

Christmas at Christ Fellowship

Week 2 of Advent | The Angels

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*Holy Anticipation,
that breathtaking space in-between
what has been, what is, what is-to-come.
Where winter dreams reveal secret longings
and winged angels announce the coming of Love.*

*You draw us to the edge of advent possibility
like the song of angels drawing shepherds—
eyes wide and breath held—
waiting, watching
Come settle into our living for awhile
and do not let us settle for too little.*

Amen.

- by Pamela Hawkins, in *Simply Wait: Cultivating Stillness in the Season of Advent*

Imagine a line that goes on for city blocks. What are these people waiting for?

Imagine a crowd. People are pressed together, jostling one another and standing on tiptoe to get a better view. What are they trying to see?

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, there was no line of expectant admirers anticipating the sight of newborn King. There was no throng of people gathered around the manger hoping to catch a glimpse of the Messiah. Yet the lack of a crowd doesn't mean Christ's arrival was unanticipated. The prophets had looked forward to the day when Messiah would come. And the absence of a multitude of devotees doesn't mean his birth went uncelebrated. An unlikely pairing of angelic beings and ordinary shepherds rejoiced over the child.

We've entered the season of Advent, a time when Christians all over the world celebrate Jesus's arrival. Last week we focused on the words of the Prophets. We'll spend this week with the angels as they deliver the most extraordinary messages.

God was doing something so amazing, so incredible that the news had to come from the mouths of supernatural messengers. In the time surrounding Christ's birth, angels brought the news to several people: Zechariah, Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds. This week we'll look at how they reacted to the news and consider how each of us should respond to Jesus' incarnation. Pray that the Spirit will cultivate in you a holy anticipation for the coming of Jesus Christ.

Advent Guide

At the end of Day 5 you'll find an Advent guide you can use on Sundays between now and Christmas, and on Christmas Eve. Advent officially started last Sunday, November 29, but if you missed last week, it's not too late to start! Grab a few candles and your Bible and gather this Sunday with some family or friends to celebrate the season of Advent.

Day 1 | Zechariah

Zechariah was an old priest who served in the temple in Jerusalem. Even though he and his wife loved and obeyed God, they had not been blessed with children. By the time we're introduced to the couple in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, Zechariah likely assumes he would never have a child. That is, until an angel tells him otherwise. Let's see how he responds to an angel bringing news that seems too good to be true.

Luke tells us that Zechariah had been chosen for a special honor. As priest, he would enter the holy place in the temple to offer incense to Yahweh. While Zechariah was likely filled with wonder at this opportunity, it is unlikely he expected to encounter an angel.

Luke 1:11–17

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹ The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth were going to be blessed with a very special baby boy. Their son, later called John the Baptist, would have an important role to fulfill. He was going to prepare the way for the Messiah. Stunned and disbelieving, Zechariah asks for a sign to assure him. The angel gives him one all right; Zechariah wouldn't speak again until the baby was born.

Sometimes we think that if only God would send us an angel to tell us what we should do, we'd do it without hesitation. Yet, Zechariah, one of Yahweh's priests, doubted the angel standing

right in front of him. It's faith in God, not just evidence of his will that leads to obedience.

Zechariah learned his lesson though. When Zechariah was finally able to speak, he praised God for keeping his promises — promises that would become realities through Jesus.

Luke 1:67–69; 76–79

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

*⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.*

*⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David*

*⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,*

*⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,*

*⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven*

*⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,*

to guide our feet into the path of peace."

The old priest had many months of silence to reflect on the angel's message and what God would do through the miraculous birth of his son, John. We can imagine him pondering the words of the prophets from Moses to Malachi. Could it be that the one for whom they had waited was finally coming? That Zechariah's son would prepare the people for the coming Messiah?

That's exactly what would happen. God was being true to his word and was miraculously intervening in history to rescue humanity. The salvation he offered wouldn't be just for a single nation who needed to escape the tyranny of an earthly empire, but a rescue offered to all from the dominion of sin and death.

John the Baptist would dedicate his life to proclaiming that the Kingdom of God had come through the arrival of the Promised One. For all "living in darkness" and "in the shadow of death," the Messiah brings light and life. By trusting in this salvation, we are put on "the path of peace" — a right relationship with God.

In his prayer, Zechariah anticipated what was to come. During Advent, we look back to what God has done through Christ. But we can also look forward to another arrival of Jesus Christ and a time when our faith will become sight. We anticipate a time when we will fully experience complete salvation, victory over death, and intimacy with our heavenly Father.

Take some time to pray and thank God for being true to his word and sending Jesus. Ask him to reveal himself to you in a fresh way during this Advent season. Praise him as you look back to what the Father has done for you in Christ, what he is doing for you now by the Spirit's power and what he will do for you in eternity.

Day 2 | Mary

As we saw when the angel appeared to Zechariah, a visit from an angel is an awesome and overwhelming experience. From the angel Gabriel, Zechariah received the astonishing news that he would have a son and that his son would prepare the people for the arrival of the Lord.

Yet, Gabriel wasn't done delivering astonishing news. He had another amazing message to deliver — this time to Mary, the young woman who would give birth to the Messiah. Let's see how Mary responds to the news.

Luke 1:26–38

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² 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, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ 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. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Imagine being Mary and getting this message from an angel. Not only would be the presence of an angel overwhelming, but his message was equally astounding. Mary was not only standing face to face with one of the angelic host, but she was hearing extraordinary news. Even though she was a virgin, she would give birth to a child. This incredibly special child would be God's Son.

What thoughts must have run through her mind? An unmarried, pregnant girl in the first century would be ostracized. She would bring shame to her family. She must have wondered what her parents would think. How will Joseph respond? Will anyone believe me when I tell them how I am with child? God had chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah, but it could cost her everything.

The Bible is full of seemingly impossible things that God calls us to do. We are to love our enemies, forgive those who hurt us, and show kindness to those our society considers outcasts. We are to turn from evil, even when our culture calls it good, and joyfully and generously give

our time, money and talents to serve others. We are to seek unity in the body of Christ with all kinds of people, no matter how different we all are. How can we be like Mary and say, “I am the Lord’s servant”?

We trust God — not only because we know his way is best, but because we trust him to make the impossible possible.

Mary was not called to do the impossible, but to trust in God’s will. She was invited to be a part of God’s astonishing plan to save and redeem humanity, and she responded with humility, faith, joy and acceptance. “May your word be fulfilled.”

As part of her response to God’s call, Mary sings a song of praise to the Lord who has chosen her.

*And Mary said:
“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name. (Luke 1:46–49)*

Mary gives all the glory to God, for he is the one who has done great things. That should be our attitude as well. We worship the God of all power and love and respond with trust and obedience.

Spend some time in prayer praising God for the gift of the Holy Spirit and asking him to help you echo Mary’s response to his will for your life.

Day 3 | Joseph

Through Scripture, we are traveling with the angels this week. As we prepare our hearts for Christmas, we are considering the stunning announcements the angelic hosts made as they prepared the way for the Lord’s arrival. We are taking note of the responses they received.

Not only did God announce his intentions to Zechariah and Mary, God sent an angel to Joseph. Let’s turn to the Gospel of Matthew and Joseph’s encounter with the angel.

Matthew 1:18–21

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.”

There are lots of reasons for picking a particular name for your child. People may name a child after a family member, or maybe they just liked the way it sounds. In the Bible, a name can sometimes tell us something significant about a person. In the Hebrew language, the term “name” probably meant “sign” or “distinctive mark” A name may indicate “the essential character of that which the name has been given.”¹

The name “Jesus,” is Greek and the equivalent to the Hebrew name, **Yeshua**, which means “Yahweh is Savior.” Jesus’s name revealed something essential about his character that the people in his day found hard to accept. How could a poor carpenter’s son of questionable parentage be the Savior of the Jewish people? Yet Jesus would be the Savior of not just the Jews, but of everyone who puts their faith in him. “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13).

After giving us an account of Joseph’s encounter with the angel, Matthew goes on to explain that Jesus’ birth was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and reminds his readers of another name that is associated with Jesus — Immanuel.

Matthew 1:22–25

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). 24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Jesus was and is Immanuel, “God with us.” Through Jesus, the God of the universe invites us into an intimate relationship with him. He comes to us and lives in the midst of our world rather than ask the impossible, that we go to him instead. Jesus does not magically snatch us out of the suffering of this world, rather he walks with us in the midst of it. He is God-with-us.

Jesus invites us to experience *God-with-us* today and forever. He cares about whether or not his presence is part of our daily awareness. Cultivating any intimate relationship requires awareness and time. This is especially true of our relationship with God. Time spent with God in prayer and meditating on Scripture is part of the way the Holy Spirit instructs, transforms and attunes us to God’s presence. Fasting, singing praises, spending time in nature, and worshipping God through serving are other practices you might want to consider. During this busy holiday season, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to practices that will help you experience Jesus — your Savior and Immanuel.

Be sure to set aside time during the Christmas season to spend with Jesus. As you consider how you will spend that time, make a plan that you can stick to. Ask yourself, what do you most need from Immanuel during this season? How can you show him your love and gratitude?

Day 4 | The Shepherds

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel. Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 880.

The angels delivered the news that Jesus was coming. The people who had an essential part to play in God's grand redemptive drama were prepared by those angelic messengers. God was ready to do something extraordinary. He would break into history in a thoroughly unexpected way — by coming in human flesh. The eternal Son of God who had existed in an incomprehensible bond of love with the Father and Spirit since before time began, was coming to live with his creation. Imagine the angels' anticipation. It was happening!

They just had to wait nine months. Having bound himself to human flesh, the Son of God developed inside his mother's womb just as every other human has done. The angels eagerly awaited the day when Jesus, the incarnate Son of God took his first breath. On that day, the celebration could start!

At last the angels could make the royal proclamation! They appear in all their glory, astounding a group of shepherds who were tending to their flocks.

Luke 2:10–14

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

The message the angel proclaims is not only for the Jewish people, but for all of humanity. All are welcomed to share in the Father's joy because this newborn is a gift to all people. Jesus is Savior, Messiah, and Lord. Where could this extraordinary child be found? The angel tells the shepherds that he can be found wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Then a legion of heavenly beings burst onto the scene and a multitude of angelic voices offer praises to God. Can we even begin to fathom what that was like? They worship God in heaven and proclaim peace to those on earth "on whom his favor rests." And to whom is this favor given? Those who respond to his call and receive his salvation. Peace is not just the absence of conflict, but a wholeness that comes from a right relationship with God. When we are reconciled to the Father and yield to his Spirit, peace will not only flood our own souls, but will pour out into our relationships with others.

The path to peace begins with a baby in a manger. This child would grow into the man who casts out demons, heals the sick, and speaks truth with authority. The path to peace leads to the cross where the faultless Son of God bears the sins of humanity. It is from that cross that Jesus cries out to God in agony, but receives no answer (Mark 15:34). The Son lost his peace with the Father

so that we might gain it. By his death, we are reconciled to God, and because of Christ's resurrection, we have the hope of eternal life.

The Creator sacrifices himself for the creation, redeems it, and will one day completely restore it. That is the astonishing plan of God. By putting our faith in the Savior and following him, we can be redeemed and restored too. We can be among those who receive peace because in Christ, God's favor rests on us.

The salvation God has provided through Christ is amazing, even to the angelic host. 1 Peter tells us, "Even angels long to look into these things" (1 Peter 1:12). Don't let this Christmas season pass by without truly reflecting on the miraculous salvation you have received through Christ.

The shepherds set out immediately to find Jesus. May we all have the same response to the call of God on our lives.

Have you accepted God's offer of peace through Christ? Is Jesus your Lord and Savior?

If so, what does this salvation mean to you? Reflect on the ways following Jesus has changed your life and praise God for the transformation.

If not, what better time of year to make a decision to follow Christ? You can pray to receive him now.

Day 5 | Reflect, Connect, Respond

God's holy angels delivered the amazing news that the Savior of the world was coming! Consider how that news was received, and how we should receive it today.

Reflect

Reflect on the passages we looked at this week:

- [Luke 1:11-17](#)
- [Luke 1:67-69; 76-79](#)
- [Luke 1:26-38](#)
- [Matthew 1:18-25](#)
- [Luke 2:10-14](#)

What lessons can we learn from the various reactions to the angels' announcements of Jesus' birth?

Connect

Many of our Christmas traditions are about reminding us of a brighter, warmer and more

carefree time of year. We make the best of winter with reminders of light and life. We put up Christmas trees and decorate with garland made of evergreen branches. We hang twinkling lights on the eaves of our house or the balcony of our apartment. We enjoy warm cider and roaring fires. Though it is cold, dark and lifeless now, we anticipate the renewal of spring. The change of the seasons points us to a God who brings life from barrenness. Spring is the promise we cling to in winter.

When Jesus came, he offered new life. Everyone who has accepted his offer by putting their faith in him has been given a deposit on an even greater renewal. Like the green shoots that come after the final frost, we see evidence of new life in our own Spirit-led transformation. As we turn from our sin and break free of its shame, we are glimpsing the promise of an even greater transformation. At the second Advent of our Savior, we will experience complete renewal along with all of creation. The Son will banish the darkness and his life conquers all death. We'll bask in the warmth and light of the glory of God.

As you reflect on the anticipation the angels must have felt at seeing the marvelous plan of God unfold before their eyes, allow yourself to anticipate the final act in this drama of redemption. As wonderful as Christmas is, it should remind us to be ready for the second arrival of our King. The angels brought news of great joy and peace. Consider how we should live in light of that news today. And think about someone to whom you should deliver the message of salvation.

Not everyone feels joy at Christmas. Some of us are burdened by loss or grief. Allow the lights and evergreen branches of Christmas to bring you hope and comfort because of the faith you have in Jesus, the Savior and King. We can look forward to the day when those feelings will be distant memories. In the meantime, reach out ask for help to bear your burdens. You might be surprised by how willing others are to listen, pray, and share the love of Christ.

Respond

What is your next step?

The angels received different responses from each of the people with whom they shared Christ's birth. Is there a message the Lord is sending you this Christmas? You don't need the arrival of an angel to tell you God's will when so much of it is spelled out in Scripture. How can you seek and respond to the call of the Holy Spirit.

Christmas provides us with an opportunity to have meaningful conversations with others about Jesus. It's also a time when we can offer faithful presence and prayer to those struggling with loneliness, addiction, anxiety, or other issues. Is there a friend, neighbor, or family member the Spirit is prompting you to check on? Make a plan to reach out.

Merry Christmas! Advent is a tradition that Christians around the world observe and can help you and your family focus on Jesus during the whole Christmas season. This is just one of many plans that are out there. You can use it as written or alter it to add your own traditions. Whether you are raising young children, living in an “empty nest,” or sharing a place with roommates, consider how you can come together with family or friends to celebrate the coming of the Messiah!

What is Advent?

The word “advent” comes from the Latin word that means “coming.” Advent is a time of expectant waiting as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus and look forward to his return.

Traditionally, advent is celebrated on the four Sundays before Christmas and on Christmas Eve. Some Christians use an Advent wreath or “crown” that sits on a table. Four candles are placed around the wreath, and one is added in the center. A different candle is lit each week, and the center candle is lit on Christmas Eve. During this special time, Scriptures are read and hymns are sung in celebration of Jesus’ arrival!

2020 Advent Guide

To follow this Advent calendar, you’ll need: a wreath or “crown” of some kind where you can safely place the candles, five candles (a gold, white, green, purple and red), and a Bible. You’ll also want to find versions of the hymns listed below so you can sing along.

Adapt this so that it fits your family. Use a children’s Bible with pictures if you have little ones. If you don’t have an official Advent wreath or the right color candles, just use what you do have. Be creative! The point is to gather around the table with others and remember what’s truly special about this time of year — the arrival of Jesus, our Savior and Lord.

Week 1 (11/26) The Prophets

- Gold Candle: for prophets who announced Christ’s coming
- Scripture Readings: Isaiah 9:2–7, Isaiah 53:1–5, Micah 5:2, Luke 2:25–38 (Simeon and Anna)
- Hymn: *O Come O Come Emmanuel*

Week 2 (12/3) The Angels

- White Candle: for the angels who announced Jesus’ coming
- Scripture Readings: Luke 1:11–45 (to Zechariah and Mary), Matthew 1:18–25 (to Joseph)
- Hymn: *Hark the Herald*

Week 3 (12/10) The Shepherds

- Green Candle: for the shepherds who came to worship Jesus

- Scripture Reading: Luke 2:8-20
- Hymn: *Joy to the World*

Week 4 (12/17) The Wise Men

- Purple Candle: for the wise men who came to worship Jesus
- Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1-18
- Hymn: *We Three Kings*

Christmas Eve (12/24) Jesus!

- Red Candle: for the coming of Jesus
- Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-7; 40, John 3:16
- Hymns: *Away in a Manger, What Child is This?, Amazing Grace*