect gifts" for our children. Every time I hear the words to this song, I am reminded of God's perfect gift to us, his son Jesus, and that the best gift we could ever give our children is to help them to come to know Him in an intimate and real way. Heidi and I view this as our number one goal as parents. If all else fails, we will be at peace if we know that we lived out our lives trying to bring our children to Christ - not by the words we say, but by how we live and how we love. Not an easy task, by any means, but one to which God calls us as parents.

By Kathy Chen

Growing up at Trinity Lutheran Church in Walnut Creek, I was steeped in the traditions of Germany and Poland during the precious time of Advent. What started out as the opening of a daily verse and milk chocolate treat in my Advent calendar, grew to be participation in my household and congregation life of preparation. Every year we made a new wreath of greens and lit the candle each night at dinner to signify the anticipation of lighting the Christ candle on Christmas. Isaiah called on the people to be forward thinking-to clear their lives of the unnecessary and prepare for the coming Messiah. The Savior would reign. This was a promise. He would rule the earth with truth and grace. Later, John the Baptizer would say to those in his path to prepare the way of the Lord. Repent and be baptized into an active faith in Christ, the one whose sandals John claimed he was not worthy to untie. As I grew in my understanding of Jesus, I performed in church children's' pageants rotating through the roles and participated in dramatic readings as a teen. I attended 'Sing it Yourself Messiahs' at Davies (only then learning that the libretto had much more to do with Easter ultimately than Christmas) and special performances of the holiest of sacred songs by Chanticleer, another local favorite. I continue to mark this time in the Christian calendar with several of these traditions, along with the more domestic ones of rigorous house cleaning, creating new kitchen confections and traditional ethnic meals that usher in the Christ child.

So ultimately, the question remains of *how do I prepare in 2007* for the remembrance of that day of radiant splendor in Jesus' birth? As a favorite carol recalls, "What shall I give him?...Here have my heart."

I pause. It's simple and each year I find it is just as meaningful. Whether in the side chapel at GGCC communion or in the Cathedral that is Grace Episcopal during evensong I pause and remember that despite humanity Jesus was born as a humble child-completely vulnerable and dependent on the very humans that would betray him in numerous ways. Though complex in concept, the simple truth remains that God chose to come near. I try to create multiple times in the month of preparation just to meditate often with the music that ushers in the majesty that is our God. Jesus came to be near to me with my prideful heart and wholly unperfected self.

There are some parts of scripture that sink in slowly and deeply and for me this very miraculous birth is one. Jesus chose to endure the humble cave or livestock stall for His manger. He was worshipped by Kings who traveled a great distance to visit the new family in Bethlehem. He was worshipped by shepherds who obediently followed the star to find a baby. I've had the privilege to visit the historical site of His birth, to travel on many of the same paths. Jesus came near to be *with me and to know my story*. Though His name would be the most famous in human history, He would choose to forget his titles and remember *my name*, beckoning me for a more intimate relationship with each passing year. Jesus- the most patient of friends, the most gracious of hearts.

Advent is the line in the sand that I need to mark the transition to a season of gratitude for His great provision in Thanksgiving, but a turning toward Jesus who chose to come near. Emmanuel, God with us. Without these quiet moments I feel like I've ignored the calls of the prophets before me to prepare the way of the Lord. To let go of whatever entangles me from knowing God more deeply than the year before. This is an important process because I've come to realize that the entanglements become more subtle each year. If my hands are full with things, then I am too encumbered to opening my heart and hands to Christ with a yearning for truth and grace. May you find God in the quiet moments of a loud bustling season so that Christmas is a *celebration* of your deepening love of God with you personally in '08.

Week Four
Oh, You Look Just Like Him!
By Mike Davis

The other night Brenda and I were watching the 2006 version of the Nativity Story. As Mary & Joseph were traveling on their way to Bethlehem, they came across an old man who shared the comfort of his camp fire so that they could warm themselves for a few moments. As they were talking, the old man told Joseph that there was no greater joy for a father than to see his face in the face of his son. It was a poignant moment in the story as you saw Joseph's eyes sadden and his head tilt down as he realized that in fact his son would not have his face. As a father I felt his sadness. Joseph would never have the joy of hearing someone declare, "Oh, he looks just like you!"

As I have thought more about this story and the season of Advent, I was reminded that it is because of the birth of Jesus that the whole story of creation changes. The Christmas story is not just a story about how much a human child is going to look like his human father. The miracle of Advent is that we now can find the joy in how much we can look like HIM, the Christ, the King of Kings! The birth, life and death of Jesus give us the opportunity to move beyond the temptation of creating a God in our image and instead give us the means of being formed in HIS image.

The Advent season reminds us that "God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, so that we might have life everlasting". With God's help, we can go to school, go to work, go to the park, and even go Christmas shopping, and never be absent from HIS love. As we enter into Advent and as we celebrate Christmas, may each of us at some point this season hear one of the remarkable miracles of Christmas...

"Oh, You Look Just Like HIM!"

Advent now
By Tom & Elaine Bible

Have you ever sat in a Christmas service, about to sing those well known carols, and wished you had spent more time contemplating the Christ at the heart of the season? Today, take some time out to catch your breath.

Advent is a time to look to the past. Can you imagine the feelings of those who were eagerly anticipating the arrival of a baby that would change everything? The Emmanuel, God with us.

Advent is also about the present and the future. It's about the now and not yet.

Matthew 3 reminds how John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus' ministry: "In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' "

As 21st century Christians we are awaiting the Second Advent, the day when the risen Christ will return. But in the meantime, advent is now. It's a time when we can make sure our eyes are open to the new things God is doing in our lives, in the people around us, and in the world. Remembering that our actions and attitudes have eternal significance, what can we do to make straight the way of the LORD in our hearts? Or to prepare a highway for our God in our community?

Closing prayer:

"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" says Isaiah 43.

Lord Jesus, help me build a highway for you in my heart. I want to have room for you this Christmas. Open my eyes to the new things you are doing in me and in the world this advent.

Family Devotion by Kathleen Vignos

Matthew 2:9 *After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.*

Luke 8:16-17 *"No one lights a lamp and hides it in a jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, he puts it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open."*

We each see hundreds of advertisements a day – on billboards, newspapers, websites, television, and even on the floor at the grocery store or in MUNI stations. During Advent, the bombardment intensifies. Most of us are savvy enough to see through the promises of happiness offered in a bar of soap, a car, a pair of jeans. However, the fact remains that we do want some of what's being offered in advertisements: satisfaction, love, fulfillment, peace, and rest. No wonder they are so effective! As we read everyday advertisements, can we hear Christ quietly beckoning? "I can fulfill all of your needs. Try me instead. Test me."

Review the slogans or headlines below, found in one holiday issue of *Martha Stewart Living*. As you read them, substitute Christ as the product being offered. Are there Christ messages hidden all throughout your daily dose of marketing that you usually miss? Can you see His light breaking through the dark lure of excess, luxury, and power?

Have you seen the **light?** - **Tested** to withstand the unexpected – Spread a different kind of **peace** - There's No Such Thing as Being Too **Safe** – Find Your **Perfect Fit** – If you have the will, we have the **power** - Ultra **Healing** – A **calm** so deep it seeps into every pore – **Love** the skin you're in. – **Passion** for the best – **Foolproof** strategies that will **enhance** and **simplify** this year's holiday feast – **Guarantees** for the if in life – **Comfort**. It's what we do. – **Magic** transforms the season – **Rich & satisfying** – Perfect **harmony** – Be **TRUE**. – **Pure** and natural – Deal with the problem quickly and **compassionately**

Questions for Reflection

Which of the above yearnings (for peace, power, safety, love, etc.) do you most identify with? Think of a product that Madison Avenue would offer to satisfy your need. How does Jesus compare in meeting this need? (For example, suppose you have a need for rest. Advertisements might suggest you take a bath with some special bubble bath, but some solitude and prayer might better inspire the connection with your creator that can give your soul a more lasting experience of calm and rest.)

Is there something you are dreading this holiday season? Do you continue with it because it meets some need? Is there a way Christ could meet the need in a way that relieves you of this obligation?

Closing Prayer

Dear Jesus: We are looking for you! Please draw our attention away from the demands of the season – especially the shopping demands, and the demands for a picture perfect holiday. We pray that when we

look for material solutions to our problems and needs that we will find you instead. Thank you for allowing us to find you by your light. Amen.

Family Devotion - An Advent Devotional and Craft for Children By the Kilgores

Materials

Votive candle
Small clear votive candleholder
24 small star stickers, preferably shiny gold or silver

Instructions

Each night of Advent, place one star on your candleholder. Do not light the candle yet. Say this prayer:

*"I pray that my star candle will shine bright
To show me where sweet baby Jesus sleeps Christmas Eve night.
I pray that this star will help me to remember
That we await the birthday of Jesus this December."*

On Christmas Eve night, have an adult light the candle for the first time. Carefully carry your candle to your family's manger. Your candlelight and stars will show you that baby Jesus is there.

Note to parents

To enhance the symbolism of this activity, do not place baby Jesus in the manger until Christmas Eve night. For safety reasons, accompany your child when he or she is carrying the lit candle.

**Family Devotion
By Kristin Jones**

For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only son...(John 3:16)

We have heard and seen this verse so many times....At sporting events, on tracts, on billboards.

At Christmas this verse takes on a deeper meaning.

God had a son - an irreplaceable, one-and-only, son. And He gave him up. He let other people care for his baby and raise him. These people couldn't and wouldn't love His baby like he did no matter how much they tried or wanted to. They were imperfect and God knew it. But his love for these people was so great that he gave them his most important thing.

What do you have that is irreplaceable? A one-of-a-kind? How much would you have to love someone to give this thing to them? God loves you this much and MORE. Thank God for giving us baby Jesus this Christmas. Thank God for his love for you.

**Family Devotion
By The Cole Family**

WAITING...by Jonathan Cole

Warm in his manger, Jesus was born
Animals were around baby Jesus
In Bethlehem the visitors came
Traveling wise men followed the star
In the field the shepherds heard the news
News spread across the town
God came down as Jesus

ADVENT...by Rebecca Cole

Advent feels long
Dearest son of God
Voyaging wise men
Everyone is waiting
News spread fast
Tiny baby Jesus, laying in a manger

What words come to mind when you think about advent? Do you think about the tree, the music, and the candles? Do you think about baby Jesus and the wise men, or the sheep and the shepherds? Do you think about the star?

Pick a word that you like to think about when you think about Advent, our time of waiting for Jesus. Then use each letter in the word to make a special advent poem. You can think of words or sentences that go with each letter. Most of all, think about how advent helps you prepare for the birth of Jesus! Here are some ideas of words that might be special to you:

Savior, Star, Presents, Christmas, Love, Jesus Christ, Candles, Christmas Tree, Ornaments
Carols, Lights, Celebrate, Savior, Star, Presents, Christmas, Love, Jesus Christ, Candles
Christmas Tree, Ornaments, Carols, Lights, Celebrate

Family Devotion By Mary Loebig Giles

Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

Jesus tells us that we must become like little children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:3). Engage in sacred play with your kids: As a family, read the story of the three Magi, re-enact the Scripture and talk about your experiences together.

The characters:

Three travelers (wise men)

Herod, an evil king

Jesus, the young boy king

A mother and father (Mary and Joseph)

An interesting historical note for older kids (parental discretion advised): Known as Herod the Great, this Herod was appointed king by the Roman senate and, according to Zondervan's NIV Study Bible, "was ruthless, murdering his wife, three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle and many others" in order to secure his throne. Imagine his response to news of a newborn king in town.

Production notes:

Make foil crowns or towel turbans, using props on hand: dress-up clothes, bathrobes, blankets, etc. Take out face paints or eyeliner to add beards. Let young children act out the story as you narrate the events. Let older kids find their own words to act out the scenes. For small families: simplify scenes and take turns acting out various roles.

Scene summaries:

Scene 1: The travelers talk about the star they've seen and its meaning. Together they follow the star to the boy king to worship him.

Scene 2: In Jerusalem, the travelers search out Herod, King of Judea, to get better directions to the child. Shocked by the news there may be a rival to his throne, Herod pretends to want to worship the boy king himself. He sends the travelers to Bethlehem and asks them to make a careful search for the child and return to him.

Scene 3: They follow the star to a simple home in Bethlehem. Knocking on the door, they greet Joseph and Mary with news of their long journey and the momentous star sign above their home. The travelers kneel before Jesus and offer kingly gifts, worshipping him. While there, they are warned in a dream to not return to Herod.

Sample follow-up questions for your kids: What was your favorite part of the story? Did you learn anything new about the story or your character by acting the story out? Why do you think Herod might have acted the way he did? Why do you suppose the travelers (wise men) wanted to visit Jesus? How do you think Joseph and Mary responded when the wise men worshipped Jesus? How can we be like the wise men today? The wise men followed a star to find Jesus. What things in your life lead you to Jesus?

Advent is the season of Jesus coming, but not quite here.

As we explore the thoughts of a Hidden Jesus our hope is that this reader will serve you in your search for the Christ Child. There is a reading for each weekday and then one family devotion a week for the whole family. They can be found at the end of the reader. A family can be a home with kids, but feel free to read these with friends, housemates or whomever you call family.

We hope that you find the Christ child daily as we celebrate Advent together.

Peace

Pastors Don and Edwin