

The background features a photograph of two children in a grassy field. One child, with long brown hair tied in a ponytail with a red ribbon, is in the foreground, wearing a light-colored dress. The other child is in the background, also in a light-colored dress, holding a red flower and looking upwards. The entire scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent reddish-brown filter and numerous white snowflake icons of various sizes and designs scattered across the frame.

Like a Child

ADVENT 2025



NORTH AMERICAN BAPTIST CONFERENCE

LIKE A CHILD

Advent is a season of looking back while looking forward. We remember the birth of Jesus – and all that led up to it and came after – which took place during this period when the people of Israel were waiting expectantly for the arrival (advent) of the Messiah. Today, we look ahead to the second coming, or arrival, of Christ, when he will usher in the fullness of his Kingdom and bring full restoration to all creation.

Both backward and forward. One eye on the past while the other remains here in the present pointed toward the future.

With this duality in mind, join with churches and individuals across the NAB as we step into the nativity story this year, looking both backward – seeing how God became like a child for our sake – and toward the present and future – examining how Jesus calls us to become like children so that we might enter into his Kingdom in preparation for his return.



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(All devotionals written by Michael Benson, NAB communications director.)



NORTH AMERICAN BAPTIST CONFERENCE

WEEK 1

November 30

Mutual Reciprocation of Posture

“Look! The virgin will conceive a child!
She will give birth to a son,
and they will call him Immanuel,
which means ‘God is with us.’” (Matthew 1:23 NLT)

When we read this verse in Matthew, referencing the prophet Isaiah, we often get so caught up with the virgin birth and the reality of “God with us” that we can gloss over a small detail with big implications. God entered into our world as fully human – and still fully God – but he did not need to arrive the way he did.

God *could* have sent his son as a fully realized adult, ready for ministry. Instead, Jesus came to us like a child, and all that entails. He needed to learn how to speak, how feed and dress himself, how to read and write. Growing up, he suffered hunger, thirst, and, as Shakespeare describes it, “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” that is to say, life and all it entails. In short, remarkable as he was, Jesus was still a child.

In turn, he calls for us to also be like children. In Matthew 18:3, he tells his disciples we are to turn from our sins and “become like little children” to enter into his Kingdom. This is an invitation to enter into a mutual reciprocation of posture. God doesn’t invite us anywhere he hasn’t already been. Even today, when God calls us into a neighborhood, a job, a relationship, or anywhere, really, he is inviting us into a space where he already resides. Even that phrase “called by God” illustrates that God is already there and is calling over to us, like one friend inviting another to sit at their table.

The question is: are we willing to be like children? Are we able to set aside our own egos, our preconceptions of who God is and how he works, and follow after his voice, like chicks following after a mother hen?

December 1

O My People

“O my people, what have I done to you?
What have I done to make you tired of me?
Answer me!
For I brought you out of Egypt
and redeemed you from slavery.
I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to help you.
Don’t you remember, my people,
how King Balak of Moab tried to have you cursed
and how Balaam son of Beor blessed you instead?
And remember your journey from Acacia Grove to Gilgal,
when I, the LORD, did everything I could
to teach you about my faithfulness.”

What can we bring to the LORD?
Should we bring him burnt offerings?
Should we bow before God Most High
with offerings of yearling calves?
Should we offer him thousands of rams
and ten thousand rivers of olive oil?
Should we sacrifice our firstborn children
to pay for our sins?

No, O people, the LORD has told you what is good,
and this is what he requires of you:
to do what is right, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:3–8 NLT)

Recently, when I was at the grocery store with my second-grade son, the first cart I selected had a terrible wobble I didn’t initially notice. We were barely ten feet inside the store when I decided I would need to swap it out for a new one. As we went back outside, my son took it

upon himself to select the new cart. After he made his choice of a non-wobbly cart we could use, I thanked him for his help. In response, he said, “I’m a good son because I pick good carts.” Quickly, I gently corrected him, saying, “You are a good son regardless of what kind of cart you pick.”

Like my son, too often, we get it into our heads that our identities are rooted in what we do. We try to find our value or worth in relation to other people, especially what we do for them. We are all guilty at some point of defining ourselves by our actions.

When we look at Micah 6, we are so often drawn to verse 8, the famous call “to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” Yet even this command – which is itself a correction of bad theology – can pull us in the wrong direction if we don’t focus first on our identity. We don’t do right, love mercy, and walk humbly so we can be adored by God and called his people. We are God’s people first and foremost, which is why God’s proclamation through Micah begins with the phrase “O my people.”

Even though Micah is excoriating the people of Judah on the Lord’s behalf for the way they have treated their God, they are, above everything else, still God’ people. They are not God’s people because they act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with him; rather, these actions and attitudes are expected because they are God’s people.

For those of us who are parents, our chief purpose as guardians of our children is to help them grow into the people God created them to be. We foster their interests, encourage their good habits and discourage the bad, correct them when they err, and, most of all, love them. Even when they are acting out their darkest impulses, they never stop being our children, and we never stop loving them. How much more is this true of God’s view toward us?

What areas of your life do you get your priorities backward, putting your identity in Christ secondary to the things you do for him? Spend at least ten minutes alone reflecting on how deeply God loves you, centering your identity in him.

December 2

Curious, Humble, Eager, and Trusting

This is a vision that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

In the last days, the mountain of the LORD's house
will be the highest of all—
the most important place on earth.
It will be raised above the other hills,
and people from all over the world will stream there to worship.
People from many nations will come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of Jacob's God.
There he will teach us his ways,
and we will walk in his paths.”
For the LORD's teaching will go out from Zion;
his word will go out from Jerusalem.
The LORD will mediate between nations
and will settle international disputes.
They will hammer their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will no longer fight against nation,
nor train for war anymore.

Come, descendants of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the LORD! (Isaiah 2:1–5 NLT)

“Can you teach me?”

This is such an innocent phrase, especially coming from the mouth of a child, but it carries so much weight beyond its four words. It is a phrase full of curiosity, humility, eagerness, and trust. When a child says this to you, there are only two proper responses: “I would love to,” or “I'm not sure how myself; why don't we learn together?”

Even though these exact words aren't present in today's passage from Isaiah 2, that same spirit is present. It is an attitude that is part of becoming like children, as Jesus calls us to. Isaiah tells of people from many nations eager and curious to seek out the mountain of the Lord's house so they might humbly and trustingly learn his ways – how to “walk in the light of the LORD.”

As adults, it can be all too easy to remain stuck in *our* ways, whether it is due to habits, both bad and good, or because we've found a way to accomplish a task that best suits our skills, or for a hundred other reasons. As helpful as it is to create these mental shortcuts to help us move through life more efficiently or effectively, they can also blind us to differing possibilities or new understandings. They can prevent us from being open enough to learn God's ways, or even the ways of other members of God's family.

What would it look like if we as a people of God were more curious, humble, eager to learn, and trusting of our Heavenly Father and his children? Are we able to say to the Holy Spirit, or even to our brothers or sisters in Christ, “Can you teach me?”

December 3

Divine Imagination

When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah. He was a member of the priestly order of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old.

One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying.

While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly."

Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years."

Then the angel said, "I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news! But now, since you didn't believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary, wondering why he was taking so long. When he finally did come out, he couldn't speak to them. Then they realized from his gestures and his silence that he must have seen a vision in the sanctuary.

When Zechariah's week of service in the Temple was over, he returned home. Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months. "How kind the Lord is!" she exclaimed. "He has taken away my disgrace of having no children." (Luke 1:5–25 NLT)

As a priest, Zechariah would have been well-versed in the history and stories of his people found in the Pentateuch, particularly the history of Abraham, the chief patriarch of the Jews. One of the most well-known stories from his life involves the birth of his son, Isaac. The Lord came to Abraham in the guise of three men. As they were eating a meal provided by Abraham, the Lord told him that within the next year Sarah will have borne a son, even though they were both quite old, and Sarah was far past child-bearing age. In response to this, the eavesdropping Sarah laughed, to which "the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh? Why did she say, "Can an old woman like me have a baby?" Is anything too hard for the Lord?'" (Genesis 18:13–14).

Zechariah knew this story; it is one of the foundational points in Abraham's journey. Yet, when an angel came to him to tell of his own son who would be born in the next year, he echoes Sarah's questioning: "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years" (Luke 1:18).

While this response displays Zechariah's lack of faith, it also shows off another lack: divine imagination.

Zechariah simply couldn't imagine God would work in this way, even though he had done so in the past. He couldn't imagine the news of his impending fatherhood was true, even though it was delivered by an angel of the Lord. He couldn't imagine his son would be the one to make the way for the coming of the Lord, even though the Jewish people had been waiting for the Messiah's arrival for hundreds of years.

Zechariah lacked divine imagination – he forgot there is nothing too hard for the Lord and there is no end to the creative ways in which God makes himself known in our world or invites us to join him.

Children so often spend large portions of their lives with imagination as the central aspect to their play; it even places a big role in helping them learn new concepts and solve problems in innovative ways. Yet, somewhere along the line, too many of us have let the muscle of our imagination atrophy or at least weaken.

Here are some ways you can strengthen your imagination, allowing yourself to be open to new ways of thinking and opening your eyes to the creative ways God works in our world so you might join him:

- Spend some time in prayer, not with any particular agenda but just to be in God's presence.
- Let your mind wander. Let yourself be bored instead of filling every moment with a podcast, a screen, or a book.
- Read stories. Imagine yourself as one of the characters.
- Find a creative outlet. Coloring, drawing, painting, woodworking, songwriting, baking – anything that results in something you created or contributed to. You need not be good at it; all you need to do is enjoy the process.

Above all, don't forget we follow a creative God who painted all creation into existence and formed us in his image out of soil; when we take part in creative acts – even when we use our imagination – we are reflecting an aspect of our Creator God that brings him glory.

December 4

Blind

The people who walk in darkness
will see a great light.
For those who live in a land of deep darkness,
a light will shine.
You will enlarge the nation of Israel,
and its people will rejoice.
They will rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest
and like warriors dividing the plunder.
For you will break the yoke of their slavery
and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders.
You will break the oppressor's rod,
just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian.
The boots of the warrior
and the uniforms bloodstained by war
will all be burned.
They will be fuel for the fire. (Isaiah 9:2–5 NLT)

Ever wonder what it's like being blind?

Those who are blind – not just legally blind, but without any sight whatsoever – can't really describe what they "see" because their eyes don't work. The best way the rest of us can get a glimpse of how blindness is understood by blind people is by closing just one of our eyes. Rather than seeing the back of our own eyelids or even glimpses of light peaking through, the input from our open eye nullifies any input from our closed eye.

You cannot see anything out of that closed eye; even more, you are also ignorant of even the small bits of information you might have acquired were both eyes closed. Whatever you can "see" with your closed eye is the same thing a blind person sees. It's not a world of blackness; it's a world without any visual input whatsoever, one where you aren't even aware of what you're missing.

When Isaiah talks about a “people who walk in darkness,” which is to say all of humanity prior to Christ, we sometimes forget they are people who walk in a darkness they didn’t even know they were living in. They are like blind people who have never received any kind of visual input into their brains. When the “great light” of Jesus shined on their dark world, it illuminated everything, allowing them to see what was before unseeable. And what was unseeable, according to this passage from Isaiah, was a world free of strife, people free of the yoke of slavery, free of the oppressor’s rod, free of war.

Such is the power of the Gospel that through Christ – his birth, life, teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension – we can know the end of tribalism, hate, and persecution.

We would be good to remember that it is not just the people prior to Christ who walked in darkness. This is true about us as well. And even after we see the light, and choose to follow Jesus and his way, the end of such things is not automatic. The sins that so easily entangle still take up residence in our hearts. If we are to become like children, humbly allow God to guide the daily steps of our lives, we must not fall back into our old way of living.

What are you doing today, not just in your heart but through your actions, that helps push back against the oppression and tribalism so prevalent in our world?

“But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see!” (John 13:25).

December 5

Given to Us

For a child is born to us,
a son is given to us.
The government will rest on his shoulders.
And he will be called:
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His government and its peace
will never end.
He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David
for all eternity.
The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies
will make this happen! (Isaiah 9:6-7 NLT)

When I was younger, we lived roughly 2,000 miles away from one set of grandparents. This meant it was a very rare holiday when we could celebrate with them in person. To compensate for this physical lack of presence – and also likely due to a desire on their part to use the new-at-the-time technology of home video cameras – my parents would record my siblings and me unwrapping our gifts from our grandparents so they could mail them the tape to watch. It was the nearest thing the mid-nineties had to video calls.

One Christmas, when the hints of puberty were still nowhere in sight, the gift I received from my California grandparents was an electric razor.

My face went from excitement to crestfallen in the span of a breath as I finished unwrapping the device I would still be years away from needing. I'm certain the camera on its tripod, ready to catch all the action, did its job well, much to the chagrin of my mom. She immediately did her best to get me to see the great boon this razor would be any day now, but she was still too late to temper my reaction.

Yesterday, we looked at the verses leading up to this passage, where Isaiah writes about a people who walked in darkness but will see a great light, where God will bring about a drastic

reworking of the world, changing the power structures in place so the oppressor's rods are broken and there is no longer any need for the accoutrements of war (Isaiah 9:2–5).

In today's passage, Isaiah tells us how that comes to be: a child, born to us; a son given freely to us.

Rather than ending war through force or putting an end to oppression through a flexing of legal power, God brings about a new world order through the birth of a child. The framework for this government that will never end was set in place with the birth of Jesus.

In a method typical of the upside nature of the Kingdom of God – and nonsensical everywhere else – the Creator himself needed to become a child, born of flesh and bone yet still fully divine. This isn't to say the work was complete once the Little Drummer Boy finished his music solo next to the manger, but without Christmas morning, there is no Easter Sunday, no resurrection, no end to death, and no beginning of the new creation.

This was not a passive birth that just “happened.” As Isaiah tells us, this child – Jesus – was “born to us” and “given to us.” This is the story of the Christ child, but it is also *our* story. If Jesus is the gift, we are the recipients.

And this gift isn't always one we want, even if it is one we need. Jesus doesn't always do things the way we want to. After all, his upside-down Kingdom is unlike any other; under Jesus's rule, “Those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last” (Matthew 20:16). Even the disciples were eager for a political revolution when it was an entirely different kind of revolution Jesus was establishing.

Jesus is our gift, not just that day in Bethlehem, or even just at Christmastime. Every day, our God gives himself to us. How will you receive him today? Is it with excitement and eagerness for how he will guide and direct you today? Or is it more akin to annoyance at disruptions to your schedule or the way you like to do things?

December 6

Children Of

The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. (John 1:9–13 NLT)

What does it mean to be a “child of”?

To be a “child of” is to point to your lineage or to something that defines you.

We see this baked into many of our surnames, none more evident than in Iceland. Rather than maintaining a common surname amongst all family members, your last name is based on your parent and your gender. This means the child of Olaf would be either Olafsson (“Olaf’s son”) or Olafsdóttir (“Olaf’s daughter”). While this is one method of noting lineage through naming conventions, most of us can know something of our ancestors based on our name: to be a Richardson is to know you descend from a Richard, just like being a Smith means you come from a line of blacksmiths or other type of metallurgists.

In the first century when John was written – and continuing through today – Jewish people often refer to themselves as the descendants of Abraham. Another way to say this is they are children of Abraham, generations upon generations removed, of course. In John 1:9–13, there is a subtle subversion taking place regarding this lineage. John describes Jesus as rejected by his own people – the children of Abraham – and goes on to say any who believe and accept Jesus are given the right to become children of God.

There is another piece to being a “child of” – it is also a descriptor of something that defines you. You can be a child of the '80s (the era you were born), a child of war (the kind of life you've lived), a child of Bonhoeffer (the school of thought or theology you follow), and a thousand others. To be a “child of” something is often seen as a defining aspect of who you are as a person. When John writes that we have “the right to become children of God,” he is

not just talking about being grafted into a new family; he is describing a new way of living, a rebirth that should be the defining aspect of who we are as people.

What are you a “child of”? Are you living as a child of Abraham, choosing to live under the law, or are you living as a child of God, choosing to live under grace? How does this choice affect your actions – the things you say, the way you treat people, the kinds of things you share online?

WEEK 2

December 7

Resurrection Tree

Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—
yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.
And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
He will delight in obeying the LORD.
He will not judge by appearance
nor make a decision based on hearsay.
He will give justice to the poor
and make fair decisions for the exploited.
The earth will shake at the force of his word,
and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked.
He will wear righteousness like a belt
and truth like an undergarment.

In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together;
the leopard will lie down with the baby goat.
The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion,
and a little child will lead them all.
The cow will graze near the bear.
The cub and the calf will lie down together.
The lion will eat hay like a cow.
The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra.
Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without
harm.
Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,
for as the waters fill the sea,
so the earth will be filled with people who know the LORD.



In that day the heir to David's throne
will be a banner of salvation to all the world.
The nations will rally to him,
and the land where he lives will be a glorious place. (Isaiah 11:1–10
NLT)

In his book *Mercy Streets*, Taylor Field shares a story about a tree in the meager backyard of their ground floor tenement apartment. He and his wife had taken it from where it was growing in a fence – it was a volunteer plant, what some might call a weed – and transplanted it into their yard. After a time, it grew larger and taller and stronger, though it was still young, and when it was without leaves it looked more like a large stick poking out of the ground than it did a tree. One winter day, when a utility employee was in the backyard for some work being done, he broke the tree in two as part of a joke with his coworker.

Field shares how he and his wife, Susan, were furious at the cavalier disregard for this tree that had grown to mean so much to them; in response, the utility company agreed to pay \$600 to replace it with a tree of the couple's choosing. Field writes, "Our grief was diverted by the excitement of something new and expensive."

Then Easter morning arrived; Field looked out his back window and saw a green sprout sticking out of the stump they had presumed to be dead. He writes, "'Let's forget the fancy tree,' I told Susan. 'This tree is far more important. It is a resurrection tree.' Now our tree is three times as tall as I am, with a gnarled place where it was broken off, but strong and tall."

By the first century, the stump of David's family was not dead and barren, but it was no longer a source of powerful or great leaders – until a new shoot appeared, a new Branch by the name of Jesus. But this new Branch, this child of David's line, would not be like anything seen before.

Like with David, the Spirit of the Lord would rest upon Jesus, but it would not be to help him conquer Philistines; he would conquer death.

He would not calm the tormented spirit of the king; he would calm the storm and bring peace – *shalom* – to our world.

Jesus would not be a king of Israel; he is the King over all kings and Lord over all lords.

Jesus is our resurrection tree; he brings life and conquers death. Imagine being witness to this new life sprouting green and strong from the stump of an old tree.

While none of us were present for the birth of the new Branch in Bethlehem, all of us who profess faith in Jesus and follow after him have experienced his new life sprouting in our own souls.

Take time to reflect on this new life in Christ you see sprouting and growing strong in your soul. Think back on the years past as well, taking note of the ways the Spirit has seeded your life with his resurrection power, bringing life where there once was only death.

December 8

Childlike Sense of Fairness

Give your love of justice to the king, O God,
and righteousness to the king's son.

Help him judge your people in the right way;
let the poor always be treated fairly.

May the mountains yield prosperity for all,
and may the hills be fruitful.

Help him to defend the poor,
to rescue the children of the needy,
and to crush their oppressors.

May they fear you as long as the sun shines,
as long as the moon remains in the sky.
Yes, forever!

May the king's rule be refreshing like spring rain on freshly cut grass,
like the showers that water the earth.

May all the godly flourish during his reign.

May there be abundant prosperity until the moon is no more.

[. . .]

Praise the LORD God, the God of Israel,
who alone does such wonderful things.

Praise his glorious name forever!

Let the whole earth be filled with his glory.
Amen and amen! (Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19 NLT)

When it comes to ideas of what is fair, kids are often seen as inherently selfish. A ten-year study published in *Scientific American* in 2017 tells a different story.¹

Psychologists at the University of Michigan performed a number of tests with children to help them gauge their sense of fairness. In one, they paired two children who did not know each other and gave one a single piece of candy and the other four pieces. They then had one of the children either accept this unfair allocation or reject it. If they rejected it, neither child would get any candy, but if they accepted it, both would receive their treats, but one would get four times as many. Frequently, the decider would choose to reject the unfair allotment and lose out on receiving any candy rather than allow one of them to receive less.

There are certainly times when kids are so focused on getting something they want that they forget about others who might be involved, but the researchers say children “show remarkable sophistication not just in their understanding of and conformity to norms of fairness but also in their ability to enforce fairness in others and to flexibly tune fairness to different situations.”

Kids notice injustice more often than we give them credit for, and they are often willing to speak up when they notice it. Children have eyes unfiltered by years of ignoring “the way things are.”

Kids are often quicker to see the unhoused man living on the street or notice their friend who never comes to school with lunch. Not only that, but they also want to know how to fix the problem.

We all want to live in a society where our leaders have a love of justice and are people of righteousness, but rarely do we. Though we desire leaders who “defend the poor” and “rescue the children of the needy,” all of us still hold responsibility to have eyes that see the injustices around us and do something about them. “Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you” (James 1:27).

How has your sense of justice been shaped by your experiences as a kid? Do you still have your childlike sense of fairness? Invite the Holy Spirit to give you eyes to see injustices that break his heart and the motivation to follow his lead in acting against them.

¹ Katherine McAuliffe, Peter R. Blake, and Felix Warneken, “Do Kids Have a Fundamental Sense of Fairness?,” *Scientific American*, August 23, 2017, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/observations/do-kids-have-a-fundamental-sense-of-fairness/>.

December 9

Yellow and Blue

Such things were written in the Scriptures long ago to teach us. And the Scriptures give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God's promises to be fulfilled.

May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory. Remember that Christ came as a servant to the Jews to show that God is true to the promises he made to their ancestors. He also came so that the Gentiles might give glory to God for his mercies to them. That is what the psalmist meant when he wrote:

“For this, I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing praises to your name.”

And in another place it is written,

“Rejoice with his people,
you Gentiles.”

And yet again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles.
Praise him, all you people of the earth.”

And in another place Isaiah said,

“The heir to David's throne will come,
and he will rule over the Gentiles.
They will place their hope on him.”



I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:4–13 NLT)

I recently heard about a professor at a seminary who starts off his class at the beginning of the semester by asking the students to look around the room to find all the yellow objects. After they spend a few minutes scanning the room, the professor tells them to close their eyes. He then asks them to name all the *blue* objects in the room.

The goal of this exercise isn't to trip up the students; the professor is trying to illustrate a point about God that so many of us spend our lives learning and relearning.

Our brains are built for pattern recognition. This means every story about God at work in the world we've read in a book, listened to in a sermon, experienced, and heard from others builds a framework around which we expect God to work in the future. This means when we come upon similar experiences or certain kinds of people, we pay special attention to them, expecting to see God at work yet again.

But all that time spent looking at one thing causes us to miss out on a whole host of other areas where God is actively at work. We're too busy looking for the yellow that we never notice the blue right in front of us.

Before Jesus arrived on the scene as a newborn in a manger, the people of Israel expected God would work *in* them, *through* them, and *for* them, just as he had in generations past. They were expecting a Messiah who would build a Jewish empire. Yet God was not concerned with only saving the Jews; God was working *in* and *through* them in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but it was no longer *for* them alone.

During Jesus's years of ministry, as well as in the years short after his ascension, most of his disciples and followers saw Jesus as the savior of the Jews. But as the apostles and others began retelling the story of Jesus, and began receiving visions from God about what is clean and unclean, like Simon Peter in Acts 10–11, they also began to realize the death and resurrection of Jesus was not just for Jews; this was salvation for the entire world. "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you" (Galatians 3:28–29).

The disciples were so busy during the years of Jesus's ministry paying attention to yellow – God at work *in, through,* and *for* the Jews, just like he had throughout history – they didn't notice the blue right in front of them – God at work *for* the whole world. The plan from the beginning was always for the benefit of the whole of creation, not just a single people group.

Think back on your own experiences seeing God work in your life. What are the people, situations, and ways he has worked through in your life, either for you or for the benefit of others? Take a moment to celebrate all God has done, but then spend a few minutes inviting the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to the other ways God might want to work through your life today. Pray for eyes that are open to the possibilities that you might otherwise overlook.



December 10

Lineage

In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said,

“He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming!
Clear the road for him!’”

John’s clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey. People from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to watch him baptize, he denounced them. “You brood of snakes!” he exclaimed. “Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. Even now the ax of God’s judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.”
(Matthew 3:1–12 NLT)

Throughout the Bible, we see whole chapters detailing the lineages of kings and patriarchs. Even in passing, we read how important familial lines are to the Israelites throughout their history: Isaiah is described as the “son of Amoz,” Hosea is “son of Beerī,” Ezekiel is “son of Buzi,” and on and on it goes.

Throughout their history, familial lineage for the Jewish people is part of the story of who they are, both as a people and as individuals. While this is true of many people groups the world over, for the Jews, their family determined what land was theirs to inherit, if they could serve in the Levitical priesthood, and even pointed toward the coming Messiah, as they knew he would descend from the line of David.

But then a strange thing happens when John shows up. He rails against the Jewish leaders for trusting in their lineage to save them. For generations upon generations, this is exactly what they were taught: as descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they were a chosen people, blessed above all other nations. Yet now John was denouncing this viewpoint as false, that the true children of Abraham are those who produce good fruit.

In the words of Paul, “All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, ‘Abba, Father’” (Romans 8:14–15).

When we produce good fruit – when we allow the Spirit to direct our actions and we deny our selfish nature – we are setting ourselves apart from the world around us. In essence, following the way of Jesus, choosing each day to live as he would were he in our place, results in us showing off our lineage as children of God. To adapt a phrase we so often use in the NAB, when we act as servants of the Kingdom of God, we become signs and foretastes of that Kingdom in the here and now.

In what ways are you becoming a sign, servant, and foretaste of the Kingdom of God in your daily life? Where are you missing the mark? Invite the Holy Spirit to illuminate your heart and your actions from the past day or two so you might examine yourself to see what kind of fruit you are producing and in what areas you still need to grow in your lineage as a child of God.

December 11

Agents of Peace

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
are only a small village among all the people of Judah.
Yet a ruler of Israel,
whose origins are in the distant past,
will come from you on my behalf.
The people of Israel will be abandoned to their enemies
until the woman in labor gives birth.
Then at last his fellow countrymen
will return from exile to their own land.
And he will stand to lead his flock with the LORD's strength,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
Then his people will live there undisturbed,
for he will be highly honored around the world.
And he will be the source of peace. (Micah 5:2–5 NLT)

In a recent musing on his semi-regular blog, David Fitch reminisces about the early days of the missional church movement. In an effort to be forces for good in their communities, churches started focusing more and more on ways they could care for their neighbors through meeting tangible needs. Yet, per Fitch, rather than empower their congregations to be missional in their everyday lives, many of these churches instead tacked on “missional” events or programs to what they were already doing.

This misapplication of missional theology often manifests in two ways: events hosted at the church for people to come to – like free car maintenance workshops in the parking lot – or groups of people sent out into the neighborhood – such as joining in a Habit for Humanity home build.

The first type of event perpetuates church as a good to be consumed; people travel to the location, receive the service or good, then go home, largely unchanged by the experience.

The second type of “missional” event is closer to the mark but still misses. It is meeting people where they are, but it still treats them like a task to be checked off a list rather than individuals imprinted with the image of God.

As Fitch notes, God can work through these efforts, and through them there is good being done and people coming to faith, but there is a better way to announce the in-breaking of the Kingdom in our neighborhoods. Fitch writes, “God works to transform people’s lives when we join with God in people’s lives.”

One of the key aspects of missional theology is practicing an incarnational lifestyle. This means we need to stick around beyond the ministry hours allocated for serving others. We are not called to parachute into the middle of a neighborhood and leave once the assigned task is complete; if we want to truly follow in the footsteps of our Savior, we must become an active part of the community.

Eugene Peterson describes the incarnation this way: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14 MSG).

When Micah 5 describes the Messiah as leading his people home from their exile, the picture is of a leader standing in their midst, showing them the way. And the end result is “he will be the source of peace.”

While we cannot be the source of peace for our neighbors and neighborhoods, we can still be agents working on his behalf. But first we must model our lives after the one who “gave up his divine privileges” and “took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being” (Philippians 2:7 NLT).

What are some ways you can practice an incarnational lifestyle where you are? God has placed you in your neighborhood for a reason; how can you be an agent of peace by joining with God in people’s lives?

December 12

Tilted Aslant

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!”

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!”

Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.”

The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What’s more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For the word of God will never fail.”

Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” And then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26–38 NLT)

One of C. S. Lewis’s lesser-known series of books is a space trilogy, fantasy books masquerading as sci-fi. In the third book, *That Hideous Strength*, one of the characters, Jane, begins to feel something otherworldly approaching the room she is in. “Something intolerably big [. . .] was pressing on her, was approaching, was almost in the room. [. . .] The whole room was a tiny place, a mouse’s hole, and it seemed to her to be tilted aslant—as though the insupportable mass and splendour of this formless hugeness, in approaching, had knocked it askew.”

This “something” in the story is an *eldil*, a creature akin to an angel within Lewis’s trilogy. Jane, having never been in the presence of an *eldil* before, feels her entire world knocked askew. Even though everything remains as it was – nothing actually shrinks or grows like Alice in her *Wonderland* – Jane’s perception of the room has become smaller and knocked off its axis. It’s as if the very weight of space has been bent around the *eldil*, like the space around a black hole, and the immensity of their presence makes everything and everyone seem the size of a mouse by comparison. Even her perception of the world in which the room exists has shifted; no longer is the world level and calm. In this moment, she is catching a small glimpse of what it means to live on a spinning orb flying through the heavens, resting on its axis at a slant.

I imagine this was something like what Mary felt that day the angel Gabriel visited her. As she was going about her day, a creature unlike any she’d ever seen suddenly arrived in the same space she was occupying, the weight of the presence of this being seemingly bending space and time, allowing Mary to feel her own smallness in the shadow of the agelessness of the messenger in front of her.

Then the angel tells her the reason for his visit.

Learning of the important role she would play in the history of her people – in the story of all creation – some might have felt themselves grow larger; others might have broken down and felt utterly helpless. But, understanding the weight of the role bestowed upon her, Mary humbly recognizes her place in the story. When the angel knocks her entire world askew, rather than attempt to right it, she shifts her perspective to one that centers this new reality.

For anyone who follows the way of Jesus long enough, this feeling of being knocked askew should be somewhat familiar. None of us has had our world “tilted aslant” as much as Mary has, so how much more should our reaction mirror hers: “I am the Lord’s servant.”

When your plans don’t go your way – whether it’s as massive an event as God redirecting the next decade of your life or as simple as a grain of sand in the gears of your perfectly ordered schedule – how do you react? Are you so focused on the sadness of what could have been or the anger at what was lost that you are unable to see the beauty of what God is crafting in your soul and in his plans for your life? Find ways to practice reacting as Mary did today.

December 13

A Parent's Voice

A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said." (Luke 1:39–45 NLT)

Babies recognize their mother's voice. Pretty much before they know anything else, they know that.

Around the eighteenth week, a baby growing in their mother's womb gains the ability to hear. At first, the only sounds they can hear are those associated with their mother's body: stomach gurgles, heartbeat, coughs and sneezes, and other noises our bodies are constantly making but we hardly notice. To the unborn child, this is their entire world.

After another two months or so, as the baby's ears continue to develop, along with the rest of their body, they begin to not only hear and recognize voices, they start to respond to them. Studies have shown that around weeks 25 to 30, the baby's heartbeat increases when they hear their mother's voice. Whether the mom is reading aloud to their child or simply chatting on the phone, hearing their mother's voice excites them. And this is true of other voices; babies also learn to recognize voices they hear often, such as those of their father or siblings.

When Mary arrived at the house of Elizabeth and Zechariah – just a few days after the angel Gabriel shared with her the good news of her pregnancy and the Messiah who would grow inside her – the baby in Elizabeth's womb not only recognized Mary's voice, he responded by jumping for joy – as much as a baby can in their confined space.

At this point, Mary might not even register as pregnant on a modern drugstore pregnancy test. Yet John, the unborn child who would come to be the forerunner of Jesus, preparing the

way for the Messiah, was already doing his job announcing the Christ among us. He already recognized the voice of the one blessed by God to conceive and give birth to the Savior of all creation.

Are you this receptive to the voice of your Father in Heaven when he speaks to you? Do you, like the small child growing in their mother's womb or the infant lying next to their parents, get excited when you hear his voice saying your name? Or have you forgotten what it sounds like when God is trying to get your attention?

Regardless of how receptive you are to the Holy Spirit speaking into your life, spend at least ten minutes today in a quiet place, away from others, just listening for the voice of your Father in Heaven. When you find your mind wandering to all the projects and distractions of the day, acknowledge that your mind has wandered and redirect your thoughts back to God. It might help to pray a short, repeated prayer alongside your inward and outward breaths, something to serve as a lightning rod for your attention without distracting you from the task of listening for God's voice; these breath prayers can be as simple as a short verse – "The LORD is my shepherd; I have all I need" (Psalm 23:1) – or a phrase – "Father, Son, and Spirit, your child is listening."

You might not hear God speak to you during those ten minutes, but simply the practice of listening helps train your heart and soul to quiet your mind, allowing you to notice when he does speak.

May we all get to a place where we are like John, jumping for joy to be in the presence of our Savior, to hear him speak our name.

WEEK 3

December 14

Highway of Holiness

Even the wilderness and desert will be glad in those days.

The wasteland will rejoice and blossom with spring crocuses.
Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers
and singing and joy!

The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon,
as lovely as Mount Carmel or the plain of Sharon.

There the LORD will display his glory,
the splendor of our God.

With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands,
and encourage those who have weak knees.

Say to those with fearful hearts,

“Be strong, and do not fear,
for your God is coming to destroy your enemies.
He is coming to save you.”

And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind
and unplug the ears of the deaf.

The lame will leap like a deer,
and those who cannot speak will sing for joy!

Springs will gush forth in the wilderness,
and streams will water the wasteland.

The parched ground will become a pool,
and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land.

Marsh grass and reeds and rushes will flourish
where desert jackals once lived.

And a great road will go through that once deserted land.

It will be named the Highway of Holiness.

Evil-minded people will never travel on it.

It will be only for those who walk in God’s ways;

fools will never walk there.
Lions will not lurk along its course,
nor any other ferocious beasts.
There will be no other dangers.
Only the redeemed will walk on it.
Those who have been ransomed by the LORD will return.
They will enter Jerusalem singing,
crowned with everlasting joy.
Sorrow and mourning will disappear,
and they will be filled with joy and gladness. (Isaiah 35:1–10 NLT)

Every parent has two chief roles: teacher and guardian. Today, let us focus on the former role. (We'll touch on the latter role tomorrow.)

Every child comes into this world as a helpless bundle. Even most creatures in the animal kingdom can at least walk, swim, or waddle around on their own shortly after birth, but we humans are entirely uneducated in the art of anything beyond eating, pooping, and crying when we first arrive.

This is why the role of a parent as an instructor, teacher, and guide is so crucial. Parents are the source of information for pretty much everything a child learns those early years – from the simplest lessons of life, such as how to get dressed or make a sandwich, to the more complicated, like what it means to be a good friend and who God is and how our lives should be living worship services dedicated to him.

One of the most crucial aspect of parental instruction is teaching the difference between right and wrong. As Proverbs 22:6 says, “Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it.”

As every good parent knows, we cannot prevent the consequences of our child's own poor choices from impacting their lives, just as we cannot wrap our children in bubble wrap to prevent scrapes and bruises. Ultimately, our best hope is that they choose the right more and more often and learn from their painful mistakes and failures.

The Highway of Holiness Isaiah writes about is a road God has carved where we will be safe from evil people and dangers, but that says nothing about the gutters on either side or the

fields running parallel to the highway. As travelers along this road, it is up to us to stay on the path, to not allow ourselves to be pulled aside.

In John Bunyan's classic *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian is traveling from his former home in the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, meeting friends and trials along the way. During one stint of his journey, he and a companion come upon By-path Meadow running parallel to the road they are on. Being much more agreeable to walk on, they divert from the road proper, which ultimately leads to being captured by Giant Despair and suffering consequences they could have otherwise avoided had they kept to the highway.

Too often we fall for the same temptation as Christian and his companion and find ourselves diverted from the Highway of Holiness. Consider the last time you strayed from the way of righteousness, whether for a day or an extended period. Ask our Father in Heaven to guide your feet as you walk this path today, tomorrow, and in the days and weeks to come, remembering that you are one of his ransomed one. May we not stray as we make our way to his holy city, singing with everlasting joy.

December 15

Little Emulators

But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their helper,
whose hope is in the LORD their God.

He made heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them.

He keeps every promise forever.

He gives justice to the oppressed
and food to the hungry.

The LORD frees the prisoners.

The LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are weighed down.

The LORD loves the godly.

The LORD protects the foreigners among us.

He cares for the orphans and widows,
but he frustrates the plans of the wicked.

The LORD will reign forever.

He will be your God, O Jerusalem, throughout the generations.

Praise the LORD! (Psalm 146:5–10 NLT)

It seems to be a stage of life every child goes through without fail: soon after they learn to walk, they find mom or dad's shoes and slip their tiny feet into them. Soon, they are tripping themselves up on the overly large shoes as they wander around the house, but mom and dad don't mind the thievery; to them, this is yet another cute act cementing their child as the most darling kid to have ever existed, at least in that moment.

Despite most parents focusing so much on teaching through instruction, children learn most through copying the actions of their parents.

When it comes to our Heavenly Father, we will never fail to have his words spoken over our lives, through the Bible and through the ongoing instruction of the Holy Spirit. But we also learn by watching how God acts, and so often when he acts it is as a guardian, or protector.

To be a guardian is to protect others from danger. Much of this is proactive work. As a parent, this means caring for the needs of their child, such as providing food, shelter, and clothing. But there are also times when a guardian must be reactive, responding to the unexpected dangers or injustices that arise.

Likewise, our Father in heaven gave us life and provides all we need to make our way in the world, but he is not a deadbeat dad who sets us loose with little or no oversight. He is actively rooting for us and caring for us, looking over our lives to ensure we have what we need to flourish in his Kingdom and are protected from harm.

Today's reading shows us both sides of this guardian role in God's protection of his children. In verse 6, the psalmist points out that everything we need for this life was made by God: "He made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them." The psalm quickly transitions to a handful of ways God is reactive, caring for our needs as they arise: He provides justice for the oppressed, food to the hungry, freedom for prisoners, sight to the blind, and relief for the overburdened. He even "protects the foreigners among us," "cares for the widows and orphans," and "frustrates the plans of the wicked."

God is a good Father who cares for his children and protects them – protects us. And as his children, it is on us to follow in his example. Are we actively paying attention to what our Father does and attempting to copy him? Do we emulate his acts to the best of our ability?

To be a Christian is to be a "little Christ." The name we have taken for ourselves is evidence that we are seeking to be little emulators, following in the footsteps of our Savior. We may only be as toddlers stumbling along as we attempt to wear our Father's shoes, but it is still so very important we attempt to emulate him in our everyday lives.

How are you emulating God today? How are you serving as a guardian for the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoners, the blind, the overburdened, the foreigners, and the widows and orphans?

December 16

Parental Ideal

“Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.
How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!
For he took notice of his lowly servant girl,
and from now on all generations will call me blessed.
For the Mighty One is holy,
and he has done great things for me.
He shows mercy from generation to generation
to all who fear him.
His mighty arm has done tremendous things!
He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.
He has brought down princes from their thrones
and exalted the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away with empty hands.
He has helped his servant Israel
and remembered to be merciful.
For he made this promise to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his children forever.” (Luke 1:46b–55 NLT)

There is a special age in the life of every child where they see the skill level, intelligence, and strength of their parents as unmatched. Their dad is as strong as a super hero, their mom makes cookies better than any bakery, and both of them can fix anything.

Yet, at some point the reality of who their parents actually are becomes apparent, usually due to some failure. It's inevitable. Maybe a back is thrown out, cookies are accidentally burnt, or a toy cannot be fixed. Ultimately, the result is the same: no longer does their child see the parents as the Platonic ideal. They learn that nobody is perfect.

But there is one parent who is perfect. God the Father is unfailing, all powerful, and incorruptible. As Joshua tells the people of Israel, “Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD will personally go ahead of you. He will be with you; he will neither fail you nor abandon you” (Deuteronomy 31:8). God – Immanuel – is always with us, and he will never let us down.

Luke 1:46–55 could easily be read as a child bragging about how great their parent is, but unlike a first grader overhyping his dad on the school playground, every accolade Mary extolls upon her Father is true.

All too often, the parental example we see in those who raised us become the glasses through which we see other parents, including our Heavenly Father. Even those of us who grew up with the absolute best parents in the world – complete with mugs to prove it – they are still human and full of flaws and faults. If we aren't careful, these faults can easily creep into how we view God the Father.

When we read passages like this psalm from Mary, it's crucial that we hold onto two thoughts simultaneously: this description is concerning a specific people group in a specific point in time and should not necessarily be applied broadly to all people groups across all time, *and* this absolutely has an impact on our lives if we allow it.

There is a specific historicity that we must not ignore when reading Scripture. To ignore the context of any given passage is akin to wielding a hammer by holding it near the top: the weight that gives it its strength is negated, leaving it sterile and powerless. Yet so much of Scripture is still applicable to us, even when – or especially when – taken in the broader context.

In the case of this passage, where Mary describes all God has done and continues to do, we can use it to shape our understanding of who he is, even today. Her description of a God who cares for the lowly and is merciful is the Platonic ideal, the measuring stick by which all other parents – and people in general – are to be measured. Obviously none of us can live up to that ideal, but just because we aren't perfect doesn't mean we shouldn't still try to follow our Father's example.

How have your parents – for good or ill – shaped your understanding of God? How has God shaped your view of what it means to be a parent?

December 17

The Longest Day

Dear brothers and sisters, be patient as you wait for the Lord's return. Consider the farmers who patiently wait for the rains in the fall and in the spring. They eagerly look for the valuable harvest to ripen. You, too, must be patient. Take courage, for the coming of the Lord is near.

Don't grumble about each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. For look—the Judge is standing at the door!

For examples of patience in suffering, dear brothers and sisters, look at the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. (James 5:7–10 NLT)

Ask any elementary student when the longest day of the year takes place, and they might say it's the last full day of school before summer vacation. But in terms of contrasts between felt reality and the actual path of the sun across the sky, there is no competing with the last day of school before Christmas break.

Christmas Eve is officially one week away. For any kid who has been staring at the pile of presents under the tree, this next week will be interminable. There is a reason so many of us keep track of how many days until Christmas with Advent calendars full of chocolate or chains of colorful paper: being able to see how many days are left to go makes the waiting so much easier.

This season of Advent is one of looking back while looking ahead. We remember the birth of Jesus – and all that led up to and came after it – which took place during this period when the people of Israel were waiting expectantly for the arrival (advent) of the Messiah. Today, we look ahead to the second coming (advent) of Christ, when he will usher in the fullness of his Kingdom and bring full restoration to all creation.

James reminds us that though the waiting is hard, it is our duty to be patient. It would certainly be easier if we had some cosmic construction-paper chain to count down the days. “However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows” (Mark 13:32).

How do you wait patiently when the day of arrival is unknown? By focusing on the day at hand.

There is a famous study performed in 1970 where kids are given the option of eating a single marshmallow right then or getting two marshmallows if they are able to wait until the researcher returns, usually a wait of fifteen minutes. Over the years, this study has been replicated a number of times, with slight variations on the results each time. One thing that remained consistent, though, is the tactic by which most of the kids refrained from eating the marshmallow in front of them: they focused on something else.

It was the kids who were thinking about the reward to come who most often failed to delay their gratification and ate the treat in front of them before the researcher returned.

When we focus on the end result – whether it is a second marshmallow or the day of our Lord’s return – it becomes much easier to lose our patience over the fact that what we want has not yet arrived, especially when we have no idea the day or time it will show up.

This doesn’t mean we can slack off like the five bridesmaids who failed to take enough oil for their lamps as they waited for the bridegroom’s return (Matthew 25:1–13). We should absolutely be mindful that Jesus could return at any moment, which is why we should live out our faith in such a way that every act is announcing the Kingdom of God in our midst – loving God and neighbor in word and deed by caring for the poor, comforting the prisoners, feeding the hungry, protecting the foreigners in our midst, and hundreds of other acts, small and large.

How are you spending your days waiting for the Lord’s return?

December 18

To Be Great

John the Baptist, who was in prison, heard about all the things the Messiah was doing. So he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the Messiah we’ve been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?”

Jesus told them, “Go back to John and tell him what you have heard and seen—the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor.” And he added, “God blesses those who do not fall away because of me.”

As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began talking about him to the crowds. “What kind of man did you go into the wilderness to see? Was he a weak reed, swayed by every breath of wind? Or were you expecting to see a man dressed in expensive clothes? No, people with expensive clothes live in palaces. Were you looking for a prophet? Yes, and he is more than a prophet. John is the man to whom the Scriptures refer when they say,

‘Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
and he will prepare your way before you.’

“I tell you the truth, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John the Baptist. Yet even the least person in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he is! (Matthew 11:2–11 NLT)

When Jesus describes John the Baptist, he says there are none who have lived who are greater than him, but he is still not as great as “the least person in the Kingdom of Heaven.” In another interaction with his disciples only seven chapters later, Jesus elaborates on what it means to be considered great in the Kingdom of Heaven: “Jesus called a little child to him and put the child among them. Then he said, ‘I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven’” (Matthew 18:2–4).

In a sermon he preached back in 2001, Tim Keller describes the cross as an object that turns us into little children who run into our Father's loving arms because of what Jesus has done. Keller says you need to "not just know that Jesus died to pay your debt, but you have to rely completely on what he's done, and not on yourself, not on anything you've done. You have to rely completely on him."

To be great in the Kingdom of Heaven is to be humble enough to recognize our utter dependence on God that we submit to his authority over us, allowing him, through the Holy Spirit, to lead us in our daily lives.

It is not enough just to recognize God's reign; the most rebellious child still recognizes their parents are in charge, even as they lash out against them. We must also submit to God's authority and allow him to direct our path.

For most of us who were raised in our individualistic Western culture, it can take real inner work to reject the impulse to let someone else – even God – dictate our choices in life. But this is what it means to follow Jesus: recognizing that we are to be like children and allowing our Father to guide our steps.

Do you allow the Holy Spirit to guide your steps as you go through your day, even when he directs you to do something you don't want to? The next time that rebellious nature makes itself known when God directs you somewhere, take a moment to acknowledge to God how you are reacting, invite him to take your hand, like a child being led by their Father, and allow him to lead you gently, trusting that he will always be right beside you.

December 19

Born to Dance and Sing

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in highest heaven,
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them. (Luke 2:8–20 NLT)

Is there anything more awkward than a middle school dance? Boys on one side of the dance floor and girls on the other, and only the bravest of the brave dare breach the DMZ between the two.

Yet, just a few years prior, these same kids were unabashed in how they sang and danced. It didn't matter if they were off key or their dance moves were subpar. They heard their favorite song, they needed to move. Children seem to be born to dance.

Imagine if this mindset we all had as kids, where singing loudly was simply a natural reaction to the joy inside and dancing was the best way we knew to celebrate being alive in this moment. The angels in Luke 2 certainly couldn't hold in their song; if ever there was a moment for celebration, this announcement of the birth of the Messiah to a group of shepherds – a once-in-all-creation moment – certainly qualified.

Luke doesn't record whether the shepherds joined in the chorus in the moment or if they tapped their feet to the beat. What we do know is they understood the weight of this moment and didn't want to miss out on seeing this miraculous newborn, and that after seeing the child and sharing all that happened to them, they “went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.”

They might not have joined in the chorus of angels in the moment, but once they experienced the full impact of that momentous night, they found their voices and sang along with the celebration.

When was the last time you sang loudly and unashamed of your voice? When did you last dance like nobody was watching, regardless of whether that was true or not? Be like the shepherds and join with the chorus of angels. Sing loudly. Dance with joy. Celebrate the Messiah whose birth in the small village of Bethlehem was the start of something new and world changing.

December 20

Bioluminescence

At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace,
as you have promised.
I have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared for all people.
He is a light to reveal God to the nations,
and he is the glory of your people Israel!”

Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby's mother, “This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul.” (Luke 2:25–35 NLT)

Bioluminescence is light created through living things. It is the result of biochemical reactions inside the body of an animal or plant, causing it to glow. One of the most well-known bioluminescent animals is the firefly, but there are countless others, many of which are found in the deep sea, where sunlight cannot penetrate. Among these bioluminescent deep-sea dwellers is the angler fish. With a wide mouth full of long teeth and a protruding appendage sticking out from their forehead, ending in a glowing “lure,” they are not the prettiest fish out there.

Interestingly, the glowing bit, called an esca, doesn't glow because the angler fish is bioluminescent; it glows because the angler fish has bioluminescent bacteria it hosts inside the

esca. So long as these bacteria get enough oxygen, they will continue to glow, which means the angler fish needs a way to turn the bacteria on and off, or at least hide them from view. Some species of angler fish regulate how much oxygen the bacteria receive, effectively turning it on and off at will, while other species use a kind of eyelid or other system to hide the glow. Ultimately, this symbiotic relationship illuminates some of the darkest environments of our world.

In Luke 2:32, Simeon calls eight-day-old Jesus “a light to reveal God to the nations.” More than thirty years later, Jesus himself would proclaim to the crowd on the mountainside, “You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:14).

On our own, we have no light. The light that Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount does not come from us. We are like angler fish; the light we make is not our own but comes from another. The source of the light we project into a dark world is found in Jesus himself. We are simply vessels through which he illuminates.

There is another lesson here with the angler fish and its bioluminescent glow: a fish that lives near the surface of the ocean where the sun can more easily illuminate the underwater environment has a very different relationship with light. The glowing esca of the angler fish would be far less impressive, and much less effective, were it in a well-lighted environment. It is in the dark depths of the ocean, where little light is found, where the bioluminescent glow of the angler fish makes any kind of impact.

If we are to be bioluminescent lights glowing for Jesus in our world, we would do best to remember that remaining in our well-lighted enclaves amongst other bioluminescent believers will do little to pierce the dark recesses of our communities. We are certainly not meant to be solitary candles attempting to illuminate the darkness on our own, but “no one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket” (Matthew 5:15).

How are you allowing Christ to glow in your life so others can see his light emanating out of you? Are there ways you and your community can better step into the dark corners of your world to bring this illumination of Jesus to where it is most needed?

WEEK 4

December 21

Obedience, Defiance, Repentance

Please listen, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph's descendants like a flock.
O God, enthroned above the cherubim,
display your radiant glory
to Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh.
Show us your mighty power.
Come to rescue us!

Turn us again to yourself, O God.
Make your face shine down upon us.
Only then will we be saved.
O LORD God of Heaven's Armies,
how long will you be angry with our prayers?
You have fed us with sorrow
and made us drink tears by the bucketful.
You have made us the scorn of neighboring nations.
Our enemies treat us as a joke.

Turn us again to yourself, O God of Heaven's Armies.
Make your face shine down upon us.
Only then will we be saved.

[. . .]

Strengthen the man you love,
the son of your choice.
Then we will never abandon you again.
Revive us so we can call on your name once more.



Turn us again to yourself, O LORD God of Heaven's Armies.

Make your face shine down upon us.

Only then will we be saved. (Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 NLT)

Too often for any parent's liking, when a child doesn't get their way, it is not unusual for them to pout, throw a fit, or generally act defiant. Sometimes this results in punishment from the parents, such as the loss of privileges or preferred activities; other times the punishment is simply the natural repercussions of the child's actions, like the death of a plant a child fails to water when they refuse to do their weekly chores.

Yet often, even after they have acted defiantly toward their parents, once emotions have run their course, the child comes back into their parents' arms, penitent for their actions.

First comes obedience, followed by defiance, then repentance, leading back to obedience once more. And thus the cycle replays, again and again.

When Jesus tells his followers in Matthew 18 that they – and us – must become like little children to enter in his Kingdom, believers across the ages have understood him to be referring to the humble and unassuming nature of children, their child-like wonder at the world and affinity toward trust, love, and kindness. Jesus is not asking us to be like children at their worst – defiant and rebellious.

The history of the children of Abraham, in some ways, follows the same story arc of the defiant child. The Israelites decide they want to do their own thing rather than follow the way God is leading them; they act rebellious and feel the repercussions, either punishment from the Lord or the natural result of their rebellious acts; they return to God, sometimes after only a few short years, other times after decades or longer.

Knowing this rebellious cycle, the psalmist calls on God to turn his people back to him: "Turn us again to yourself, O God of Heaven's Armies. Make your face shine down upon us. Only then will we be saved" (Psalm 80:7).

This cycle of obedience, defiance, and repentance is visible not just in the history of Israel or in our interactions with our children, but it is also present in our own relationships with God.

Obedience. Defiance. Repentance.

This is a cycle not easy to escape. It is in our sinful nature to be selfish and want to go our own way rather than allow God to direct our steps. The hope, and the goal, is that the periods of obedience grow ever longer and the times between the first moment of defiance and the moment of repentance decrease more and more.

Ideally, as we continue to seek God by following the Way of Jesus and allowing the Spirit to dwell in our hearts and minds, we not only bend the cycle so that those times of obedience grow longer and longer, but we start to break it, through the prompting of the Spirit and as we continue to monitor our own thoughts and hearts. In other words, we “capture [our] rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:5). In doing so, we are better able to recognize when we are starting to renew the cycle and becoming defiant.

Practice taking every thought captive today. This might look like living in a constant state of prayer, inviting the Spirit to direct your thoughts. Or maybe you keep track of the errant thoughts that flash through your head and examine what sparked them or where they originated. Regardless of how you capture every thought, know that you are working to break, or at least bend, the cycle of obedience, defiance, and repentance that so often entangles us as God’s children.

December 22

The Good News of Christmas

This letter is from Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, chosen by God to be an apostle and sent out to preach his Good News. God promised this Good News long ago through his prophets in the holy Scriptures. The Good News is about his Son. In his earthly life he was born into King David's family line, and he was shown to be the Son of God when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is Jesus Christ our Lord. Through Christ, God has given us the privilege and authority as apostles to tell Gentiles everywhere what God has done for them, so that they will believe and obey him, bringing glory to his name.

And you are included among those Gentiles who have been called to belong to Jesus Christ. I am writing to all of you in Rome who are loved by God and are called to be his own holy people.

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.
(Romans 1:1–7 NLT)

Paul makes plain in this passage that the Good News is about God's Son – Jesus. Specifically, Paul points to his birth in Luke 2 as part of a lineage of kings going back to David and his resurrection in Luke 24 showing the power of the Holy Spirit over death itself.

Paul is highlighting the crucial nature of the dual lineages of Jesus: one as the son of Mary, descendent of King David, and one as the Son of God, bearer of our sins and conqueror of death. It wouldn't have been enough if Jesus had been privy to only one of those lineages – it was vital Jesus be the bridge between God and mankind, and the only way to do this was by wrapping his godhood in flesh: the fullness of his divinity and the fullness of his humanity found in the person of Jesus.

This is the Good News. Because Jesus is fully God and fully man, because he is the bridge between the divine and the mortal, we are capable of knowing God. There previously existed a distance between us and God, carefully managed by the priesthood for our own protection,



“for no one may see [the face of God] and live” (Exodus 33:20). But through Jesus, “Anyone who has seen [him] has seen the Father” (John 14:9)!

Because Jesus came like a child, born of a woman, we can know God himself. This is the Good News of Christmas.

And because Jesus was resurrected through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can spend eternity with God. This is the Good News of Easter.

Together, they are the Gospel – God made flesh defeating death itself on our behalf.

How will you celebrate this Good News today?

December 23

Adopted

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet:

“Look! The virgin will conceive a child!
She will give birth to a son,
and they will call him Immanuel,
which means ‘God is with us.’”

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:18–25 NLT)

Joseph was engaged to be married to Mary, and by all indications, he was happy to be her husband and have her as his wife. The only thing that put a hiccup in his plans was Mary’s unexpected – and, unknown to him, miraculous – pregnancy. To save face, for himself and for her, Joseph planned to cancel the engagement. This couldn’t have been an easy decision to make. He was likely hurt by what he perceived to be Mary’s betrayal, and he would also have been mourning the loss of what could have been, the life he had planned for himself and Mary after their wedding.

In the midst of making this life-altering decision, Joseph sleeps, and in his sleep he dreams. And as a result of this dream, Joseph does make a life-altering decision, but rather than

choosing to break off the engagement and walk away from Mary, he chooses to continue with his plans to take Mary as his wife, but with the addition of adopting her child as his own.

Adoption was not unheard of in first-century Jewish culture. We see it a handful of times throughout Scripture: Moses is adopted by Pharaoh's daughter; Samuel is adopted into the priesthood as a young boy; Esther is looked after by her uncle Mordecai; even the children of Gomer conceived in prostitution are taken by the prophet Hosea as his own. Even so, it is not a common occurrence. That Joseph would take on Jesus as his own child would effectively make him the firstborn son in the eyes of the law – especially given no one knew the paternal lineage of Jesus and therefore he would likely be assumed to have been Joseph's natural son, particularly since Joseph took Jesus as his own.

Those of us with no Jewish ancestry who have chosen to follow Jesus – what the Bible refers to as Gentiles – have likewise been chosen by God as his children, adopted as his own. We are, as Paul writes in Romans 11, branches that have been grafted into the family of God and given new life.

Because of Jesus, we are now part of God's family. We can call him Abba and refer to ourselves as his children.

Take a few minutes to praise the name of our Father in Heaven, who accepted us into his family, adopted us, and grafted us in so we might receive new life and flourish as his children.

December 24

Time With

Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36–38 NLT)

Like adults, kids are masters of staying busy, but what that means to them is quite different than what adults mean.

As adults, being busy means projects, tasks, and jobs we need to accomplish. Reading a book, playing a board game, or conversing with friends is fun, but that's recreation, not busyness. Adults make *time for* the things that need done. For kids, though, busyness is quite different. Rather than thinking about *time for*, they are more concerned about *time with* – time playing with toys, time with an engaging story, time with parents, grandparents, siblings, or friends.

Time with requires us to set aside our agenda and be in the moment with the people in front of us. It means we set aside our plans for what comes next and focus on the immediate. It is holding a conversation to share life, not to convey information. It's scheduling your day around the time you set aside to pray – without deciding who or what to pray for – rather than fitting pray between appointments. It's presence rather than performance.

Pastor Zach McAlack of Table of Life Church in Easton, Pennsylvania, recently wrote on their church blog, "Presence requires me to show up as a person, not just a pastor. It requires vulnerability, attention, and a kind of pastoral courage that says: 'I'm here with you. I see you. And I'm willing to let you see me too.'"

Consider Anna. From one point of view, she doesn't accomplish anything. All she does is spend her time in the Temple praying and fasting and worshiping God. While these are excellent pursuits, they don't *do* anything. But she is spending *time with* her God.

How are you spending your time? Is your day so scheduled that you are making *time for* others, or do you allow yourself to spend *time with* others, without an agenda of things that need to be accomplished?



December 25

Moment-to-Moment Living

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 were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

[. . .]

So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

John testified about him when he shouted to the crowds, "This is the one I was talking about when I said, 'Someone is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.'"

From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us. (John 1:1-5, 14-18 NLT)

God became man.

The Creator – the un-created one who has no beginning and will have no end – became part of his creation.

The Author of history entered into the story and became the central figure, the crux of the narrative, the axel around which the wheel of time spins.

This is the celebration of Christmas: "the Word became human and made his home among us." And because of this, we can know him. And in knowing him, we can follow in his footsteps, becoming more like him with every step.

Dallas Willard puts it this way: to follow Jesus “is to learn from Christ how to live our total lives, how to invest all our time and our energies of mind and body as he did. We must learn how to follow his preparations, the disciplines for life in God’s rule that enabled him to receive his Father’s constant and effective support while doing his will.”

As we celebrate today the birth of Jesus – the Messiah who brought salvation to the world and redeemed all creation through his death and resurrection – let us not forget what it means to truly become like little children as we follow him. May we allow Jesus to become so much a part of our daily lives – our moment-to-moment living – that every word, every act, and every facet of our beings announces the Kingdom of God in our world.