

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus



days until Christmas

Two hundred years ago, a man named Charles Wesley lived in England. It was a dark time in history – orphans roamed the streets, homelessness was at an all-time high, and nobody seemed to care about God or church. One day, Wesley sat down to write a hymn. He based it on the verse you just read, Haggai 2:7, which foreshadows the coming of Christ to heal the broken world and fill it with His glory. Wesley's carol wasn't very popular at first. But in 1850, a famous preacher named Charles Spurgeon referenced the hymn in a Christmas sermon. Suddenly, Wesley's carol started appearing in hymnals everywhere. Today, *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus* is one of the most beloved and theologically-rich hymns of all time.

***Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.***

***Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.***

RESPOND

Read the lyrics in the sidebar. How has Jesus set you free from fear and sin? Where do you still need freedom from fear or sin? Pray or journal about these areas of your life. Ask God to be your strength and hope. Then go to [discovergrace.com/listen](https://www.discovergrace.com/listen) to listen to *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*. Sing along if you want!

Waiting Well



days until Christmas

Don't you love to wait for stuff? It's so fun to be the last person on earth to get an iPhone or a Prom date. Just kidding – waiting stinks! It's frustrating, discouraging, and sometimes downright scary. The Israelites were well-acquainted with waiting. They waited for the coming of Jesus for (ready for this?)...400 years.

Advent is a time to remember the longing people felt as they waited for Jesus. Unlike the Israelites, we're not waiting for the birth of Christ anymore. We see the happy ending, so it's easy to forget that 400 years of sorrow and suffering preceded it. But we don't see the ending to our own stories. We don't know how God will work in the situations that frustrate and worry us, and that's really hard. But Isaiah 40:28-31 is what we DO know.

RESPOND

What do these verses teach us about God? Make a list of His attributes (who He is) and actions (what He does). Now reread verses 30 and 31. Notice, it's normal for us to grow weary, but verse 31 says that "those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength." Other translations say, "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength." Waiting and hoping go hand-in-hand. Whether we're waiting to make friends, make the team, or get through a tough season, putting our hope in God strengthens us to wait well. Close in prayer, asking God to fill your heart with hope as you trust Him day by day.

The Government Will
Be on His Shoulders



days until Christmas

The passage you just read is one of the most well-known prophecies regarding Jesus. It was spoken two thousand years ago by a man named Isaiah. People clung to Isaiah's words for centuries as they waited for Jesus. They clung to the promise that one day a child would be born, and the "government would be on His shoulders."

What does that mean? It means the weight of the world – every burden imaginable – would be placed on this child. Do you ever feel like you're carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders? The burden of your sin and failure? The pressure to be perfect? The stress of school and sports and relationships and fill-in-the-blank? Listen again to these words: "For unto YOU, a child is born. For YOU a son is given. And the weight of the world will be on HIS shoulders, so it no longer has to be on yours."

RESPOND

Give your burdens to God. Tell Him everything you're carrying right now. Then speak aloud each of the four names of God given in this passage. Which name means the most to you in this season, and why? Praise God for being your Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

Anointed



days until Christmas

Yesterday our Bible passage talked about who Jesus is. Today, our text talks about why Jesus came. Jesus was anointed (or we could say “chosen” by God) to bring good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, and to free prisoners.

Think about these three types of people – the poor, brokenhearted, and imprisoned. To be “poor” means to be “without” something. It doesn’t necessarily have to be money. You could have lots of money and be without hope because you don’t have Jesus. In the same way, you don’t have to be in prison to be stuck in captivity. Some people are free to walk around, but their hearts are stuck in sin or anxiety. And sadly, there are lots of reasons to be heartbroken in a broken world.

RESPOND

Is there an area in your life where you feel poor, heartbroken, or stuck in sin? Jesus didn’t just come for ancient, biblical characters. He came for you. To heal your broken heart. To free your stuck soul. To fill you with hope that stretches from here all the way to eternity. Reread Isaiah 61:1-3. As you read, pause and talk to God about anything that stands out to you. Thank God for anointing Jesus to be the Savior of the world.

Rivers in the Desert



days until Christmas

Imagine being lost in a scorching desert. Wild animals roam, dust blows in your face, and you're so thirsty your throat stings. How would you feel? What would you fear? Now imagine a Hero bursts onto the scene. With a giant machete, He hacks a path through the bramble. He leads you to a cool, rushing river. You jump in, wash off, and drink to your heart's content.

Yesterday, we talked about three reasons Jesus came. Our text today reveals a fourth reason: Jesus came to do something new. He came to show us a new way of living – to refresh us when life feels like a dry, lonely desert. Picture yourself, jumping out of that river, new and fresh. The story doesn't end there though. Now the Hero puts His arm around you and you're no longer afraid or alone. He leads you out of the wilderness, and together, you walk all the way home.

RESPOND

One of the ways Satan attacks Christians is by trying to get us to dwell on the past – to think about our sin, so we feel ashamed and avoid God. No wonder Isaiah exhorts, “Forget the former things! Do not dwell on the past. See, I (Jesus) am doing a new thing!” Thank Jesus for doing a new thing in your life; for making “a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” Ask Him to continue teaching you how to live. Thank Him for having a beautiful plan for your life.

The Second Advent



days until Christmas

The word “advent” comes from the Latin word *adventus*, and means “coming” or “arrival.” Did you know we’re actually living between two advents? Right now, we’re looking backward, remembering how people waited for the birth of Jesus. But Christians today are also looking forward, waiting for the day when Jesus will come again.

The Bible promises that one day Jesus will return to earth to fully and finally restore all things. We call this the “Second Coming of Christ.” Our text today describes what it will be like when Jesus returns.

RESPOND

How will it be different when Christ comes back to earth? We’ve been talking about the hope we have in Jesus, but right now, we’re still living in a broken world. We still cry, sin, and suffer. But one day, all of that will be over. God Himself will live with us, wipe away every tear, and put an end to brokenness once and for all. That’s why Jesus is our greatest hope, now and forever. Close in prayer, thanking God for the eternal hope you have in Christ. Ask Him to help you live expectantly as you wait for Jesus to return.

But As for Me



days until Christmas

This week, we've focused on hope. We've talked about how hoping and waiting go together, and how we can have certainty in Jesus. Notice the heading in your Bible for our text today: "Israel's Misery." Not exactly a warm fuzzy title! The truth is, it wasn't a warm fuzzy time in Israel's history. Everyone was hateful, sinful, and rebellious.

It'd be nice to say things are different in 2022, but sadly, our world is just as broken today as it was two thousand years ago. It's not exactly popular to love and obey God, and it never has been. But notice Micah's declaration in verse 7, "But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me."

RESPOND

But. As. For. Me. Those four words are powerful. Just because others fight, gossip, hate, and disobey doesn't mean we have to. Every person gets a choice. Against a dismal backdrop, Micah chose something different. He chose to wait for God – to put his hope in God – believing that God would hear him. What about you? What choice will you make?

Spend some time talking to God with total honesty. Tell Him what life is like in your world. Tell Him what discourages you at school, online, at practice, or at home. Talk about your anxieties and temptations. Then use Micah's four words: "But as for me." How will you be different? How will you put your hope in God?

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing



days until Christmas

Remember Charles Wesley? Besides writing *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*, he wrote a few more hymns...just, you know, 6,000 or so! One Christmas, Wesley was walking to church in London when he heard the bells ring. Inspired, he scribbled a poem beginning with, "Hark! How the welkin rings!" ("Welkin" means "sky" or "heavens.") Years later, George Whitefield would adapt Wesley's hymn, changing the first line to: "Hark! The herald angels sing."

RESPOND

Read the lyrics in the sidebar. This week we lit the Shepherd's candle, which represents joy. What do you think this phrase means: "Joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies"? How do we find joy and triumph in Jesus? What has He done for us based on Psalm 16:5-11?

Go to [discovergrace.com/listen](https://www.discovergrace.com/listen) to listen to *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. Sing along with a worshipful heart, focusing on the rich lyrics of this carol.

*Hark! The herald angels sing,
Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled:
Joyful all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies,
With angelic host proclaim,
Christ is born in Bethlehem.*

*Christ by highest Heav'n adored
Christ the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold Him come
Offspring of a Virgin's womb
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with men to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel
Hark! The herald angels sing:
"Glory to the newborn King!"*

*Hail the Heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings
Ris'n with healing in His wings
Mild He lays His glory by
Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth
Hark! the herald angels sing:
"Glory to the newborn King!"*

Socially Unacceptable



days until Christmas

The story of Advent begins right here in Luke 1 with two unlikely characters. First, notice when this story takes place. Who is the current king? (See verse 5.) Remember that name because you'll see it again.

What is Zechariah's job? What two things do we learn about Zechariah and Elizabeth in verses 6 and 7? At first glance, these two things seem ironic. We learn that Zechariah and Elizabeth are awesome, godly people ("blameless," in fact)...yet God won't give them what they want (a child). Being unable to have children was a huge deal in Bible times. It was so stigmatizing that some theologians have likened it to a form of "social death."

RESPOND

Have you ever felt socially unacceptable, like you just don't fit in? Believe it or not, the Bible is filled (filled!) with characters who can relate. Some of them are just plain odd. Others, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, don't fit in because of their circumstances. But the Bible is proof that God uses all kinds of people to fulfill His purposes.

God isn't interested in cookie-cutter clones who all look and act the same. He is a God of creativity and YOU are among His most beautiful, unique, and beloved creations. Claim this truth right now. Put it in writing by finishing this statement: "Thank You, God, for making me beautifully and wonderfully unique. These are some of the things I love about myself..."

Joy and Delight



days until Christmas

Let's recap. Today in our story, Zechariah's priestly division is on duty to serve and (surprise, surprise!) Zechariah is chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary. What happens while Zechariah is in the sanctuary? (See verses 11-13.)

Talk about an astonishing way to receive life-changing news! How would you feel if you were Zechariah? How do you think he will respond to this news? Not only will Zechariah and Elizabeth finally have a baby – notice the prophecy in verse 14 concerning this child: “There will be joy and delight for you, and many will rejoice at his birth.”

RESPOND

God delights in bringing us joy. Take a moment to think about every good gift God has given you. Think about the big and little things in your life that bring you joy. If you like journaling, write God a letter of praise and thanksgiving, celebrating the wonderful things He's given you, or simply pray and thank Him for all of the good things in your life.

The Forerunner



days until Christmas

Yesterday, we got a front-row seat to an angelic appearance. Zechariah received shocking news – he and Elizabeth will have a baby. What are they supposed to name the baby? (Glance back at verse 13 if you need a reminder.) After prophesying that many will rejoice at the birth of this child, the angel goes on to tell Zechariah several interesting facts about his future son.

What four facts do we learn about John in verses 15 and 16? Each of these facts point to the reality that John has been chosen to be set apart. He has an incredible calling. Not only will he turn people's hearts toward God, he will "make ready for the Lord a prepared people." Translation? He will prepare the way for the Messiah. If you haven't already guessed, this little baby will become John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ Himself.

RESPOND

What's a forerunner? Sometimes at a concert, before the main artist takes the stage, a lesser-known musician will perform an opening song. That's a forerunner. He comes before the main thing, and his job is to get everyone excited for what's coming next. We'll learn a lot about John the Baptist in the days to come. But for now, think about your life. In what ways has God chosen YOU to be set apart for Him?

Speechless



days until Christmas

Did Zechariah's response to the angel surprise you? Zechariah points out the obvious: "Excuse me, Angel, but my wife and I are really, really old. How am I supposed to believe you?"

Notice the angel's rebuke. It's almost as if he's saying: "Do you know who I am? I'm Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God Almighty. I've been sent (from God!) with this amazingly joyful message, and you're going to doubt what I'm saying?"

Ouch. What is the consequence for Zechariah's lack of faith? How long will he be silent?

RESPOND

Christmas is a time when we focus on the gift God has given us – the greatest gift of all time, Jesus. But did you know, we can also give God gifts? All throughout Scripture, we see that God has emotions – anger, sorrow, joy, delight. Have you ever thought about the fact that WE can affect God's feelings? We can literally bring joy to the God of the Universe. How? By our faith. Over and over, the Bible teaches that faith deeply pleases God (Hebrews 11:6, Romans 1:17, 4:3). It is a gift to Him. The next time you're tempted to doubt God, pause and think, "Right now, by choosing faith, I can bring God joy."

His Name Is John



days until Christmas

At last, it's time! In our text today, Elizabeth gives birth. You may have noticed everyone shows up – friends, neighbors, relatives. Can you blame them? It's not every day that a barren woman gives birth. When the partying dies down, Elizabeth's relatives prepare to do what they always do – name the baby after his dad, Zechariah. Why are they surprised when Elizabeth chooses the name “John” instead? (See verse 61.)

“Who on earth is John?” They wonder. “Nobody in our family has that name!” (Nowadays, you can name your child Moon Rocket or Diva Muffin and nobody will even blink, but back then, people stuck to family names only. No exceptions.) “Surely Zechariah will protest!” Everyone thinks. They motion him over, but instead of protesting, Zechariah writes four words on a tablet: “His name is John.”

Boom! Zechariah can speak again.

RESPOND

Have you ever lost your voice after screaming at a championship game or spending a week at camp? Silence has a way of making us think and reflect. This time when Zechariah has to choose between doubt and obedience, he responds with unwavering conviction: His name is John. Over the weekend, try taking a vow of silence for a couple of hours. (Tell your family what you're doing ahead of time, so they don't get frustrated!) Invite God to speak into your life during your time of silence. Welcome His encouragement and wisdom. Ask Him to show you whatever He wants to show you.

Light in the Darkness



days until Christmas

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah begins to prophesy regarding the future. Glance back at verses 67-75. These verses are talking about Jesus. In a moment of supernatural clarity, Zechariah realizes that the Messiah is coming to redeem His people. He also realizes that his son, John, will play a significant role in Christ's coming.

What does Zechariah say his son will be called? (See verse 76.) What will John the Baptist do according to verse 76? Do you remember the word for this unique calling?

RESPOND

John the Baptist will be the forerunner of Christ. He will not be the "main thing." He will point people to the main thing – to Jesus, the "Horn of Salvation" raised from the house of David to provide redemption, forgiveness, and merciful compassion. Close by reading verses 78-79 aloud. Thank Jesus for being the Light who shines in the darkness, dispels death, and guides our feet into the way of peace.

O Little Town of Bethlehem



days until Christmas

This week, we lit the third Advent candle, which is called the Bethlehem Candle. In 1866, a Boston pastor named Phillips Brooks traveled to Bethlehem for Christmas. Two years later, he decided to write a poem for the Sunday School class at his church. Drawing inspiration from his trip to Bethlehem, he titled the poem *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. Brooks asked Lewis Redner, the church organist, to compose a tune for the lyrics. Legend has it that Redner (who also worked a day job) composed until the very last minute, finishing the tune the night before it was sung in church.

*Oh little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie,
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep,
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth,
The everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.
For Christ is born of Mary,
And gathered all above,
While mortals sleep the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love.
Oh morning stars together,
Proclaim thy holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King,
And peace to men on earth.*

RESPOND

Read the lyrics to *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. Meditate on this line: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” What do you think this means? How are all the hopes of humanity – past, present, and future – met in Jesus? How does the gospel (the good news that Jesus came to earth to rescue humanity) quiet every fear?

Hope and fear tend to go together: We hope to pass Algebra, and fear we may fail it. We hope to be accepted, and fear we will be rejected. Think about the hopes and fears in your own heart. Consider listing them on a sheet of paper or in a journal. Pray over each one, surrendering it to Jesus. Claim I Peter 1:13, asking Jesus to help you set your hope fully on Him. Then go to discovergrace.com/listen to listen to *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

The Trendsetter



days until Christmas

Today we jumped ahead to see the fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy about his son. Baby John is all grown up...and what a guy he's become! He's a desert-dwelling, locust-eating, camel-hair-wearing, baptizing prophet, with one doozy of a message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

John is what we might call a trendsetter. He's radically different. And guess what? People are flocking to him in droves, confessing their sin, and lining up to be baptized in the Jordan River. Unlike modern-day trendsetters, people weren't coming to John for fashion advice, or because he took the best Insta photos of his locust lunch.

They were coming to John because he was living for something greater than himself. John was preparing people to encounter God Almighty in human flesh.

RESPOND

It's easy to believe that happiness comes from fitting in. But true joy comes from being who God wants us to be and doing what God wants us to do. As we countdown 13 more days until Christmas, thank God that long ago, a strangely-dressed, bug-eating man prepared the way for Christ. And ask God how you can prepare others to know Jesus, too.

The Beloved Son



days until Christmas

Why did John protest when Jesus came to be baptized by him? John was mind-blown at the thought of baptizing Jesus because he recognized the glory, majesty, and deity of Christ. “Who am I to baptize you? YOU should be baptizing ME!” He cried.

John had a right view of Jesus. He treated Him with honor and reverence. Does your view of Jesus align with John’s view of Him? Why or why not?

After John baptized Jesus, the Spirit of God descended from heaven to rest on Him. What form did it take? (See verse 16.) What did the voice from heaven say? (See verse 17.) Jesus isn’t just the Son of God; He is the beloved Son of God. Knowing God is perfect, imagine how much He loves His Son. God gave the world the most precious gift He had to offer: His only, beloved Son.

Close in prayer, thanking God for the gift of His beloved Son. Ask Him to forgive you for the ways in which you fail to treat Jesus with the reverence He deserves. Ask God to shape your view of Him. Thank Him for His unbreakable love for you.

Trust Me



days until Christmas

We've arrived at a painful point in the story of John the Baptist. John has gone from the heights of ministry – baptizing Christ Himself – to the very depths of persecution – sitting in a prison cell. When John hears about everything Jesus is doing, he sends word to Jesus, asking a raw and revealing question: “Are you really the Messiah, or should we wait for another?” Why do you think John asked this question? What do you think he was feeling?

Have you ever felt forgotten by God? Like you're sitting in this lonely “prison cell” of suffering, and you're invisible to Him? Why won't you help me, Jesus? This is John's true question, and maybe it's yours too.

In verse 11 Jesus calls John the Baptist the greatest man who's ever lived...and yet, even John experienced doubt. Wrestling with doubt doesn't mean we're “bad” Christians; it means we're normal. Human. Just like John.

Notice Jesus' response to John's question. After declaring everything He's doing by way of teaching and healing, Jesus says, “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me” (Matthew 11:6). Translation? “Trust Me, John. Don't stumble when you can't understand what I'm doing. Trust Me.”

We won't always understand what Jesus does or why He does it. But His response to John is the same as His response to us: “Trust Me. Even when you don't understand. Even when it hurts. Even when it feels like I've forgotten you. I promise I haven't. Trust me.”

A Desolate Place



days until Christmas

Are you shocked by the ending of John's story? It's a devastating passage of Scripture. This chosen prophet, anointed from the womb, who dedicated his life to preparing the way for the Messiah, dies alone in prison. Beheaded.

Why? Because he stood up for the truth. He confronted the sinful relationship between Herod and Herodias, and as a result, they wanted him dead. While Herod feared an uprising, Herodias did not, and with a little trickery, she managed to get John's head on a platter. Reread verse 12. Then read verse 13 to see how Jesus responds to the news.

RESPOND

Jesus could have prevented John's death. In fact, yesterday, we read about how John sent word to Jesus while in prison. But Jesus didn't intervene, which can only mean one thing. Jesus had a bigger perspective. He knew that death wasn't the end of John's story. It was the beginning of an eternity in heaven – of reward, blessing, and celebration in the presence of God.

Still, Jesus doesn't rejoice when John dies. Verse 13 says, "When Jesus heard this, He withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by Himself." Jesus needed to be alone. The language of "desolation" and solitude implies that Jesus withdrew to grieve. Just because God doesn't answer our prayers the way we want Him to, doesn't mean He takes joy in our sorrow. Jesus mourns with us. When our hearts ache, His heart aches. If you're going through a hard time, imagine climbing into that lonely boat with Jesus. Tell Him why you're sad, sit in His presence, and let His love soothe your soul.

When Life Changes



days until Christmas

Remember Gabriel? Where have we seen him before? (Glance back at Luke 1:18-19 if you need a reminder.) We took a detour to follow the life of John the Baptist, but now we're traveling back into the heart of the Advent story. It's been a busy week for Gabriel. He's delivered two messages about unexpected births – one to an older, barren woman named Elizabeth, and one to a young, unmarried woman named Mary.

Think about the difference between these two birth announcements. Zechariah and Elizabeth longed for a baby – it would remove the stigma of “social death” from them – and yet, how did Zechariah respond to Gabriel's news? (See verse 18.)

Mary, on the other hand, was not longing for a baby. In fact, for an unmarried woman to become pregnant in Mary's time led to “social death.” There was no recovering from the shame and disgrace of an unwed pregnancy. It tarnished your reputation for life. But incredibly, how does Mary respond? (See verse 38.)

RESPOND

Have you ever experienced a major life change, like an unexpected move or upheaval in your family? When things change it's normal to feel all kinds of emotions – fear, anger, excitement, sadness. Chances are, Mary experienced a lot of those feelings at some point, too. But Mary chose to submit to God's plan for her life because she loved and trusted Him.

Bow your head and open your hands, palms up. This is a posture of surrender. Imagine putting the thing that's troubling you most into your open hands. Surrender the whole situation to Jesus. Acknowledge that it's hard to trust Him, and ask Him for divine help. Ask Him to give you a heart like Mary's.

Loving One Another



days until Christmas

Some biblical scholars believe Mary and Elizabeth were cousins; others think Elizabeth was Mary's aunt. Either way, we know that Elizabeth was an older relative to Mary. Why do you think Mary rushed to Elizabeth's home? Elizabeth lived about 50-79 miles away. That's quite a journey for a pregnant woman without a car! Mary was willing to go the distance for the comfort and encouragement of being with someone she loved – someone older and wiser, who was going through a similar experience.

RESPOND

One of the ways we can experience God's love is by being loved by other Christians. In your head, or on paper, make a list of Christians you trust. Think of people you want to emulate – peers and older spiritual leaders in your life. These people are God's gift to you! They are a tangible way to experience His love. Rely on them. Reach out to them honestly and vulnerably when life's hard. Celebrate with them when life's awesome!

If your list is short (or non-existent), ask God to bring Christian friends and leaders into your life. Put yourself in a position to meet these people – show up faithfully for church and student events. Invite a small group leader to mentor you. We were not meant to follow Jesus all alone!

Silent Night, Holy Night



days until Christmas

This week we lit the fourth Advent candle, the Angel's Candle, which represents peace. John 14:27 is a beautiful promise straight from the mouth of Jesus, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your heart be troubled or fearful."

The world has lots of ideas about "peace." It tells us peace comes from fitting in, finding the right relationship, and achieving all our goals. But what if we don't fit in? What if relationships disappoint us? What if we fail to meet our goals? Jesus offers true peace – not fleeting, worldly "peace" that evaporates the moment something goes wrong.

*Silent night, holy night!
All is calm, all is bright.
Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child,
Holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

*Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia,
Christ the Saviour is born!
Christ the Saviour is born*

*Silent night, holy night!
Son of God love's pure light.
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
With dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth*

RESPOND

Two hundred years ago, a young, Austrian priest went for a winter stroll. His name was Joseph Mohr, and his heart was heavy in the wake of the Napoleonic wars. The story goes that Mohr looked out over a quiet, snow-laden town and was so inspired by the peace of it that he sat down and penned *Stille Nacht Heilige Nacht* (that's *Silent Night, Holy Night* in German).

This simple carol has been translated into over 300 languages. Go to discovergrace.com/listen to listen. As you do, reflect on your own life. Where do you need Jesus to quiet your heart and give you true peace?

The Magnificat



days until Christmas

While visiting Elizabeth, Mary's heart is so filled with worship that it overflows in song. Her song is called the *Magnificat*, and through the years, legendary composers like Bach and Mozart have set her beautiful words to music.

In her song, Mary praises God because she recognizes that He has done great things for her (verse 49). Mary could have focused on the difficulties ahead: On the fact that she's an unwed, pregnant woman; that people may not believe her story; and let's not forget, she still has to walk over 50 miles home! But instead of complaining, Mary worships God by celebrating His goodness in her life.

RESPOND

What wonderful things has God done for you? Create your own *Magnificat*. Brainstorm several ways God has revealed His love to you. String your praises together to create a prayer of celebration for the wonderful things God has done for you.

Immanuel, God with Us



days until Christmas

So far, we've looked at the Advent story from Mary's perspective, but our text today gives us a glimpse into Joseph's point of view. In Bible times, when two people were engaged to be married, they couldn't just call the whole thing off. An engagement was legally binding, which meant you had to get a divorce if you no longer wanted to be married.

When Joseph found out Mary was pregnant, he planned to divorce her. How did he plan to do it according to verse 19? What does this reveal about Joseph's character? How did God stop Joseph from divorcing Mary?

RESPOND

Everything that happened to Mary and Joseph was part of God's sovereign plan. It was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Look back at verses 22-23. At the start of our Advent study, we learned four names for Jesus: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Here in verse 23 we see a fifth name. What is it? What does it mean?

Being "with us" isn't just something God does; it's who God is. God could no sooner abandon us than He could abandon His own character. Close in prayer, thanking God for being "Immanuel, God with us."

The Incarnation



days until Christmas

Okay, let's clarify a few things. What's a census? A "census" is like an official head count. Everyone travels to their hometown to register so that the government can have an accurate record of all the people in their region – in this case, the entire Roman world. In biblical times a census was typically used for tax purposes or military recruitment.

How far did Mary and Joseph travel? In order to get to Joseph's hometown of Bethlehem from Nazareth, they had to travel a whopping 90 miles! When at last Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem, the Bible says there's no room left in the inn. But where exactly was Jesus born? Some scholars believe Jesus was born in a stable or barn; others imagine that it looked more like a cave where animals sleep. We're not exactly sure what it looked like, but one thing's certain – it was the humblest beginning imaginable for the King of Kings.

RESPOND

Have you ever thought about the fact that God could've taken any form when He came to earth? Warrior. Ruler. Marvel Hero. But He chose to come as a baby. There's literally no human form weaker or more vulnerable!

"Incarnation" is the theological word for the act of God taking on human form. The next time you wonder if God really understands you, think about the incarnation – about the fact that God has experienced the fullness of humanity from birth and infancy through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. He understands sadness, hunger, exhaustion, and temptation. He understands you. Thank God for His ability to deeply relate with you because of the incarnation.

Glory to God in the Highest



days until Christmas

During the age of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), shepherding was considered honorable. But when the Israelites migrated to Egypt everything changed. The Egyptians were agriculturalists, meaning their livelihood depended on producing crops. What poses a threat to crops? Sheep! Goats! Livestock in general. For this reason, farmers hated shepherds. Believe it or not, the animosity between farmers and shepherds dates all the way back to Cain (farmer) and Able (shepherd). You can see for yourself in Genesis 4:1-8.

Eventually, Egyptian prejudice toward shepherds spread. By the time of Jesus' birth, shepherds were considered despicable – the lowest of the low. In fact, only Luke even mentions them. But get this, God chose them. God chose ordinary, unpopular shepherds to be among the very first people to see the Messiah and share the good news of His birth with the world.

RESPOND

God loves to use ordinary people, just like you and me. He's not looking for the coolest person with the most followers. He's looking for followers. For people who will jump up, just like the shepherds, and take Him at His word – people who are eager to see what He's doing, tell everyone about it, and give God all the glory.

Are you a follower of Jesus? If the answer is, "I don't know," talk to your parents or a Grace pastor about it. It's the most important question you'll ever answer.

The Gift of the Magi



days until Christmas

Jesus was still young, probably around two years old, when the wisemen visited him. We don't know how many wisemen made the journey, but we know they gave Jesus three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts were symbolic.

Gold was a gift for royalty. By giving it to Jesus, the magi recognized His Kingship. Frankincense was made from a special tree bark and used by priests as incense. It was the perfect gift for the Great High Priest. Myrrh was a perfume used in burial, and it foreshadowed the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. In this way, the wisemen worshipped Jesus as the ultimate King, Priest, and Savior of the world.

RESPOND

In two days we'll celebrate Christmas and open tons of gifts. But tonight, before all the festivities, pause and think about what gift you could offer Jesus this year. Could you give Him your trust in a particular situation? Could you offer Him a commitment of some sort? Could you give Him your gratitude or obedience? Choose one thing you'd like to give Jesus this year. Write it down in a journal or tell your parents about it, so you can be reminded of this commitment throughout the new year.

Jesus the Preteen



day until Christmas

So far, we've seen Jesus at birth and two years old. Today in Luke 2:41-52, we catch a glimpse of Him at the beginning of adolescence. He's 12 years old, and He nearly gives his parents a heart attack.

Have you ever thought about the fact that Jesus understands what it's like to be a teenager? He knows how it feels to grow in independence, to be so focused on what you want to do that you don't think to tell Mom and Dad where you'll be.

Jesus was human. Sure, He lived a long time ago, but He still experienced the same basic emotions all teenagers experience. He understands you more than you can imagine.

RESPOND

Spend some time talking to Jesus about what's going on in your life. Ask Him to guide you and teach you, remembering that He once lived through adolescence too.



Merry
Christmas!

Our final text is a beautiful summary of the story of Advent. It's the story of everything, really – the world, humanity, life itself.

When John writes that the “Word” was with God from the very beginning, he’s talking about Jesus. Jesus is the beginning of the whole story. He has always existed, since before time began. In Him is LIFE and He is the LIGHT of all mankind. No amount of darkness can overcome Jesus. Why? Because Jesus won.

He became flesh and lived among us – only He didn’t live like us. He lived perfectly. Sinlessly. Then at just the right time, He died the death we deserve in order to rescue us. Now, to all who will receive Jesus, to those who believe in His name, He gives the right to become children of God. Amen? Hallelujah and Amen!

RESPOND

Today, as you open presents, stuff your face, laugh, and have fun, remember: Jesus is the gift that never grows old. He will always be with you, He will lead you to true peace and joy, and He will love you forever.

Merry Christmas!