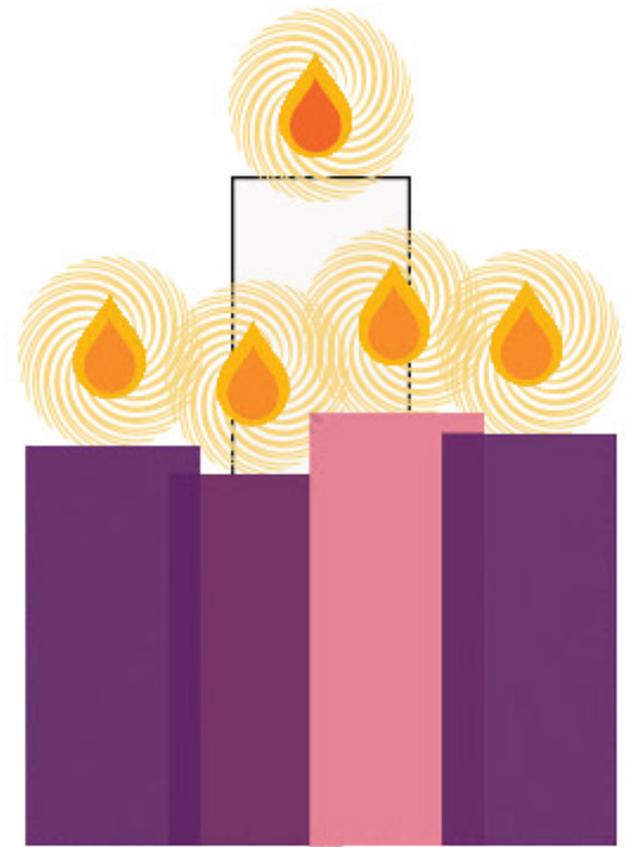


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**ADVENT
READINGS**



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Keystone UMC - Advent Guide

November 29, 2020

Incarnation – The Royal Titles

Scripture:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. **Micah 5:2**

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.” **Matthew 2:1-2**

Glory to the newborn king

MONDAY 11.30.20 Matthew 1:16-18; 2:1-6; Micah 5:2-4

“Christ” was a title, not a personal name. The Greek word “*christos*” meant “anointed one,” the same meaning as the Hebrew word “*mashiach*,” or “Messiah.” Matthew said Jesus is called “the Christ”—that is, the anointed king. Israel loved the hope of God sending a ruler born in Bethlehem. The “chief priests and legal experts” knew Micah 5 when King Herod asked them. But it was the foreign *magi* who spoke of the infant as Israel’s ultimate king.

- Matthew used the Greek word “*magoi*” (English “magi”) to describe the visitors from the East. Picture the scene in your mind's eye: these wise men, often honored and respected themselves, honored the young child Jesus and named him “king.” What did this say about their hopes for who Jesus was and would become? What do you hope Jesus, the king, will do in your life?
- The Magi didn’t say, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We have come to make a treaty with him,” or “We have come to attend one of his meetings.” Scholar William Barclay noted that the magi had “the reaction of adoring worship, the desire to lay at the feet of Jesus Christ the noblest gifts they could bring.” As you plan for Christmas, how will you honor Jesus’ birth through “adoring worship” this year?

Prayer: King Jesus, amid all of the holiday hoopla, help me to find a place of inner stillness and peace. And in that space, help me, like the wise men of old, to name you king, and to commit myself anew to serve you. Amen.

A NEW YEAR, A NEW SERMON SERIES

January 3, 2021



“But forget all that—

it is nothing compared to what I am going to do.

For I am about to do something new.

See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?

I will make a pathway through the wilderness.

I will create rivers in the dry wasteland.”

Isaiah 43:18-19 NLT



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Family Activity: For this activity, you will need a Bible, a sheet of blank wrapping paper or newsprint to cover a doorway in your home, a marker and some tape. Gather together and have someone read 2 Timothy 1:6-7 aloud. Discuss why at times it is difficult to be brave, strong and full of faith. Write down everyone's fears, obstacles and roadblocks on the large piece of paper. When everyone has responded, tape the paper to the doorway. Join together to break through the paper covered in fears and barriers and walk through to the other side. Pray together as a family to remember God is always with you, even through the unsure and scary times.



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God's anointed one (Messiah, Christ), God's son

TUESDAY 12.1.20 Psalm 72:1-6; Matthew 16:13-20

Scholars call Psalm 72 a "royal psalm," one that almost certainly originally prayed for Israel's earthly anointed king. But as the decades and then the centuries rolled by, it became painfully clear that no merely human king could possibly fulfill the hopes that the psalm expressed. The hope rose anew as Peter and the disciples followed Jesus. They saw him as "the Christ," the true king who could bring justice, peace and righteousness forever.

- Note carefully all the qualities Psalm 72 asked God to give to the king. How thankful would you be if any of the leaders we recently elected, or the president we will elect in 2016, fully lived out all those qualities? What kept Israel's kings (and our leaders) from being able to fully live them out? What made Jesus uniquely qualified to be that ultimate, eternal king?
- In answer to Jesus' question, the disciples said people identified him as "John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets." That was no insult—those were great, respected names. Yet they fell short of what the disciples saw in Jesus. To what extent can you join Peter in declaring that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God"? What factors shape what you believe about Jesus?

Prayer: Lord, the carol says, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Thank you for rekindling hope in me, and for giving me strength to live beyond my fears. Amen.

Paul's message: Jesus is "the Christ"

WEDNESDAY 12.2.20 Acts 17:1-4, 26:19-23

Paul always had one great central message. He used all his learning, his extensive knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures and his speaking skill to convince his hearers that Jesus was "the Christ," God's anointed king. His message has long outlived those seemingly more powerful, important people (like Agrippa) who scoffed at his faith in Jesus.

- Scholar N. T. Wright noted that Paul's preaching from the Scriptures wasn't just a few proof texts. "It was a matter of the entire plan of God, the whole sweep of the narrative, the story of Israel going into the dark tunnel of slavery in Egypt only to be rescued at the Passover, of David fleeing from Absalom only to be reinstated after a great victory, of Jerusalem being destroyed and the nation carried away captive to Babylon, only to be brought back and rebuilt after a tribulation everyone thought would be final ... of a story whose



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main themes were all about suffering and vindication, disaster and reversal, death and resurrection." In other words, Jesus as "the Christ," crucified and risen, embodied the essence of all of God's saving action. In what ways has Christ brought the power of "reversal," of hope, into your life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, the world around me sees suffering as something to avoid at all costs. Thank you for living out a different story, one that gives me hope that service and suffering are the ultimate paths to life and true greatness. Amen.

"The Son of David" claimed David's kingdom

THURSDAY 12.3.20 Isaiah 9:2-7, Matthew 21:8-16

Isaiah wrote of Israel's hope that God would send a faithful heir of David's royal line to rule forever (cf. 1 Kings 9:3-5). In Israel, donkeys were for kings (e.g. 1 Kings 1:33-44) as well as common people. But Zechariah 9:9-10, which Matthew cited, distinguished a king on a donkey, who came in peace, from the war horses and chariots of a conqueror. People hailed Jesus as the "Son of David," God's promise come true at last.

- Some who watched Jesus no doubt hoped he would lead a drive to kill the Romans and restore Israel's power. His ride on a donkey pointed in a different direction. "When the chief priests and legal experts saw the amazing things he was doing and the children shouting in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' they were angry." They didn't want a gentle king, a "Son of David," who said to love your enemies. Do you?
- "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." Yet even after he met Jesus, Paul would write, "Now we see a dim reflection" (1 Corinthians 13:12). In what ways has Jesus already brought light into your dark world? In what ways are you waiting for the full brilliance of God's light?

Prayer: Lord God, during Advent we renew our trust in your gift of hope. So much in our world, globally and locally, tugs me toward hopelessness. Renew and reinforce my ability to live in hope this Advent. Amen.



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Keystone UMC - Advent Guide

Madeleine l'Engle wrote of a "vast, patiently waiting love" at the heart of the universe. How does it shift your view of life's meaning and purpose to believe in that, rather than just a cold, empty universe?

- John particularly related his teaching that God is love to a human fear of punishment. To what extent did your upbringing, or your adult experiences with church, teach you to see God as angry, nit picking, eager to punish you? What is helping you to change that inner picture, so that you can live 2015 in the light of God's love, rather than in fear of punishment?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you that your love is a fixed point I can depend on in an ever-changing world. Keep me steady, stable and loving every day of this New Year. Amen.

"Powerful, loving and self-controlled"

SATURDAY 1.2.21 2 Timothy 1:3-7

On his second missionary journey, the apostle Paul met a younger man named Timothy (cf. Acts 16:1-4). Timothy became one of his most trusted associates, one Paul trusted to lead some of the churches he planted, and to continue leading them after Paul was gone. Such a large responsibility must have frightened Timothy at times, especially in the light of his youth (cf. 1 Timothy 4:12). But Paul told him that God's spirit could make him lovingly powerful, rather than timid. That same spirit goes with each of us into 2021.

- The apostle Paul traced his faith to his ancestors (verse 3). Here he called his friend Timothy to live out his own legacy of faith from his mother and grandmother, and from Paul, his spiritual "father." What examples of either spiritual courage or timidity are parts of your family's spiritual legacy? In what ways have parents, grandparents and other important people given you confidence to fearlessly value and use your God-given strengths? What effect have they had on you? How can you mentor and encourage someone who is younger than you are?

Prayer: King Jesus, thank you for being the "eternal father, strong to save," whose love and courage can guide me either through or beyond the legacy of my earthly family. Give me the courage to always live out your principles, and to guide others in your ways. Amen.



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Keystone UMC - Advent Guide

“If God is for us, who is against us?”

Thursday 12.31.20 Romans 8:14-18, 31-32

The apostle Paul tirelessly preached Jesus in settings where both the Roman Empire and much of the Hebrew religious leadership strongly opposed him. Like those who opposed Jesus, Paul’s foes often seemed overwhelmingly strong. But Paul, though he was not devoid of human emotions, refused to let fear govern his life or determine what he would do. In his letter to Christians in Rome, he stated his view clearly: “If God is for us, who is against us?”

- Paul, trained as a rabbi, drew heavily on the Old Testament. Psalm 68 said God is a father to the fatherless, and Paul said the Holy Spirit teaches us to address God as *abba*, the Aramaic word little children used to address their fathers. Did you have a warm, trusting bond with your father, or was your experience of a human father more hurtful and fear-filled? How does the invitation to relate to God as *abba* speak to your heart?
- Paul also contrasted a fear-filled spirit of slavery with the privilege we have of being adopted as God’s own children. What role, if any, has fear played in your spiritual life? Have you ever had times where you sought desperately to please God by “trying harder”? Soak deeply into your spirit the life-changing implications of Paul’s word: “If God is for us, who is against us?”

Prayer: Dear God, teach me how to trust your steadfast love more completely. Teach me, in my relationships with others and with you, how to better live free from fear, always confident that you are “for” me. Amen.

“Perfect love drives out fear”

Friday 1.1.21 1 John 4:14-19

Welcome to 2021! Some of us look forward to good things this New Year; some of us just hope things don’t get worse, and some of us fear that illness, poverty, loneliness or even death will define the year for us. No matter what our circumstances here, John urged us to remember (not just on New Year’s, but every day) that our ultimate destiny rests in the hands of our God, who “is love.” And perfect love, God’s love, John wrote, casts out fear.

- John’s words are so familiar that it may be hard for us to catch the depth of what he was saying. What difference do you see between “God loves” and “God IS love” (which John said in verse 16)? In her book *Many Waters*,



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Jesus (not Caesar) is Lord, ruler of all

FRIDAY 12.4.20 Acts 10:34-43, Romans 14:2-12

By New Testament times, Rome’s Caesar claimed worship as “Lord” (Greek *kurios*). There could only be one “Lord,” so to say Jesus was king and lord was risky. But even to Romans, Peter and Paul said Jesus was the true *kurios*, the Lord of all. With Rome’s military might pitted against Jesus’ seemingly naïve witnesses, the contest looked ridiculously uneven. It was—but 2,000 years of history shows that it was Caesar, not Jesus, who was overmatched.

- One important way Rome demanded that citizens in its empire show their allegiance was to say, formally, “Caesar is Lord.” Picture the scene as Peter declared to this group of Roman soldiers, “This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all!” (verse 36) What “lords” has Jesus challenged and dethroned in your life?
- Jesus’ lordship needs to shape the family of faith. Some Romans disagreed in critical, caustic ways. Paul told them we do not answer to one another, but to our Lord, Jesus. Scholar William Barclay wrote, “‘I beseech you by the bowels of Christ,’ said Cromwell to the rigid Scots of his day, ‘think it possible that you may be mistaken.’ We must banish both censoriousness and contempt from the Church’s fellowship. We must leave the judgment of others to God, and seek only to sympathize and to understand.” When do you need to remember that Jesus, not you, is Lord over some person you disagree with or dislike?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are Lord of all. That takes in all of the world’s big problems that sometimes trouble me—and it also takes in all of my internal struggles. Be Lord of all, inside me as well as outside. Amen.

“King of kings and Lord of lords”

SATURDAY 12.5.20 Revelation 19:11-16

In a vision packed with symbols, Revelation proclaimed Jesus’ final triumph over evil. Some symbols change little over time—good guys, for example, ride on white horses. Others take a bit more thought—the sword from the victor’s mouth is a symbol for the power of God’s word (cf. Hebrews 4:12). The vision used a double title—“King of Kings and Lord of Lords”—doubly inscribed (“on his robe and on his thigh”) to powerfully underline Jesus’ royalty in the universe.



- Rome happened to be in power at the time of Revelation's writing. But Rome was hardly unique. Human rulers have often claimed divine approval for their actions (e.g. Nazi soldiers wore belt buckles that said, in German, "God is with us"). Some, like the Roman emperors, have even claimed to be divine. Scholars G. K. Beale and Sean M. McDonough said Jesus' title "is expressing the idea of 'ultimate ruler over all kings' ... The name is taken from Dan. 4:37 Septuagint [Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament], where it is a title for God." The headlines continually report concerns about Vladimir Putin, various terrorist leaders and many others. Do you trust that Jesus is "king of kings" over all of them? In what ways does that trust form the basis for the hope in which we live, during Advent and all year long?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are the King of kings, you are the Lord of lords. I cannot fully grasp all the reach of that, but I can and do ask you to be Lord of my life, to make me the person you want me to be. Amen.

Family Activity: Being called by the right name and title is important to everyone. It helps us feel cared for and valued. The angel told Mary to give her baby boy the special name Jesus. And Jesus was given important titles, like Lord and Son of David. Notice the people around you. Do you know the name of your mail carrier? School-crossing guard? Janitor at work or school? As a family, take time to learn the names of those who serve you every day. You can share God's peace and love by introducing yourself and telling them how much you appreciate their hard work. For something extra special, bundle up some homemade treats and give them a Christmas treat! Also tell them you are praying for them.

December 6, 2020 Incarnation – The Deliverer's Title: Savior

Scripture:

The Lord appeared to [Joseph] in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, **for he will save his people from their sins.**" –Matthew 1:20b-21



- Our culture stresses "standing on your own two feet." *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* noted, however, "The flock can also be an image of vulnerability. Thus we find the disciples called a 'little flock' that needs to be commanded to 'fear not' (Lk 12:32) ... As a ... metaphor, the flock is an apt picture of the combined people of God under his care." How easy or hard do you find it to put more trust in God's care for you than in your own efforts? Are you okay with being part of God's "flock," not just a free-standing individual?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you told us that you are the good Shepherd, willing even to give your life for your flock. I thank you for your tender care for me, both now and in eternity. Amen.

"I AM. Don't be afraid."

WEDNESDAY 12.30.20 John 6:16-20

In several places in John's gospel, Jesus referred to himself with the Greek version of the divine Hebrew name YHWH, which meant something like "I am that I am" (cf. Exodus 3:13- 14). One key instance came when his disciples were in a small boat caught in a ferocious wind and rainstorm lashing the Sea of Galilee. Jesus told them that, because he was the great "I AM," they did not need to be afraid.

- Scholar N. T. Wright noted that the story of Jesus walking on water can be a metaphor for our journey through life. Many times life's waters get rough, and a strong wind is blowing. Yet in the midst of the rough waters Jesus is there, even walking on water to help and comfort you. When have you faced "rough waters"? How did Jesus help you "reach the land" on the other side?
- When Jesus said, "It's me", he was using the same words in Greek as "I Am," God's Old Testament name. Scholar Myron Augsberger writes, "The primary meaning is that Jesus as Lord of creation can be present in the lives of people in this material world." In what parts of your life do you need Christ's comforting, calming presence today? How confident are you that he can and will be with you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, at times my fears distract me and hide you from me. Remind me that your love and salvation are always in reach, even when I feel as though I'm sinking. Amen.



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- Scholar John Oswalt wrote, “The key to [God’s promised redemption] is the personal relationship of God to his people. The recurrence of the pronouns “I” and “you” in 43:1–7 is striking. Twice God says, “I am/will be with you” (vv. 2, 5). He identifies himself by relation to them, calling himself “the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” (v. 3).” What steps can make your relationship with God personal, not just with an impersonal “force”? How can knowing God personally move your heart beyond fear?
- An ancient tradition said King Manasseh killed Isaiah. The Romans crucified Jesus and beheaded Paul the apostle. Do this passage’s promises ring hollow in light of events like that? No—Hebrews 2:15 said Jesus’ resurrection can “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” In what ways does fear limit your ability to live for God and others? To what extent has faith in Jesus freed you from the fear of disappointment, grief or even death in this life?

Prayer: God, I’m scared about something too much of the time. But you’re the maker and sustainer of all that is, and your word says, over and over, “Do not fear.” Help me learn to listen better, and to trust you. Amen.

“Don’t be afraid, little flock”

TUESDAY 12.29.20 Luke 12:22-32

“Don’t be afraid” is one of the most common commands in the Bible for a reason. We tend to fear, to worry about what the future might hold. Our minds may see truth in Jesus’ question, “Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life?” (We know that research says worry shortens our lives.) But our hearts still tend to worry. Jesus tenderly called his followers his “little flock,” an image of God’s deep desire for their ultimate well-being.

- Almost everyone who heard Jesus say “There is more to life than food and more to the body than clothing” lived in near-poverty. They had few material assets, if any, so one accident, illness or unjust act by a powerful person could leave them destitute. Does the principle behind Jesus’ words apply equally well to the relative affluence and safety of life in the United States in 2015? How can Jesus’ wisdom help you set your financial and emotional priorities for the New Year?



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Keystone UMC - Advent Guide

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**

God: “There is no savior besides me”

MONDAY 12.7.20 Isaiah 43:5-11, Isaiah 52:6-10

In the violent world of the Middle East, Israel’s first concept of God as Savior tended to be military and political. Their tradition said that Moses and the Israelites sang about God as savior after Egypt’s army drowned in the Red Sea (cf. Exodus 15:1-3). Similarly, the Israelites had a powerful sense of God as savior when they were allowed to return to their land after decades in exile in Babylon.

- Egypt was the dominant world “superpower” when Moses led the Israelite exodus to freedom. Persia had overthrown Babylon and dominated the scene when they let Israel return after the exile. And Rome seemed unassailable when Jesus’ followers spread out to preach the good news. Do you believe God is still more able to save than any world superpower today (cf. Psalm 2)? How does God’s power operate differently than human political and military power?
- Before the exile, Israel had turned to a variety of alliances and kingly maneuvers to try to carve out their own place in the world. Isaiah 43:11 spoke strongly to their efforts to fix things for themselves: “I, I am the Lord, and there is no savior besides me.” What are some of the “saviors” people still tend to look to today? How confident are you that the truth Isaiah declared about God as savior is still true?

Prayer: Lord God, I see signs of your saving power in history, even though so many rulers at the time missed seeing you. And I see your saving power at work in my life, too. Again, today I claim you as my savior. Amen.



God (the savior) “raised up a mighty savior”

TUESDAY 12.8.20 Luke 1:67-75, 2:10-11

Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, poetically expressed his joy about God’s salvation when the son God promised to him and his wife in their old age was born. But, like most Israelites at the time, he still saw the gift of a savior as release from “our enemies.” A different vision of the meaning of “savior” began to emerge when the baby the angel told the shepherds about didn’t appear to be much of a threat to the Roman occupiers of Palestine.

- Zechariah said, according to Luke, “[God] has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David’s house, just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago. He has brought salvation from our enemies and from the power of all those who hate us.” Does that sound like an accurate description of a baby born in a stable to a poor young couple? In what ways was it inaccurate? In what ways was it accurate?
- The angel’s announcement to the shepherds included both Jesus’ royal titles, which we studied last week (Christ, the Lord), and the title “savior” made personal (“your savior”). How might those night-shift shepherds have understood the angel declaring such august titles to them? In what ways have you made Jesus, not just savior, but “your savior”?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you came quietly, humbly, softly. But as I look back, I realize that not only the whole world, but MY whole world, began to change when you were born. Thank you for coming to be my savior. Amen.

Jesus as Savior from sin (the real enemy)

WEDNESDAY 12.9.20 Matthew 1:20-21, Acts 5:27-32

Most of us know the story: a carpenter named Joseph, engaged to Mary, struggled to believe her story that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. He planned to break the engagement quietly. In a dream, an angel told him to believe Mary, and to name the child Jesus (Greek form of Hebrew “Joshua,” meaning “Yahweh is salvation”). Salvation ran much deeper than just the Roman army. This child brought salvation from humanity’s greatest enemy: sin. The earliest Christians echoed that, as they defied the leaders trying to silence them.



- In verse 25, you may recognize the words John Newton used when he wrote “Amazing Grace” centuries later. Newton used the words to confess his sorrow at having once sailed a slave ship that carried holds jammed with captive Africans across the ocean to a life of slavery. In what parts of your spiritual life is this your testimony—what do you now see to which you were once blind? How will you apply what you have “seen” about Jesus this Advent to living your life differently in 2021?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, please continue your “eye surgery” in my life, clearing my vision and moving my heart to follow you more completely. Amen.

Family Activity: Gather your family into the darkest space of your home. A closet or a dark bathroom would be good options. Bring a Bible and a very small reading light with you. When you are all together, ask someone to read John 1:1-5. Describe how just as life can be dark at times, so are our hearts, lives and the world without the light of Jesus. Discuss how as followers of Jesus, his light lives within us and he wants us to share it with the world with our words and actions. Open the door of the room and celebrate the light of Jesus together! Give thanks to God for Jesus and for the light he brings to our lives at Christmas and always! Commit to sharing the light of Jesus with all people.

December 27, 2020 *Be Not Afraid* Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:7

“For God gave us a Spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.”

“Don’t fear—you are mine”

MONDAY 12.28.20 Isaiah 43:1-7

Isaiah 43 came in a section of the book many mainline scholars call “Second Isaiah.” Its prophetic poetry spoke first to Israelites returning from exile in Babylon. The chance to return to their land was welcome, but it took a long, likely dangerous journey, often on foot. “Don’t fear,” was the divine message to them. “I will be with you.” Those words have strengthened and encouraged God’s people in all kinds of challenging or difficult situations ever since.



Prayer: Lord, by my world's standards, it was odd that you'd declare the good news first to shepherds. But you chose well—the shepherds listened and worshipped. This Christmas I join the shepherds in worshipping you. Amen.

"I am the light of the world"

FRIDAY 12.25.20 John 9:1-17

When John wrote that "the life [Jesus] was the light for all people" (John 1:4), he followed Jesus' lead. Jesus said in the Temple that he was the light of the world (cf. John 8:12), and repeated the claim in verse 5 of today's reading. His healing of this blind man was like a life-changing, acted-out parable. Jesus' light gave the beggar back both his physical and spiritual sight.

- At what age or stage of life did Christ's light first shine into your life? What are some of the first things that you remember seeing more clearly in the light of Jesus' love and grace? What are one or two ways that Christ's light has helped to give you clearer vision in the most recent weeks and months of your walk with him?
- Jesus' disciples reflected a view common in their day (and still today): that God caused everything, even bad things. Jesus taught us to see God differently, as the source of healing and hope even in the face of illness or tragedy. (For deeper study of this key idea, see Pastor Hamilton's book *Why?*) What does it mean to you to trust that God is on your side, not working against you, in a volatile, often frightening world?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when something bad happens, I'm tempted to ask, "Why is God doing this to me?" Help me remember what you told your disciples, and to trust your healing light and love even when I'm hurting. Amen.

How well can you see "the light of the world"?

SATURDAY 12.26.20 John 9:18-41

In his prologue, John said we must choose to see the light Jesus brought (cf. John 1:10-11). John graphically portrayed the terrible results of spiritual blindness—the blind man's talk with the Pharisees would be comical if it weren't so tragic. Rather than admit anything good about Jesus, the religious leaders grasped at straws to deny the plain fact that a man born blind could now see! In his beautiful confession of faith in verse 25, the man showed that he could "see" more clearly than the religious leaders.



- Scholar N. T. Wright wrote that "Matthew sees Jesus as the one who will now complete what the law of Moses pointed to but could not of itself produce. He will rescue his people, not from slavery in Egypt, but from the slavery of sin, the 'exile' they have suffered not just in Babylon but in their own hearts and lives." In what ways has missing God's path led your heart and life into a kind of "exile"? What are the benefits of letting Jesus save you from that exile?
- Wright also observed that in Acts 5 Peter spoke of Jesus as Savior "because he has broken through the power of death itself and is therefore ready to rescue people not only from that ultimate enemy but from such other enemies, whether sickness, oppression, persecution or imprisonment, as they may face from time to time." What "enemies" of that sort are you facing? How confident are you that Jesus can ultimately save you from all of them?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you came to save us from sin because sin hurts, damages and destroys us. Be my savior today from all that makes me less human, and keep me growing into the person you want me to be. Amen.

What our Savior did for us

THURSDAY 12.10.20 2 Timothy 1:8-11; Titus 3:3-6

God does not save us, the apostles preached, based on any good things we have done. Simply put, they said we couldn't fix the profound problem of humans missing the mark, because we ARE the problem. That's why we needed Jesus, the Savior to do for us what we could never do for ourselves, however good we tried to be. God, they said, saved us through Jesus out of sheer divine grace and mercy.

- It is humbling enough to read that salvation is not based on anything we have done that sometimes we resist that. Is there a point in your past (even your recent past) which you can identify as "foolish, disobedient, deceived," or are you more in the "I've always been a pretty good person" camp? Do people in both groups need God's mercy for rebirth and renewal? When have you most clearly sensed God's mercy toward you?
- We know (though we regularly forget) that Christmas is not really about how much "stuff" we can get, or give. The letter to Titus described salvation as the gift "God poured out upon us generously through Jesus Christ our savior." What helps you, amid all the holiday hoopla, to remember that Jesus the savior is God's ultimate generous "Christmas gift"?



Prayer: Lord God, Mary wrapped your ultimate gift to me in cloths and laid him in a manger. Help me to value the gift of Jesus, my savior, as highly as I ought. Amen.

Saved by faith, for a divine purpose

FRIDAY 12.11.20 Ephesians 2:3-10

“God is rich in mercy.” “You are saved by God’s grace.” That was vital, said the letter to the Ephesians, but it was not the end of the story; it was just the beginning. God saved us FROM a broken, self-seeking way of life, for a very specific purpose. God’s mission, what Jesus called “the kingdom of God,” is to restore not just individuals, but this whole broken world to the divine purpose. And God saves us FOR a new life as God’s human instruments, joining in God’s work to reclaim our broken world.

- John Wesley applied the idea that we are “created in Christ Jesus to do good things” to everyday life through the Methodist Church’s Second General Rule: “By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men.” What are one or two “sorts” of goodness you didn’t used to practice, but do now as a Christ follower? Use the phrase “doing good of every possible sort” to spark your imagination about new sorts of goodness that might be possible in your life.
- Ephesians 2:10 stated, in a general way, the life purpose of every follower of Jesus. Spend time in prayer and thought. Try to write down, and keep handy, the specific ways in which you live out, and intend to live out, the life purpose laid out for you in Ephesians 2:10.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for all that you have saved me from. Guide me day by day into a way of living that honors and carries out the purpose that you saved me for. Amen.

“Now is the day of salvation”

SATURDAY 12.12.20 Isaiah 25:6-9, 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2

The Savior’s work comes in three “tenses,” so to speak. Jesus saved us, past tense, through his life, death and resurrection. Jesus also saves us, present tense, as we yield ourselves to him each day and join in his mission. And the glorious future



rejection—go on.” What role is Jesus playing in your Christmas celebration this year? How are you making room in your heart, and in your life, for him?

- A contemporary Christmas song has Joseph say, “Why me? I’m just a simple man of trade ... Why here, inside this stable filled with hay? Why her? She’s just an ordinary girl ... This is such a strange way to save the world.” If you were God, would you trust the Messiah to a family as poor and “ordinary” as Mary and Joseph formed? What are some of the key ways God’s values challenge yours?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you were born in a stable, and laid in a feeding trough. Be born in my messy, yearning heart this Christmas Eve, Lord, and dwell in me forever. Amen.

“Wonderful, joyous news for all people”

THURSDAY 12.24.20 Luke 2:8-20

We’re used to seeing dignified, noble shepherds in manger scenes, Christmas pageants and paintings. Yet when Jesus was born, most people looked down on shepherds. Most priests shunned them because, caring for flocks, they couldn’t carefully observe all the rituals it took to be “holy.” But God loved them, and made these shepherds the first to hear the “wonderful joyous news for all people.”

- Was Jesus born on December 25? Probably not. “Flocks in pasture at night show that this was a warmer season, not winter (when they would graze more in the day)” (*The IVP Bible Background Commentary*). How can the story of the shepherds watching their flocks outdoors on a warmer night remind you that the good news of Jesus’ birth applies all year, and not just for a few wintry nights?
- In verses 9-10, the shepherds were terrified, and the angel told them, “Don’t be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you.” Have you ever felt fear when you faced something unexpected or unexplainable? In what parts of your life do you need to hear anew the wonderful, joyous news of Jesus, and to take in the message “Don’t be afraid”?



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Keystone UMC - Advent Guide

“We have seen his glory”

TUESDAY 12.22.20 John 1:6-14

The Bible writers often pictured the tension between good and evil as “light” and “darkness.” The apostle John was able to define what he meant by “light” more specifically. Jesus, he said—the Jesus he had seen, heard and known—was the light who broke into the world’s darkness. As darkness couldn’t put out light, so Jesus could deliver us from the darkness we find within ourselves.

- Greek thinkers like Plato said “the logos” was too pure to enter the corrupt material world. Hebrews usually saw God as so awesome and distant that they feared to even say the divine name. John drew on both those thought worlds, but he boldly wrote, “The Word became flesh.” How can it help you realize how much God values you to believe that he “became flesh,” like us, rather than just wishing you well from afar?
- Being born is the way each one of us begins our life in the world. John, taking his cue from Jesus (cf. John 3:3-8), said that the life Jesus brought is so qualitatively new that it’s like being born, this time as a child of God. When did your spiritual journey start? In what ways has trusting and following Jesus given you a whole new life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for being born, for becoming flesh, so that you could give me the authority and power to be born anew, as a child of God. Thank you for my new life. Amen.

“She gave birth to ... a son ... and laid him in a manger”

WEDNESDAY 12.23.20 Luke 2:1-7

Christmas is one key story about God’s Great Reversal. Caesar Augustus, a human who thought he was a god, issued a decree that forced Mary and Joseph to make a hard trip with Mary nine months pregnant. Jesus, the true God become human, spent his first night on earth in a humble animal shelter in Bethlehem. On Christmas Eve, we reflect on the birth of the child who showed us God’s kind of power—the power of selfless love.

- Scholar William Barclay wrote, hauntingly, “That there was no room in the inn was symbolic of what was to happen to Jesus ... He sought an entry to the over-crowded hearts of men; he could not find it His search—and his



GROW.PRAY.STUDY.

Keystone UMC - Advent Guide

hope that God’s people have always held is that Jesus will save us when God fully establishes the divine reign, and tears and brokenness are no more.

- Review your own spiritual autobiography. In what ways did you find Jesus’ gift of salvation in the past? (If by any chance your answer is, “Not yet,” remember that “Now is the day of salvation.”) In what ways are you living into the gift of salvation more deeply day by day? (If by any chance you say, “Not much,” remember that “Now is the day of salvation.”) What additional dimensions of salvation do you look forward to experiencing, both in this life and in the next? (If you can’t think of any, remember: “Now ...”) Jesus came to be your savior. Be sure you’ve responded to the apostle’s plea: “Be reconciled to God!”

Prayer: O God, what mystery and what love there is in the message that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself. Help me set aside any remaining fear, reservation or rebellion, and trust myself fully to your salvation. Amen.

Family Activity: Frederick Buechner wrote, “The worst thing is never the last thing.” He can say this (and we can, too) because of the hope we have in Jesus Christ as our Savior. As a family, create a collage of hope. Gather some magazines, markers, glue, scissors and a piece of poster board. Look through the magazines and cut out pictures of images that bring hope to your family. Use the markers or crayons to draw pictures and write words that communicate hope. Also, include images and words representing what brings hope to the whole world. Place your collage of hope in your home where everyone can see it or give the collage to someone who needs hope. Pray and give thanks to God for your family and for hope.



GROW.PRAY.STUDY.
Keystone UMC - Advent Guide

December 13, 2020 *The Incarnate Title: Emmanuel*

Scripture:

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” – **Matthew 1:20-23**

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. – **Hebrews 1:1-3**

A sign in Isaiah’s time; a reality in Jesus

MONDAY 12.14.20 **Isaiah 7:5-16, Matthew 1:22-23**

Three kings were plotting to attack Israel, and King Ahaz was frightened. The prophet Isaiah said to ask for a sign that God was with him. The stubborn king refused, but Isaiah gave him a sign anyway—a young woman would give birth to a son. Before the boy reached *bar mitzvah* age—age 13), the plotting kingdoms would lose their power (and they did). Matthew said Mary’s son completed Isaiah’s prophecy by being God’s presence for all people. (For a more detailed study, see Pastor Hamilton’s book *Making Sense of the Bible*, pp. 56-60.)

- Matthew 18:20 quoted Jesus as saying, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.” And the gospel’s final verse, Matthew 28:20, carried the promise that “I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.” What settings or practices help to make God’s presence real to you? What makes God’s presence as important for you (and each one of us) as it was for King Ahaz?
- Scholar William Barclay summed up Matthew’s message: “Jesus is the one person who can tell us what God is like, and what God means us to be. In him alone we see what God is and what man ought to be.” In what ways have you been able to make Jesus central to your understanding of what God is like?



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Keystone UMC - Advent Guide

December 20, 2020 *The Light of the World*

Scripture: John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

“The Word was God”

MONDAY 12.21.20 **John 1:1-5**

Opening with “In the beginning,” John deliberately echoed the first words of Genesis. The “life” and “light” images also echoed those “beginning” stories. Coming to earth, Jesus the creator was creating anew. John’s prologue connected Hebrew and Greek thought worlds when he wrote of “the Word.” Many Greek thinkers identified “the Word” as the great Idea behind the world. For Hebrews, meanwhile, Genesis 1 said God created by speaking (cf. Psalm 33:6), by “the Word.”

- John’s prologue, grounded in reality, was splendid philosophical poetry. Which is more “true”: a geologist’s precise technical report on the Grand Canyon’s sediments and rocks, or a poet’s imagery evoking the Canyon’s awe and grandeur? When have you had an experience that took you “out of yourself” or helped you “get “in touch” with depths in yourself, aware of realities that went beyond your ordinary day-to-day life?
- “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light” (verse 5). Have there been times when it felt to you as though darkness was trying to put out God’s light in your life? What spiritual practices keep the windows of your soul open, so that God’s light can keep shining in and through you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you were (and are) light in my darkness. Continue to change me from the inside out to be a beacon reflecting your light to those around me. Amen.



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Keystone UMC - Advent Guide

“God’s dwelling is here with humankind”—forever

SATURDAY 12.19.20 Revelation 5:6-13, 21:1-5

Jesus wasn’t “God with us” just for a few first-century years. He pledged to remain with us in the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14:16-18). More than that, Revelation’s amazing symbolic vision said that by his life, death and resurrection Jesus, “the slaughtered Lamb,” made God’s presence with us a reality for all of eternity. No matter what life throws at us, we can live, like those first Christians, trusting that THIS is where history is going: “He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

- The symbols in Revelation 5 can seem bizarre at first (e.g. a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes?). To people with Hebrew backgrounds, the number “seven” meant “complete” or “perfect.” These images said that Jesus, perfect in power (7 horns) and able to perfectly “see” what you need (7 eyes) is the Lamb of God, the center of all true worship now and forever. In what ways have these Advent studies deepened your understanding of Jesus as your true king, as your savior, and as God with us? How fully are you able to join in singing, “Blessing, honor, glory, and power belong to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb forever and always”?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to grow more comfortable and trusting in your presence each day, so that I can look forward with greater joy and hope to being with you through all eternity. Amen.

Family Activity: One title of Jesus is Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” Whether in disappointment or joy, we can always trust God to be present. Gather as a family in a favorite room in your home. Talk about why that particular room is a favorite. Is it extra comfortable? Does it have more light? Now move together to the least favorite room in your home (maybe the garage or laundry room). Discuss why it is the least favorite. Is it dark? Dirty? Back in the comfortable room, talk about where each person experiences God’s presence most deeply. Ask each person to choose one uncomfortable or unfamiliar place this week to spend some time remembering God is always present with everyone, everywhere. Pray and thank God for always being with each one of you.



GROW.PRAY.STUDY.

Keystone UMC - Advent Guide

Has that helped you to avoid some of the negative, frightening images of God some people have? If so, how?

Prayer: O Lord, on that first Christmas you came into our midst. You were human, but you were also more. Give me insight and humility as I grapple to internalize the mystery that you were Emmanuel, “God with us.” Amen.

Life: from eternity to where we could see and touch it

TUESDAY 12.15.20 1 John 1:1-3

John used lofty, nearly ecstatic language as he reflected (probably several decades later) on his experience of knowing and following Jesus. Commentator Glenn Barker captured John’s central point: “This message is from the beginning because it is of God. It precedes creation, time, and history. But in God the message of life also draws near to humanity and finds its culmination in Jesus. In him the Word of life becomes incarnated [made flesh], manifested, and hence can be seen, touched, and even handled.”

- John’s claim was (and is) amazing. He said he had heard, seen, looked at and touched “the Word of life” which was “from the beginning”: i.e. God, the creator and savior! How can John’s simple, direct eyewitness testimony give you a firmer basis for your faith? How, without the same physical experience John had of Jesus, have you been able to trust that Jesus is “the eternal life that was with the Father”?
- John wrote that sharing the good news about Jesus as “God with us” draws us into fellowship (community) with one another and with God. Do you value connections with people that have come about because of your shared faith in Jesus? How can you keep your heart and life open to inviting others into this worldwide, centuries-old fellowship?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, sometimes I think of you as a figure in a painting or a statue. But witnesses like John said they actually knew you as a real man. Help me to grasp, and live out, the reality that you are still really with me today. Amen.



“I am in the Father and the Father is in me”

WEDNESDAY 12.16.20 John 14:7-11

The gospel of John began with language similar to that we read in 1 John: “No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is at the Father’s side, has made God known” (John 1:18). John did not invent such words about Jesus out of thin air. He recorded that Jesus himself, on the night before his crucifixion, told the disciples, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

- In some Bible stories, God sounds angry, brutal or unloving. Those stories may reflect human misunderstanding, shaped by ancient culture, or perhaps loving acts that only seem unloving to us because of our partial understanding. But in Jesus, who came to be “lifted up” on the cross so we can have eternal life, we find the definitive picture of God’s heart. Has knowing Jesus reshaped any of your images of God? How deeply are you able to trust the truth of Jesus’ saying?
- Jesus asked, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been with you all this time?” It is still possible to go to church for many years, to know many facts about the Bible and the church, and yet not know Jesus. For how much time have you been around Jesus and his message? In what ways do you wish to grow deeper in knowing Jesus, not just knowing about him?

Prayer: O Jesus, Revelation paints a picture of you knocking at the door of my heart, seeking leave to enter. This Advent season, I seek to open that door more widely to you than ever before, to commit myself to knowing you. Amen.

“The Son is the image of the invisible God”

THURSDAY 12.17.20 Colossians 1:13-20

The poetic words of verses 15-20 appear to be the lyrics to an early Christian hymn in honor of Jesus. Like other first-century Christian writing, these verses did not seek to explain the mystery that the human Jesus was “God with us.” They simply stated it as the reality that Paul and the early believers said was transforming their lives. “All the fullness of God” lived in him, said this joyous hymn. He truly was “God with us.”



- If we focus on the stories that usually lead the news, we might wonder what the final line of the Christ hymn is supposed to mean: “He brought peace through the blood of his cross.” Too often, in homes, companies or nations, we try to bring about peace by changing external conditions while leaving hearts unchanged. In what ways has Jesus brought peace into your life “from the inside out”? How have you seen that kind of peace transform alienation and pain into renewed relationships?
- Rector Dick Lucas wrote that “If [Col. 1:15-20] was a spiritual song along the lines of Colossians 3:16, it would make the teaching hymns of even a Charles Wesley appear lightweight.” Review the hymn’s lyrical lines, noting all of the qualities and actions of Jesus they name. Which of them mean the most to you? Which of them would you like to understand better?

Prayer: Lord God, you are so much grander and greater than I am—yet you want me to know you. Thank you for coming in Jesus to show me a clear image of what you are like. Amen.

God with us—in humble service and suffering

FRIDAY 12.18.20 Philippians 2:5-8

Jesus was not the kind of “king” people expected. He was not the kind of “savior” human wisdom wished for. And he was also not “God with us” in the way we might expect God to come. Today’s reading, another early Christian hymn, honored Jesus, but not by starting with his power or majesty. It praised his willingness to “empty himself” (the literal meaning of the Greek in 2:7) for us. Jesus did not demand divine prerogatives, but came to serve, and even to suffer.

- The *New International Reader’s Version* sums up well this hymn’s view of the depth of Jesus’ descent: “He came down to the lowest level. He obeyed God completely, even though it led to his death.” Pastor Bill Hybels wrote a book called *Descending into Greatness* based on this passage. Does that kind of “career path” (or “life path”) strike you as backward, or do you sense the power that it carries? How does this deepen your understanding of what it means to want to “be like Jesus”?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, the old hymn says you could have called 10,000 angels to take you off the cross. But you didn’t—you chose to save me rather than preserve your own comfort or dignity. Help me to have your attitude in my daily life. Amen.