

# INTRODUCTION

On December 1, we begin our annual Advent calendar tradition, counting down the days until Christmas. Last year it was a *Star Wars Lego* calendar for our son, Reece, while his sister, Kitt, had her *Elf on the Shelf North Pole Advent Train* calendar. For twenty-five days each year, they awake eager to discover what surprise their calendar will offer.

These calendars capture the spirit of Advent, a time of anticipation. It's a feeling clearly on display when I'm impatiently asked how much longer until the next numbered door can be opened.

Originating from Latin, "advent" means "arrival." From as early as the sixth century, the church has prepared to celebrate the arrival of Jesus, the Christ, by participating in a season known as Advent. The four Sundays before Christmas are set aside for this purpose.

During Advent, four candles are often prominently displayed, each week being devoted to one candle. These four candles symbolize the gifts Christ brings: hope, love, joy, and peace. (Some traditions include a fifth white candle symbolizing the light and purity of Christ.)

Since stumbling upon the rich history of Advent in my mid-twenties, I've been a loyal fan. As I continued to dive deeper into Advent, I began noticing there are two ways we can wait for the arrival of Jesus. We can be passive in our waiting, or we can be active. Passive waiting virtually ensures we miss out on the gifts Christ brings while active waiting makes room within ourselves to receive these gifts. My guess is you're like me and can use all the hope, love, joy, and peace you can get!

As a way to count down to Christmas and actively wait for the arrival of Jesus, I have created this Advent calendar. Each day will offer a surprise: a fresh invitation for us to open. We'll walk together through the birth stories of Jesus, paying attention to where we are being offered opportunities to join in.

For me, this is the best way to read these stories. Not as an event that happened in the past, but as something that's happening right now. An event we can notice, step into, and participate in today. If we view the story of God being born into our world as nothing more than an event that happened 2,000 years ago, we might miss the Spirit that's still birthing hope, love, joy, and peace into our world today.

This Advent season, I hope you'll join me. And as you step into these twenty-five invitations of Christmas, may you be filled with more of the hope, love, joy, and peace that Christ brings.



# MAKING SPACE

READING: Luke 1:26–38

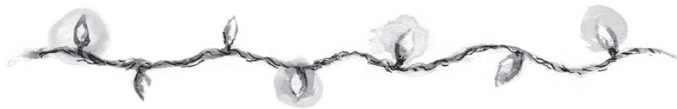
*In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."*

*Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."*

*“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”*

*The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.”*

*“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.*



There’s an ancient parable about a teacher whose wisdom was known far and wide. Many would travel long distances to seek his counsel and learn from him.

One day, an important man came to see the teacher. He was a leader, used to commanding others and getting his way. Upon arrival, he was ushered into the teacher’s room where he was asked the reason for his visit.

“I want you to teach me your wisdom,” replied the man.

The teacher gave a knowing smile and suggested they first share tea. Once a fresh pot of steaming tea had

been brought into the room, the teacher handed the man a cup and proceeded to pour the tea. Holding the cup in his hands, the man watched as the tea reached the rim.

“Stop!” he yelled as the burning tea spilled onto his lap. “Can’t you see the cup is already full?”

“Yes,” said the teacher. “This cup is like your mind. It’s so full that nothing else will fit. Return to me with an empty cup.”

As we begin our journey through Advent, we, like the man, must make space within ourselves to receive.

Think for a moment about what fills your mind.

If you’re like me, a mental list probably forms immediately of all the responsibilities you carry. Maybe just the thought of that list raises your blood pressure. I get it.

And now with the Christmas season upon us, that list can often feel even more daunting. There’s shopping to be done, parties to attend, ugly sweaters to buy, cookies to bake—the list goes on and on. How will we fit it all in?!

The problem with this way of living—bouncing around from one task to the next, creating little, if any, margin to breathe—is that our lives start looking like that

overflowing teacup. There's so much filling our lives that we don't have time to fully receive the good that's coming our way. Sometimes we're trying to cram so much in, we aren't even aware of the good that's right in front of us. We're onto the next thing before we've had a chance to appreciate the gifts present in the moment.

So, we need a period when we slow down and leave a little space. Which, I know, sounds near impossible given the current season. But what if we did find a way to empty our cup, even a little? What if we were to create some space within our lives so we could receive the gifts this season promises: hope, love, joy, and peace? Wouldn't it be worth it if we walked away from Advent with a little more peace in our lives? Or a little more hope for the situation we're walking through?

I love the story Luke tells about Mary when she was first told she would give birth to the Messiah, Jesus. When she hears the news, she's shocked. Why is this happening to me? Why have I been chosen? And how is this even possible?

By the end of the conversation, she's all in. She's considered what it will require of her, and she's ready. Like any pregnancy, there's a sacrifice involved. She has to make space within herself as she allows her body to be borrowed for nine months.

But she thinks the sacrifice is worth it. She sees this opportunity as a gift and is willing to make space within herself for this child.

What would it look like to create some space in your life over these next twenty-five days? Is there something you can go without for a season? Is there something on your list that can be set aside so you don't miss any of the hope, love, joy, and peace that's being offered to you this Advent season?

## INVITATION

FIND TIME EACH DAY TO BE AN  
ACTIVE PARTICIPANT IN ADVENT.  
SIT WITH THE STORY OF CHRISTMAS  
AND LISTEN FOR HOW THE SPIRIT IS  
BIRTHING HOPE, LOVE, JOY, AND PEACE  
WITHIN YOU THIS SEASON.

## SPACE FOR REFLECTION

- How can you make space each day to sit with the story of Christmas?

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- Of the four gifts of Advent (hope, love, joy, and peace), which do you find yourself most in need of this year?

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# AN INVITATION TO HOPE AGAIN

READING: John 1:1–14

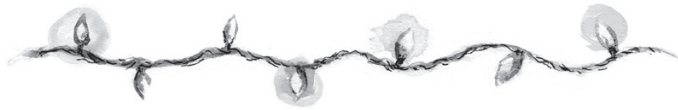
*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

*There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*

*The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and*

*though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*



While doing home renovations, we discovered a large number of mice were finding their way into our crawlspace. To solve this problem, we had to go around the entire foundation and seal any cracks. Mice can squeeze through a crack the size of a dime, or even the width of a pencil, so the sealing had to be thorough. After the initial sealing, we were still catching mice. My friend offered a suggestion for discovering any spaces we'd overlooked. Go into the crawlspace on a bright, sunny day and turn off all the lights. While in the darkness, he said, look for signs of daylight. That's where the mice would be getting in.

The next day, I did just that. Alone in the dark crawlspace, I scanned the perimeter for signs of light. As I looked around, I found daylight. There were my cracks.

The Gospel of John doesn't include the traditional Christmas story, but it does have its own riff on the birth of Jesus. In the story, there's this line: "The light shines in the darkness..." (John 1:4).

John doesn't explain what this darkness is. He doesn't try to rationalize it. For him, it's an assumed reality. In this world, there's darkness.

We all know this to be true. Turn on the news and you'll see it. Look at your own life and you'll recognize moments of darkness. We all have these experiences when it feels as if any semblance of light or hope are nonexistent.

When we find ourselves in such moments, it can be easy to focus on nothing but the darkness: all that's going wrong in our lives or the world around us. But John tells us the story doesn't end with darkness. Because in the darkness emerges a light. Yes, that light can often seem faint. It can feel far away. But, the truth of Christmas is that light is here.

This Advent, I want to offer you a way to regain any hope you might have lost this past year. Like me in the crawlspace scanning for signs of light, let's be intentional about looking for signs of light in our lives.

Whenever you come across something that sparks the flame of hope within you, write it down. Take a picture. Make a note in your phone. It can be as small as the first conscious breath you take in the morning, the sun shining on your face, or a text from a friend. Capture those moments. We'll call these our hope sightings.

By the end of Advent, I'd love for us to have a collection of hope sightings showing all the slivers of daylight shining through the cracks into our lives. Yes, the darkness won't be gone completely. But, this season, let's focus our attention on the light we experience. After all, that which we give attention to is what grows.

## INVITATION

CAPTURE YOUR HOPE SIGHTINGS—  
ALL THE MOMENTS THAT REVEAL  
LIGHT AND HOPE.

## SPACE FOR REFLECTION

Use the space below to begin listing your hope sightings.

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# EMBRACING YOUR WHOLE STORY

READING: Matthew 1:1–18

*This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of  
David, the son of Abraham:*

*Abraham was the father of Isaac,  
Isaac the father of Jacob,  
Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,  
Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose  
mother was Tamar,  
Perez the father of Hezron,  
Hezron the father of Ram,  
Ram the father of Amminadab,  
Amminadab the father of Nahshon,  
Nahshon the father of Salmon,  
Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother  
was Rahab,  
Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,  
Obed the father of Jesse,  
and Jesse the father of King David.*

*David was the father of Solomon, whose mother  
had been Uriah's wife,  
Solomon the father of Rehoboam,  
Rehoboam the father of Abijah,  
Abijah the father of Asa,  
Asa the father of Jehoshaphat,  
Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram,  
Jehoram the father of Uzziah,  
Uzziah the father of Jotham,  
Jotham the father of Ahaz,  
Ahaz the father of Hezekiah,  
Hezekiah the father of Manasseh,  
Manasseh the father of Amon,  
Amon the father of Josiah,  
and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers  
at the time of the exile to Babylon.*

*After the exile to Babylon:  
Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel,  
Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,  
Zerubbabel the father of Abihud,  
Abihud the father of Eliakim,  
Eliakim the father of Azor,  
Azor the father of Zadok,  
Zadok the father of Akim,  
Akim the father of Elihud,  
Elihud the father of Eleazar,  
Eleazar the father of Matthan,  
Matthan the father of Jacob,  
and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of  
Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is  
called the Messiah.*



*Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.*

*This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about...*



Before we even get to the birth of Jesus, Matthew starts us off with a genealogy. By today's standards, this isn't a great way to begin a story, especially one with such significance. Yet, Matthew finds it necessary to start the story of Jesus with a record of past generations.

As we read through the genealogy, there are plenty of names that make sense. Of course the Messiah would come from this heritage! But then, we come across names we wouldn't have expected to make the cut. Try googling "Manasseh." These are the relatives we keep off the guest list. The uncle we don't want our friends to meet.

Then there are the women. Besides Mary, the inclusion of women appears odd for a first-century document. Even more bizarre is how Bathsheba is introduced. Instead of being mentioned by name, she is described as "Uriah's wife." That odd description seems to be

Matthew's way of drawing our attention to the story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah. But why bring up a story of adultery and murder? Why give extra attention to a story that seems best omitted from the genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah?

By including all these names and stories, we are being offered permission to own the entirety of our stories. If Christ, God in the flesh, can be birthed through a past as flawed as this one, there's hope for us.

When I was in high school, my band, 30 Foot Salmon, performed a song at our church's Christmas show. In every way, the performance was a disaster. Thirty seconds in, we all stopped and looked at each other. I told the crowd that was our dress rehearsal, and we were now ready to rock their world. Not a chance. Our second try was just as dismal as the first. We stopped the song midway and walked off stage, hiding in a locked room the rest of the night, too embarrassed to show our faces.

We all have moments in our past that we proudly display for the world to see. We go out of our way to highlight these accomplishments. But then, there are those moments of shame. The parts of our past we'd like to run from and deny as a part of ourselves.

The invitation being offered in Matthew's genealogy is to own all of our past. To cease expending energy trying to deny and keep certain parts of ourselves

hidden away. This doesn't mean you have to be proud of it all. You don't have to prominently display those shameful moments. But you do have to own it all. It's a part of you.

The more we are able to embrace our whole selves, the more we allow for the grace and healing of Christ to flow through us.

## INVITATION

EMBRACE YOUR WHOLE SELF  
BY OWNING ALL THE PARTS OF  
YOUR STORY.

## SPACE FOR REFLECTION

- Are there any parts of your past you feel uncomfortable owning?

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- How does it feel to own those stories as a part of you?

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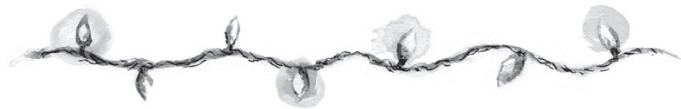
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# EVERYTHING IS REDEEMABLE

READING: Matthew 1:6

*...David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife...*



Let's take yesterday's reading one step further. It's one thing to embrace your whole story. That's important and necessary. But it's something entirely different to believe that, even with a checkered past, you can still be a person God uses to bring love and grace into the world.

Today, we're going to look a little closer at the phrase "Uriah's wife" because I think there's so much wisdom hidden in these two words.

This is a shameful story. Deceit. Murder. Adultery. Power used to manipulate and take advantage of those without power. At first glance, there's nothing redeeming here. How could anything good come from this?

But, as we saw yesterday, this is one of the stories through which Jesus, the Messiah, was birthed. Good was able to come from a moment even as horrible as this one.

Right away, before we read anything about what Jesus did, we come upon a story rooted in grace. One built upon a foundation of redemption and using our worst moments to birth hope and love into this world.

Here's what I believe: You've made a few mistakes. Had a few stumbles. We've all been there. It's a part of being human.

But here's what I also believe: Those mistakes don't define you. Nor do they mean your story is over. You have a gift to offer the world. Your life is to be a vessel of healing, love, grace, hope, peace, joy, and all the other good, redeeming qualities we need more of.

The story of Christmas begins with a loud declaration: Nothing can stand in the way of God's grace. Everything is redeemable.

This is true for your life as well.

The mistakes. The past sin. Yes, they're there. And they have to be dealt with. Owned and acknowledged.

But they don't disqualify you from being someone God uses to bring healing to this world. You have a role to play in God's restoring work.

Your life matters.

You are valued.

There's nothing that can change that truth.

## INVITATION

TRUST THAT GOD CAN REDEEM AND  
USE ALL THE PARTS OF YOUR STORY.

## SPACE FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever thought yourself unworthy or unqualified because of your past?

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- How does it feel to hear that God can use your life to bring love and healing to the world?

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# “BECAUSE HE WAS A RIGHTEOUS MAN...”

READING: Matthew 1:18–25

*This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

*But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”*

*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*

*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*



Joseph's fiancé is pregnant with a child he knows is not his own. Sounds like the perfect storyline for a daytime talk show. But rather than exposing Mary to public humiliation, Joseph decides to end the engagement and secretly send her away. The reason he does this is "because he was a righteous man."

This is how Matthew introduces us to Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus. With a scandal, and with Joseph determined to do the right, religious thing.

At the top of Reece's homework, written in bold, capital letters, was the sentence, "WE FOLLOW THE RULES!" The corresponding assignment was to circle all the people following the rules and describe what rule they were following. It was a helpful assignment for him as he's learning how to interact with others.

Rules are a good thing. They help keep the world operating in an orderly fashion. Without rules, chaos would ensue. But what happens when we elevate rule-following to being the greatest, most sacred pursuit?

When we meet Joseph, he's following the rules. The rules that tell him Mary is not someone to be trusted and he should quietly break the engagement. This is the wisdom he's received from his family, his culture, and his religion.

Then, one night, he has a dream. In this dream, the Spirit visits Joseph and tells him to take Mary as his wife because her pregnancy is the work of the Spirit. Apparently that's all the convincing he needs. No questions asked. No wondering if the dream was legit or just the result of his late-night pizza run. He wakes up, and the engagement is back on.

Why did Joseph need to be asleep for the Spirit to speak? Was it the only time all the other voices in his head were silenced? The voices telling him to play it safe, follow the rules, and do it how everyone in his family and tribe would do it. We all know these voices. They're the background noise we hear every day.

The rules you've been following have brought you to where you are today. But will those same rules allow you to continue growing and expanding as a person? Will they help you become the person the Spirit is leading you to be?

The story of Joseph is an invitation to inspect the rules and wisdom guiding our life. Are they helping you experience the new things that the Spirit is birthing? Are they offering you a greater vision for how you can partner with the Spirit to bring new life and hope to this world? If not, maybe it's time to leave a few rules behind this season and embrace a new wisdom. Sometimes the new can only be birthed when we have the courage to step outside our tradition and beyond the rules we've been living by.

## INVITATION

INSPECT THE RULES YOU'VE BEEN  
LIVING BY. LEAVE BEHIND ANY  
THAT ARE TAKING YOU AWAY FROM  
PARTNERING WITH THE SPIRIT TO  
BIRTH NEW LIFE AND HOPE WITHIN  
YOU AND THE WORLD.

## SPACE FOR REFLECTION

- Are you following any rules that have been placed on you by others?

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- What rules in your life do you need to let go of today because they aren't leading you deeper into joy?

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