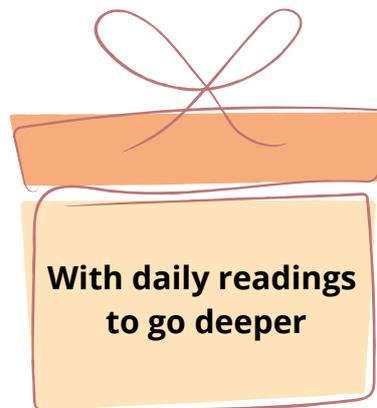




Devotions from the Jesse Tree

25 DAYS OF ADVENT



**With daily readings
to go deeper**

Welcome to the **first** day of Advent.

The Place Where Love Grows

We start with a family — a special family. Jesse's family. Jesse was the father of King David; Jesus, the Messiah, is the "son of David." Jesse's family wasn't a perfect family, however — in fact, this family tree had come to fall so far from the closeness of God, that it looked more like a stump than a tree.

Where could hope possibly be, for a stump of a family tree?

But God wasn't finished with Jesse's family; hope sprang forth! Isaiah 11:1— "Out of the stump of Jesse will grow a shoot – a new branch bearing fruit from the old root."

And here we begin our journey; of an entire testament proclaiming the promise and hope of Jesus' coming to us. Jesus would come to bring peace—and so much more—reuniting us with God.

Read Isaiah 11:1-10

The branch of hope springing forth in Jesus, would become a crown of thorns, a rugged cross —and a bridge, for us. *How did Jesus become a bridge for us to be reunited with God?*

Jesus didn't come for only some of us, he came for us all—your grumpy cousin, your hard-to-get-along-with mother, your Muslim neighbour, etc. If the wolf will live with the lamb, and there will be peace (v6), *who in your life needs to know that God loves them?*

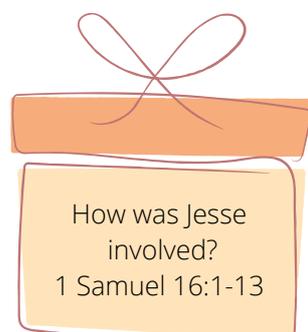
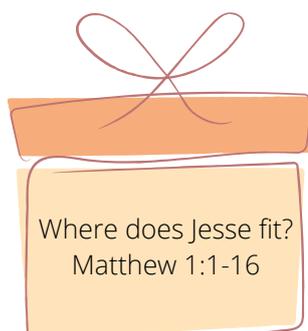
Who needs to hear the story of hope that sprang from a hopeless place?

When has God brought about hope, or a promise of hope, in a 'stump' of a situation in your life?

Jesus restored peace between us and God by sacrificing himself. "Can I have peace with my grumpy cousin, my hard-to-get-along-with mother, or my Muslim neighbour?" In Jesus, there won't be a difference between Jew or Gentile—my neighbour or myself (Galatians 3:28).

What are you going to do to allow a branch of hope and peace to spring forth from the stumps in your life? In what ways can you offer help and peace to people, and begin to bridge them to the love of God?

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **second** day of Advent.

Created by Love

In the beginning, Jesus was there. When the universe roared into existence, Jesus was there. And when God had us in mind, Jesus was there, too. "Let us make human beings..."

God spoke and the world leapt into being; but God breathed and we came alive, because He carefully crafted us in love. God spoke and his word created the heavens and the earth, and everything in it. In Jesus, the word became flesh and sought to create with us! A new beginning, a new relationship, a restored dwelling together.

Read Genesis 1

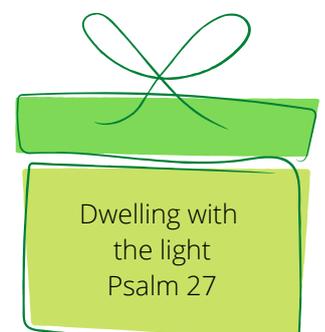
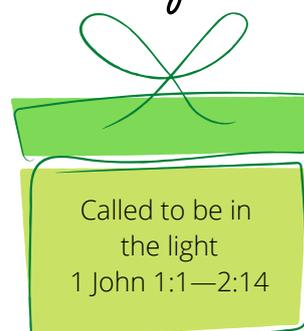
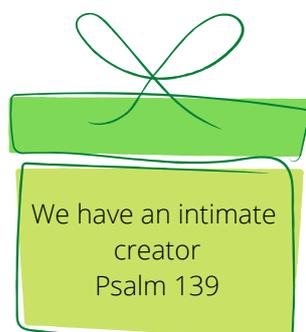
God seems to be making a point about darkness and light! But have you noticed how He emphasises it? Genesis 1:5b says, **and there was evening, and there was morning – the first day** (6 times). WE normally say that a day is 'daytime followed by night time', not night followed by day... God knew that darkness needed light! In the darkness, WE need light! So He enshrined this truth into the pattern of His people. The Jewish Sabbath starts on Friday evening and ends on Saturday afternoon. It starts with 12 hours of darkness followed by 12 hours of light.

God is interested in us going from darkness to light!

In creation God is clearly interested in light dispelling darkness. In John 1:1-9 (read it!) Jesus is declared to be this light, still today. John says Jesus is **the true light that gives light to every man**. *What is a time in your life where you have been reminded of God as the light? When have you experienced his light shining brightly in the darkness —and overcoming it?*

John 1:1-3 also tells us that when, at the beginning, **God said**, and **it was**, that **Jesus was the Word that spoke!** It was Jesus who brought us into being!! So why wouldn't this Jesus still chase after us now! His love didn't stop – **God so loved the world...** (John 3:16). That's why He came for us—**the Word became flesh** (John 1:14)! Creation and Christmas go hand in hand! Those He created (you, your neighbour, the Chinese, the Africans, the Buddhists – all human beings...) He is intimately involved with, and still chases to have a relationship with! *Who do you know needs to know that they have a loving creator—a loving saviour—who knows them better than they know themselves? How can you be a messenger of the light, overcoming darkness?*

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **third** day of Advent.

God is Looking for You

"Where are you?" Have you ever lost someone?
God has... Were you frantic? *"Adam! Where are you!"*
That's today's story...

What does love do when it loses someone?
What does love do when it finds that someone?

God is love!

In the Garden of Eden, the evil one hinted to Eve that God 'can't really love you! He always holds the best back from you!' He snuck into Eve's heart. He stole her life!

But God (LOVE remember) is searching. He wants people to enter back into His happiness!

Read Genesis 3

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, God came looking with a question: not, why did you do that! Not, what did you do wrong!? God's very first question is: **Where are you?**

God's first question to you is not: Why did you do that! Or, what did you do wrong? If the story of Adam and Eve's fall into sin teaches us anything about God's attitude to us, then you will know that His first question to you is always: where are you? "Wherever you are, I will find you. Whatever you've done won't stop me seeking you, to heal you..."

God desires to be with us; *Where are you?*
Are you drawing near to God, or are you hiding from him in some way?

What's your story? How did God seek you and pursue you?
In what ways can you see that God is pursuing you now?
In what way can you see God pursuing those around you?
In what ways can he use you?

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **fourth** day of Advent.

God's Tears

The stories of Advent all give us some insight as to the value and experience of Jesus' life as a human being. Why did He come as a human being? How can the flood teach us about this...?

Consider this... Just as the door on the side of the Ark (6:16) was opened and the world was renewed (8:16-19), this looks forward to when Jesus' side was opened by a spear and the blood and water poured out. This depicts the creation of Jesus' bride, the church, in baptism. And the church is God's new creation that offers renewal to humanity.

Read Genesis 6 - 8

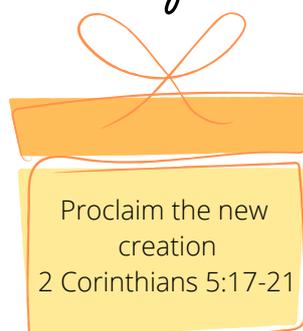
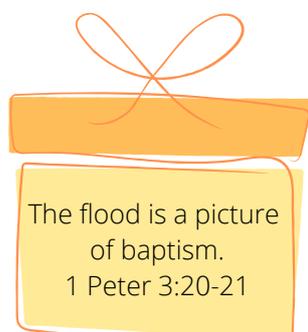
Genesis 6:5 says, 'The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that *every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.*' Since the fall, we have had a tendency to lean away from God, and towards everything... not-of-God. Ourselves. Selfishness. The world.

How's your heart? Where do you find it leaning most these days? How does your heart-lean affect your actions? How can you guard against a heart that only leans away from God, and restore a heart that lean towards God? It isn't recorded in Genesis, but when we think about Noah building the ark, we often assume there must have been some kind of ridicule from the people around him: "God told you to build a what?" "A big boat? Ridiculous." "A ginormous flood? Yeah right!" "What is 'rain' anyway?"

Noah faithfully followed God, and obeyed all that God had commanded (Gen. 6:22, 7:5, 7:9) He trusted God's plans; and God was able to save Noah and his family.

When has God asked you to trust Him for something that didn't really 'add up' according to the world? Were you faithful in obeying all God commanded you, trusting the big picture to him? How can you encourage Christians around you, who are "building arks," obeying God, and being ridiculed?

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **fifth** day of Advent.

Count The Stars (Your blessings!)

The stories of Advent all give us some insight as to the point and value of Jesus' life for us as a human being. Abraham—the 'father of faith'—is a figure of Jesus who had ultimate faith in the Father. God called Abraham to leave everything. God said He would supply. What does that call mean for you? How does Jesus come into your answer? - *"You will have everything you need, because I am with you!!"*

God's promise to Abraham is all about Jesus bringing the blessing to human beings that God intended in the first creation. Jesus indeed makes a new creation of our hearts and lives.

Read Genesis 12:1 - 9

Actually, it's a good practise to notice what is going on in the background of a story. Before God blesses Abram we read that his wife Sarai is barren (Genesis 11:30). God's people were not about to grow by the natural will and abilities of people. Notice also: only five chapters later (chapter 17) when Abram is 99 and God is about to do something miraculous—make him the father of nations—does Abram become Abraham.

Remember the **seven day** blessing of God's act of creation...? The NIV Study Bible says: God's promise to Abraham has a seven fold structure. 1. *I will make you a great nation* 2. *I will bless you* 3. *I will make your name great* 4. *You will be a blessing* 5. *I will bless those who bless you* 6. *Whoever curses you I will curse* 7. *All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.* God's original blessing on all mankind (1:28) would be restored through the offspring of Abram. The purpose of Jesus' birth! The seventh promise is quoted by Peter (Acts 3:25) to Jewish onlookers when he defended the healing of a crippled man. And Paul quoted the same (Galatians 3:8) to convince Gentiles (everybody else!) that they are children of Abraham, and God's children, if they simply trust, like Abraham. Have faith! Have faith! Have faith! It's a simple but powerful life!

God not only blesses us, but makes US into a blessing! He doesn't just give us His gift of love. He makes US into a gift of love for others! And remember, no matter how dark it gets, there are always millions of stars! Blessings to light our way! Jesus was born under one bright star that led people to Him—God's greatest gift, HIMSELF.

Readings for Today

God effectively said to Abram, 'Leave everything. I love you.'
We are affluent like Abram.
How hard is it to use everything for God?



Solomon desired to bring God's wisdom and blessing on his people. God blessed him with much more!

Welcome to the **sixth** day of Advent.

The Gift of Laughter

Sarah, Abraham's wife, faithfully followed the 'father of faith' when God called Abraham to leave everything, and trust in His supply. Standing by his side, Sarah struggled with the promise of Abraham being the father of many nations, as a woman well past child-bearing age. However, Sarah learns what we also need to learn—that God works in unexpected and mysterious ways!

We see Sarah's doubtful laughter turn to true joyful laughter, as God blesses her with a son, Isaac. God gives us this gift of laughter, too—this gift of joy and surprise, when we experience Him working in our life!

Read Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

God works in unlikely, unexpected, mysterious ways—ways that don't make sense!—so that only He can get the glory! The battle plan for Jericho was... walking, and playing music. Abraham was 75... and God said it was time to move on, start again, and become a great nation. He was 100 by the time Isaac came along! Sarah **could not have said** she had a son in her own strength, and in her own ability—it was impossible! And because it was impossible, God must get the glory.

Have you experienced God working unexpectedly? What has God done, that has brought you surprising joy—and even made you laugh? How did you use this testimony to bring glory to God?

As far as bitterness and sorrow is from joy- that's how big the transformational power of Jesus is, and the *difference* he makes when he is in our lives!

When has God made all the difference in a situation in your life — like Sarah's joy when God gave her a miracle child? What is a situation that you know of now, that needs divine intervention to make a transformational difference? What are you praying for?

Share this prayer need with a friend today, and commit together to praying for a Jesus-transforming difference.

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **seventh** day of Advent.

Here I Am

Learning to trust God can be hard; but it is *so necessary to learn* before we can expect to live to the fullest, in God's will, as he desires for us. Trusting God means that we are not only willing to listen to him, but faithful to obey what he asks of us—even when it doesn't make sense.

Abraham trusted God, and was faithful to obey, even when God asked for a painful sacrifice — his only son, Isaac. Only through his obedience to the Lord, could Abraham taste the delightful fruit of God's **faithfulness**, when he stepped in to provide a ram for the sacrifice, instead of Isaac! (Read more about this in Genesis 22!)

Are you obedient to God when it doesn't make sense— or even when He seems to be asking you for something very painful, or of great sacrifice? Do you ever trust him, and obey, in circumstances where it doesn't make sense so that you are able to see the fruit of His faithfulness?

Read Genesis 22

"Abraham named that place The LORD Provides" (v. 14)

It took the people of Israel 40 years, living in the desert, to learn to trust in God's daily provision before they entered the Promised Land. Elijah spent time in the wilderness, during a famine and drought, learning to trust God before he went on to call fire down from heaven on Mount Carmel.

Do you trust God? What in your life, reflects your trust in God? Do you ask him for your daily bread, and then let him provide it? Can you recognise seasons of 'learning to trust' in your own life? How has times of learning to trust become fruit of God working powerfully in your life later?

It was a practice, in the Old Testament, to set-up altars and name places in order to remember what God had done. Abraham named the mountain, 'The LORD Will Provide' as a reminder to all people to come that the Lord would be faithful in providing, as he did in providing the ram in place of Isaac. *What reminders can you set-up in your own life (in your home, car, office, etc) to remind you of what God has done, and who he is?*

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **eighth** day of Advent.

Climbing Up

If Cain and Abel started “sibling rivalry”, Jacob and Esau continued the tradition of it with fervour: stolen birthrights in exchange for food, deceiving your father (with the help of your mother!) to steal your brother’s blessing as the firstborn son; and let’s throw in a death threat, for good measure.

We pick up the story of Jacob after he runs away from home: headed to Harran to hide out with Uncle Laban, Jacob stops for the night to rest. He lays a stone under his head as a pillow, falls asleep, and dreams. Jacob sees a stairway to heaven, with angels ascending and descending. God reveals himself to Jacob as the God of his grandfather, Abraham, and father, Isaac. He reiterates the promise he gave to Abraham, that Jacob will be the father of many nations—and many people will be blessed through him. God reminds Jacob that he is always with him. God comes to Jacob in his desperate loneliness and in the midst of chaos; God meets us where we are! Just as God reminded Jacob, God reminds us of the great plans he has for us.

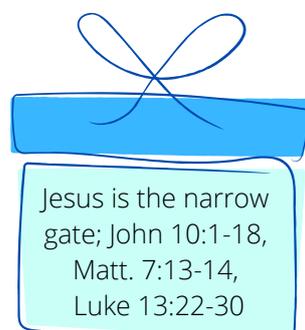
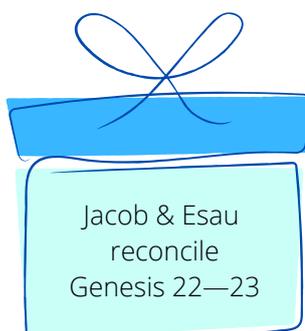
Read Genesis 28:10-22

Jacob first saw a stairway to heaven in a dream. Today, we may look at the way to heaven as a stairway or a ladder of ‘righteousness’ that we feel we ought to climb to reach God. *Do you struggle with pride? Do you fall into the pattern of thinking you are ‘one rung ahead’ of others in this journey of faith?*

But Jesus isn’t sitting at the top of the ladder, waiting for us to struggle our way to the top of a never-ending, impossibly-perfect climb. Jesus isn’t waiting for us to reach heaven—to reach perfection—to reach any “level of righteousness” by which we might save ourselves and get to heaven. Jesus came to **become the ladder** (John 1:51) by which we could come to heaven at all. That climb which was impossible on our own, has become a road by which we must cling to Jesus who is the Way (John. 14:6). *Jesus has become the way for **all**. Do you proclaim this message, or do you keep it to yourself? If life is not about earning salvation by improving in righteousness, what does Jesus ask of us, clinging to him as the Way?*

Not sure where to start? Try: 1 John 2:6, 1 Peter 1:13-16, Ephesians 2:8-10, Matthew 16:24-27, 28:18-20, John 13:34-35, Acts 1:8, James 1:27

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **ninth** day of Advent.

Surprise Gifts

Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons, was well-loved and favoured. You have probably heard of Joseph's coat of many colours? This was a gift from Jacob, to demonstrate his favour. Joseph was so painfully obviously the favourite son that it created a rift between him and his brothers - they hated him! In fact, they hated him so much, they sold him into slavery in Egypt.

Can you imagine your siblings selling you, to be a slave in a foreign land?

But, you know what? God worked even this, **for good**. Joseph was a slave, a prisoner, framed, forgotten. But, as you'll read in his story, that wasn't the end! God used Joseph's lowly position, to put him in the right place at the right time, for God to use: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done," Joseph tells his brothers (Gen. 50:20). He realised God at work throughout the worst of situations. *Can you?*

Read Genesis 37 - 50

(Or, read Genesis 37, 41:14-57, 42:1-8, 45:1-15, 50:16-21, for the highlight reel.

But fourteen chapters doesn't take as long as you think to read, and you'll probably enjoy it. It will give you the whole picture of the story, too.)

Joseph was sold out by his brothers, into slavery; that God would be able to protect his people during the famine through Joseph. Jesus would be sold out by his friends, and crucified; that God would be able to redeem and protect many through his death and resurrection.

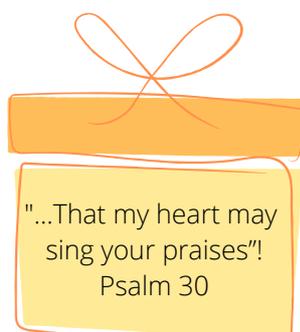
When have you experienced God bringing good from a bad situation?

Has God been able to use you for a 'greater good' through a situation of lowliness you have been in?

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang taught us: "From the ashes of disaster grow the roses of success!" Can you picture God is the gardener, growing roses of goodness from ashes of disaster? He is the God of the impossible; the God of the miraculous; the God who turns mourning to dancing; bringing good from all things.

Teen Missions teaches the story of Joseph in the Bible class, "God's Way Up Is Down." Jesus taught about the way to greatness—through servanthood! *Can you see how God worked this out in Joseph? Can you see God working this out in your life, too?*

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **tenth** day of Advent.

Ten Love Rules

Moses ascended on Mt Sinai, to meet with God—thunder, lightning and a thick cloud covered the mountain top. God gave Moses the 10 Commandments—the foundation of following Him.

One way we can understand these commandments is as 10 promises about life with God, that show God's love for us, and our love for him. "I am God," He says. "Follow me, and worship me, and no one else. My way is the only way—and it is good, and loving. Don't desire anything but me, and you will see the goodness of life as I planned it to be—love in the right order, goodness in good order."

We demonstrate our love for God in obeying his commands—this is what Jesus said in John 14:15, "If you love me, keep my commands." While we are obedient, when we love God we find that our desires change—and we understand the goodness of His ways, and his 10 "love rules."

Read Deuteronomy 5, Exodus 20:1-21

We are visiting the heart of God's commands today: it is obvious that God has a way of life in mind for his people that is set apart, pure, holy and *different* from the world around. He chose us out of the world (John 15:19, 1 Peter 2:9, Ephesians 1:4) to be *different from it*. God's ways are different from the world—they are rooted in goodness and love.

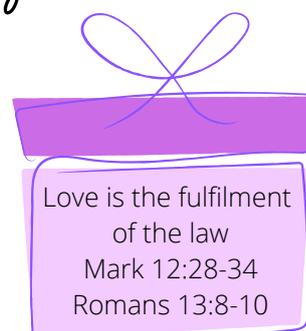
Tozer, in his book 'The Price of Neglect,' wrote this: "Religion today is not transforming the people; rather it is being transformed by the people. It is not raising the moral level of society; it is descending to society's own level and congratulating itself that it has scored a victory because society is smilingly accepting its surrender."

*Do you see the goodness of God's way, or do you struggle to see this?
(Do you need to pray Psalm 119:18?) Where can you see compromise of God's will and God's way in relation to love and morality? What stand will you take for the sake of the truth today?*

Read: Deuteronomy 30:11-20

God has set before you a choice. *Which way have you chosen?
Do you need to confess and repent, and turn to God's love and goodness, in His way?*

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **eleventh** day of Advent.

The Red Rope

Rahab had *heard* of God, and His chosen people: she had *heard* about how God had dried up the Red Sea when He led the people out of Egypt—and she had *heard* of their defeat of the Amorite kings, Sihon and Og.

Rahab didn't know God for herself, but because of what she had heard, she *knew* that God was the one true God in heaven and on earth. Without knowing God personally, she *knew* it was important to obey Him, and follow His ways. Rahab hid two Israelite spies on her roof—risking her own life to save two of the Lord's people! Rahab followed God's way, when she neither knew Him nor understood Him. (*How much more ought we, who do know God, follow Him and obey Him!*)

Obedience to God brings about radical transformational power. God saved Rahab and her family in the destruction of Jericho; He took her life, which was headed down a wrong path, and turned it around through her simple choice to follow His way—Rahab was transformed and redeemed!

Read Joshua 2, 6:22-25

Rahab hung a scarlet cord from the window of her house—by this cord, Joshua would know she had honoured her oath, and she and her family would be saved. Do you think it was a coincidence that the rope was red? The red rope—the scarlet colour of blood—echoes back to the blood of the lambs on the doorframes during the Passover in Egypt, by which God's people were saved when God passed over. This foreshadows the blood of the Lamb, Jesus, by which we are saved through his sacrifice. Even 'redemption' - the very word! - reminds us of the colour of the rope by which Rahab was saved!

We have been saved by Jesus; we do not need to hang a rope from our window, or paint blood on our doorframes. Who in your life hasn't yet been redeemed and transformed by God? Use your red rope (or ribbon!) as a reminder to pray for salvation this week for someone in your life.

Rahab was not only saved, but transformed. She and her family became a part of the people of Israel, living with them (even amongst them!) for the rest of their life! God actually included Rahab in Jesse's family tree—the family tree of Jesus! An outsider, walking down a path that was leading her away from God! Rahab married Salmon, who was the father of Boaz, the father of Obed, the father of Jesse... the father of King David. Now that, is a pretty clear statement from God: "You are in my family now, Rahab." A life, transformed, turned upside-down, following God.

Welcome to the **twelfth** day of Advent.

The Little Things

Rahab was a foreigner, brought into God's family through obedience and radical transformation. Ruth was also a foreigner, who married Naomi's son. Unfortunately, he died. Instead of returning to her family, as was tradition, Ruth chose to stay on with her mother-in-law, Naomi— "Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.

Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her." Talk about loyalty!

So the two of them travelled to Naomi's old hometown, Bethlehem. God would knit together a foreigner (Ruth) and her mother, ultimately into a very special family—one that would eventually include Jesus! Jesus, born in Bethlehem, would be treated as a foreigner, but He would love us with a tenacity like Ruth!

Read Ruth

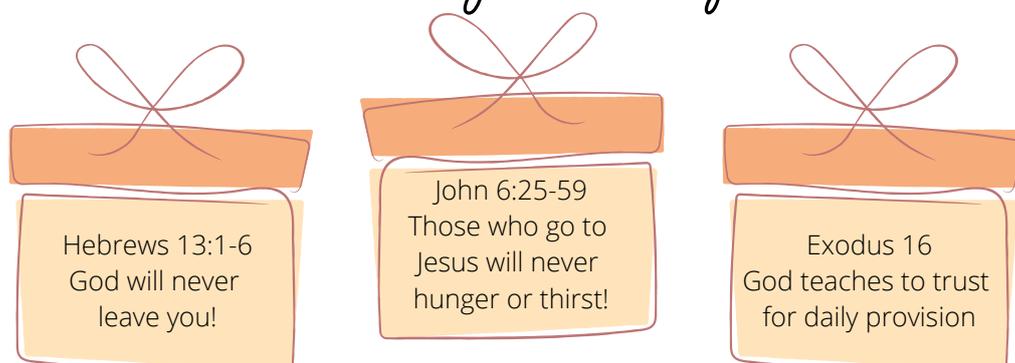
Can you see the little miracles in Ruth's life—the things that seemed to just happen in the right way, at the right time? When Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem—the "house of bread" - Ruth *just happened* to harvest wheat in the field of the man who had the right to redeem her family's land. Boaz *just happened* to meet Ruth, who just happened to tell him all about her life. And Boaz *just happened* to help Ruth out, buy back Naomi's family land—and take Ruth as his wife! Boaz also *just happened* to be the son of Rahab and Salmon (whom we talked about last week) who *just happened* to have been redeemed by God and brought into his family. Ruth and Boaz then *just happened* to have a son, Obed, who eventually *just happened* to have a son Jesse—who just happened to have a son, David. King David! Several generations down this family line, would *just happen* to be Jesus. **Coincidence? Or little miracles?**

From Bethlehem, the house of bread, to Jesus, the bread of life.

What little miracles have you seen in the past few days?

How can you keep your eyes open to notice the little things God is doing all around you?

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **thirteenth** day of Advent.

Looking at Things Inside Out

God looks at us—and sees so much more than we can see. God sees our hearts, hears our thoughts, and knows us, better than we know ourselves! He's always been in the business of doing this—the stories of Advent so far have made this clear: arguing brothers, old, barren women, foreigners... God *must* be looking at the inside!

Today's story is no exception to God's habit of looking at people inside out: **David**. David wasn't anything special—in fact, when Jesse (his dad) was told that Samuel was coming to anoint one of his sons as king, he didn't even bother to call David in to line up with his brothers! When Samuel ran out of suitable-looking sons, God hadn't chosen any to be king. *"So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?"*

"There is still the youngest," Jesse answered. "He is tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives."

So he sent for him and had him brought in." He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one." (1 Sam. 16:11-12)

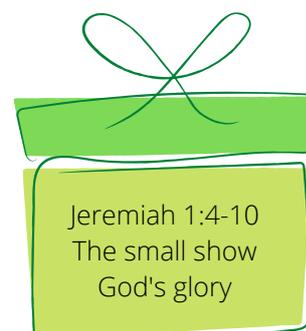
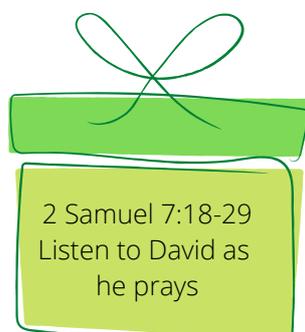
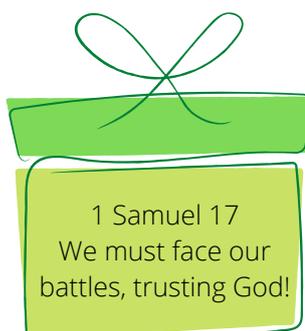
Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13

"But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Sam. 16:7)

What does God see when he looks at your heart? Do your priorities, strength, attitudes, courage and contentment reflect confidence in God as a child of God? Do you guard your heart, knowing that it is the 'wellspring of life'? (Proverbs 4:23)

Jesus lay in a manger in Bethlehem —like David, he sat among the sheep because no room could be made for him in the inn! He was overlooked by the rest of the world—but seen by God. God had long foretold of the coming of his son—God had seen what would come! God has a habit of looking at people, and situations, inside out—he can see the goodness and the potential that gives hope and life. *Is there someone you are overlooking, because you won't look beyond their appearance? Is there a situation in your life, that you need to look at with God's perspective? **Pray for him to open your eyes to see as He does.***

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **fourteenth** day of Advent.

A Candle in The Darkness

Left out with the sheep, Jesse doesn't even call his youngest son, David, in to see Samuel who is choosing Israel's next king. God makes an unexpected choice—as he always does!—and chooses this youngest son. David eventually succeeded Saul as king, and reigned 40 years.

Some three hundred years after David, came the prophet Isaiah, who spoke about another king who will come, and reign on David's throne. This king will establish his kingdom with justice and righteousness from that time on and *forever*. And we might have thought that 40 years was a pretty good tenure! But Isaiah knew that Jesus—a child, who would be left out in the stable with the sheep! — was coming to establish his throne reign forever, with a kingdom that *knows no end*. A kingdom of light.

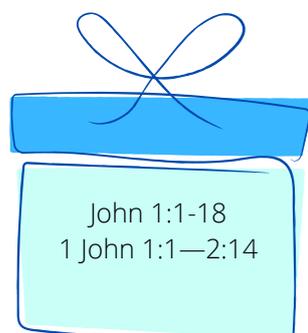
Read Isaiah 9:1 - 7

Jesus is the light that came into a dark world. Our traditions of Christmas are very fitting to celebrate this—streets practically *explode* in lights, as we light up trees, houses, malls and cities with lights, bells and angels! Christmas explodes in light, as we remember that unto us, *the light of the world is born*. More than the trees, we also watch the faces of children light up at Christmas, like the happiest candles who glow in awe at the lights of Christmas! What hope and joy they have in the wonder of Christmas! Maybe this year, you will watch more closely as our city lights up for Christmas—see these lights coming from the darkness, and remember Jesus coming as our light in the dark.

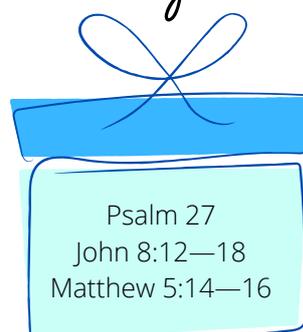
What does it mean to you that Jesus is our 'light'?
Who needs Jesus' light today? How can you shine Jesus' light?

There's strength in light—darkness cannot overcome it. A room is never too dark that it snuffs a lighted candle! Jesus' light is powerful and can overcome all darkness in this world. Can you picture... the shoeboxes sent out each year by Operation Christmas Child, **exploding in Jesus light** when they are opened by children who need hope, overseas this Christmas!

Readings for Today



Jesus came as light into the world
—which the darkness
could not overcome!



Light to the world

Welcome to the **fifteenth** day of Advent.

Bowing Down

This week's story sees a spectacular stand off between prophets—those of the living God, and those of the god, Baal. Meeting on a mountain, the challenge is to call down fire from heaven to burn a sacrifice on the make-shift altars.

Needless to say, God shows up with overwhelming power— not only burning up the sacrifice, but the wood, the stones and the soil, and twelve large jars worth of water in trenches all around the altar. "When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, 'The LORD — he is God! 'The LORD — he is God!' " (1 Kings 18:39)

Our God, is the one, true living God who answers our prayers, and shows up. He, and he alone, is to be worshipped.

Read 1 Kings 18:18 - 48

We are wired to worship—but we don't always worship God as the one, true God. In fact, our hearts tend to lean away from God, towards things we make into other gods—things we worship with our time, money, and efforts. Other "Baal."

We are the temple of the Holy Spirit—God's Spirit!—dwelling in us. We need to clear the false gods who are vying for the worship and attention of our hearts and lives.

"How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; if Baal is God, follow him." (1 Kings 18:21) Worship God alone—praying to Him—depending on him alone.

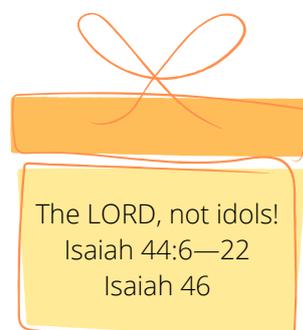
*How can you tell if something is a false god in your life?
What are some Baals that have captured your heart?*

God demands your wholehearted, undivided devotion.

How will you restore the temple?

*How will you live, trusting in God as your **only** steadfast and rock on which you stand?*

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **sixteenth** day of Advent.

Do you see what I see?

Read Jonah

Jonah struggles with what God has asked of him, and ends up in the belly of a whale. Three days later, God redeems Jonah, who is spat up on the beach. Looking ahead about 800 years, we see **Jesus** struggle with what God asks of him (Matthew 26:39); and we see Jesus crucified. **Three days later**, God overcomes the power of death and raises Jesus to life. You can't say the Old Testament doesn't point to Jesus!

In the belly of the whale, Jonah prays: 'When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple' (2:7). Jonah came face to face with hopelessness, and life bottoming-out on him, and he *remembered God*. He turned *back* to the very God he had questioned, and prayed. And God redeemed him.

*When have you been 'in the belly of a whale'? Did you remember God?
What difference does it make to those seasons, when you **do** remember God in the midst
of those seasons?*

Hindsight is a wonderful teacher: but God is present in the valley of the shadow of death while you walk there. Remember Him.

Finally, Jonah shows us a very interesting characteristic of humans. It's how we respond to God. In Luke 8, we see storms submit to Jesus' command and be stilled; we see demons cast out, we see people healed. Nature obeys Jesus. Demons obey Jesus. Disease obey Jesus. But when it comes to human beings... like Jonah ... well, he said "No!"
God asks something of Jonah, and he... ran away!

*When God asks something of us, how do we respond?
Do we leap to obedience? Do we obey at all? Do we look after the poor?
Do we love our neighbour? Do we give generously? Do we obey our parents?
Do we forgive others, even when they are not sorry?*

*Why do we think we can say "no" to the very God whom nature obeys?
God asks us, as He did to Jonah, to enter into His mercy,
and to live accordingly.*

Welcome to the **seventeenth** day of Advent.

A True Fairy Tale

The deepest meaning of the littleness and insignificance of Bethlehem is that God does not bestow the blessings of the Messiah — the blessings of salvation — on the basis of our greatness or our merit or our achievement. He does not elect cities or people because of their prominence or grandeur or distinction. When he chooses he chooses freely, in order to magnify the glory of his own mercy, not the glory of our distinctions. So let us say with the angels, “Glory to God in the highest!” Not glory to us. We get the joy. He gets the glory.

Read Micah 5:2 - 5

The Insignificance of Bethlehem
and the Great Significance of the One Born There
from John Piper’s *“From Little Bethlehem Will Come a Ruler in Israel”*

Bethlehem is scarcely worth counting among the clans of Judah, yet God chooses to bring his magnificent Messiah out of this town. Why? One answer is that the Messiah is of the lineage of David and David was a Bethlehemite. That’s true, but it misses the point of Micah 5:2. The point of verse two is that Bethlehem is small — not that it is great because David was born there. (That’s what the scribes missed in Matthew 2:6). God chooses something small, quiet, out of the way, and does something there that changes the course of history and eternity.

Why? Because when he acts this way we can’t boast in the merits or achievements of men but only in the glorious mercy of God. We can’t say, “Well, of course he set his favour on Bethlehem, look at the human glory Bethlehem has achieved!” All we can say is, “God is wonderfully free; he is not impressed by our bigness; he does nothing in order to attract attention to our accomplishments; he does everything to magnify his glorious freedom and mercy.”

The apostle Paul puts it like this in 1 Corinthians 1:27–31:
“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.... Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

God chose a stable so no innkeeper could boast, “He chose the comfort of my inn!” God chose a manger so that no wood worker could boast, “He chose the craftsmanship of my bed!” He chose Bethlehem so no one could boast, “The greatness of our city constrained the divine choice!” And he chose you and me, freely and unconditionally, to stop the mouth of all human boasting.

Welcome to the **eighteenth** day of Advent.

A Bridge To The King

Esther is renowned for her courage, risking death for the chance to bring life to others.

*What risks do you take to bring life to others?
What risks do you need to start taking to bring life to others?*

Read Esther

Esther, an orphan, grew to be King Xerxes' queen. In the inner circle of the throne, Esther had a special opportunity to intervene for the sake of her people. A new law said that all of Esther's people were to be killed. Esther's uncle, Mordecai, sent a message to Esther—"Look into the eyes of God's children outside the palace gate. Listen to the cries of God's children outside the gate. You, Esther, are the only one who can go to the king and help save us. This is the moment you were made for: *use the life you've been given to give others life.*"

King Xerxes could have had Esther killed if she approached him without his asking to see her—but, Esther decided, "I will go—and if I die, I die." Esther became the bridge—and her people were saved. This is like Jesus, who became the bridge between us and God; Jesus was willing and he died to save us.

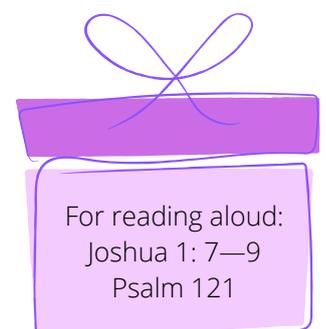
Christmas is about unwrapping the greatest gift—the love of Jesus, born to us, through whom we would have life forever with God. Will you extend the opportunity to others this Christmas?

Right now, there's a boy digging for food in a garbage heap in India. Right now, a girl is crying for food in Uganda. Right now, a child in Afghanistan is going to sleep having never heard the name of Jesus.

This is the time for which you were created:
use the life you've been given to give others life.

Will you be brave, and be the bridge to someone who needs Jesus this Christmas?

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **nineteenth** day of Advent.

Watch and Wait

Watching. Waiting. Rejoicing.

When was the last time you waited on God—just sat, in expectation, watching for His guidance?

Read Habakkuk

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.” - Habakkuk 3:17—18

“Though everything isn’t going right (at all!), I will be joyful.”

When was the last time you said that, and *meant it*? I think it is more our tendency to be pulled into frustration and despair, particularly about work and money, and then to get stuck there! Even if we dare to say, “I will rejoice; the Lord is my strength,” we hardly live a rejoicing life in the midst of struggle.

Habakkuk wasn’t sent to call us to the optimistic life; Habakkuk was the first of many reminders that God’s goodness isn’t dependent on our situation—rejoicing in the Lord isn’t dependent on life going well!

Habakkuk doesn’t show us a gritted teeth smile—he shows us we need a heart-full, can’t-touch-this, overflowing joy in God, who is greater than our circumstances. Too often, we let things in this world steal the joy we have in Jesus through his Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

“Joy to the world,”
we sing at Christmas time.

*Will you experience true joy this Christmas, that overcomes trials and tribulations?
How will your state of joy show others that the birth of Jesus really IS good news?*

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **twentieth** day of Advent.

God Remembers

Zechariah means, "God remembers."

Elizabeth means, "God's promise."

Doesn't it seem as though God was leaving clues for his people? He was going to show up!

Four hundred years of silence was broken; an angel appeared to Zechariah, proclaiming a message from God that his wife (who could not conceive: Lk 1:7) would bear a son, "John," which means, "God is gracious."

Now, God's clues began to drop like breadcrumbs— "My grace is coming; in fact, it's here! I am faithful to remember my promises—and powerful to bring about miracles! Look! Jesus is just around the corner!"

The angel proclaims a message of power and hope to Zechariah. Zechariah's son, John would later proclaim a message of power and hope to all people—prepare the way for the Lord!

Read Luke 1:5 - 25

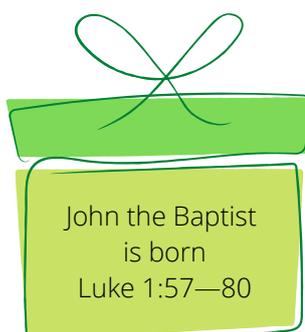
What a proclamation the angel makes to Zechariah! And what is his response? *"How can I be sure? When I look at myself and my wife... well, I'm old—and my wife is getting along in years, too!"*

Isn't that our tendency too? Zechariah wasn't being illogical— in fact, he was very logical! He looked at his situation and asked the same question that we always ask: *How can I be sure that God will do this? I'm old. I'm young. I'm stuck in a 9 to 5 job. My bank account is always empty. I've had two miscarriages already. I'm too lonely. I'm too broken. I'm too sick. There's not enough time.*

God silenced Zechariah when he saw only logic and didn't trust God's promise. God doesn't ask us to be logical. He asks for faith.

'Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see... Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him' - Hebrews 11:1,6

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **twenty first** day of Advent.

Thunder in the Desert

In those days, John the Baptist appeared: "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." He was a voice crying out in the wilderness—a voice like thunder in a desert—a booming proclamation of rain and redemption in a dry and empty land, thirsty for God to come and work, and for His long-ago prophecies to be fulfilled in His promised Son.

John appeared out of the desert—his hairy camel skin clothes crunched like the locusts he ate—he walked from town to town with the message of the coming Messiah—"Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight."

Christmas is coming very fast now! What are you proclaiming as it draws nearer? "*Quick, get the windows cleaned—the family's coming! Oh no, my bank account is going to be wiped from all the presents!*" Or is it, "*Peace! A joyful time to celebrate & share with others—Jesus is relevant & good news for us today!*"

Read Matthew 3:1 - 12

What was John's message of preparation?

Repent. Repent means to turn 180 degrees—a complete life change: and God desires this for us, to be facing His way when he comes, so that we can walk in His direction with Him when he makes his move!

As we come up to Christmas, Advent provides us with the opportunity to prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus. As a Church, we have spent twenty-one Sundays (so far!) dedicated to seeing how the Bible points to Jesus and gives significance to His long-awaited birth. We have appreciated how much of the Old Testament, happening hundreds of years before Jesus, foreshadows how Jesus would be born and what His life would mean for us.

How does your preparation look—beyond the window cleaning and garden landscaping? Does this Advent season call you to repent and realign your priorities with proclaiming the importance of Jesus for us today?

Readings for Today



Welcome to the **twenty second** day of Advent.

Wide-Awake Dreams

Today, we hear the story of the angel appearing to Mary—the “stuff of dreams” some might say, even though Mary was wide awake!

Gabriel tells Mary, “Mary, you are beautiful with God’s kind of beauty—the heart-beautiful kind of beauty that listens and sees and loves. You have nothing to fear—and everything to rejoice about! God has a gift for you— a gift for the whole world. You are going to have a baby—and you will name him Jesus. He will be God’s son.”

And Mary said, “I am God’s servant; Let it be done as you say.”

A resounding ‘yes’ —a hands open and willing, ready to receive from God, humble ‘yes’ to make a space for God’s son—right below Mary’s beautiful listening, seeing, loving heart.

Read Luke 1:26-50

“Mary’s Magnificent God”

Devotional by John Piper | from *Desiring God*

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/mary-s-magnificent-god>

Mary sees clearly a most remarkable thing about God: He is about to change the course of all human history; the most important three decades in all of time are about to begin.

And where is God? Occupying himself with two obscure, humble women — one old and barren (Elizabeth), one young and a virgin (Mary). And Mary is so moved by this vision of God, the lover of the lowly, that she breaks out in song — a song that has come to be known as “The Magnificat.”

Mary and Elizabeth are wonderful heroines in Luke’s account. He loves the faith of these women. The thing that impresses him most, it appears, and the thing he wants to impress on Theophilus, his noble reader of his Gospel, is the lowliness and cheerful humility of Elizabeth and Mary as they submit to their magnificent God.

Elizabeth says (Luke 1:43), “And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” And Mary says (Luke 1:48), “He has looked on the humble estate of his servant.”

The only people whose soul can truly magnify the Lord are people like Elizabeth and Mary — people who acknowledge their lowly estate and are overwhelmed by the condescension of the magnificent God.

Welcome to the **twenty third** day of Advent.

He Can't Stay Away

Joseph isn't featured in many Christmas songs. In our nativity sets, he is often unnoticed or put off to one side. But, as surely as God chose Mary to be Jesus' mother, God **also chose Joseph** to be an earthly father figure to Jesus!

An angel appeared to Mary, announcing the birth of a miraculous baby. When Mary told Joseph, he struggled with this! *Should he break off their engagement?* Can you imagine his mind racing, trying to wrap his head around this supernatural idea!?

Before long, God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream: *"Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The baby inside her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus which means, 'the Lord saves' — he will be called Immanuel — 'God is with us!'"*

God couldn't stay away; he came to us, to save us!

Read Matthew 1:18 - 25

The words, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife" are very important. Apparently, Joseph had experienced fear about what was happening. And why not? Joseph didn't know what was going on. No one had ever faced this kind of dilemma before. His fiancée was pregnant and had told him a story he found hard to believe.

When the angel appeared to him and said, "Do not be afraid," the angel touched his main problem. It's our problem, too. We are afraid of the unfamiliar. The things we don't understand make us nervous. When God is at work and we don't know what He's doing, we can feel a degree of alarm.

The angel's word to Joseph was, "Don't be afraid." Don't fear for your reputation, don't be afraid of what you don't understand. God is in this! Knowing that God is up to something is an effective antidote to fear. Similarly, as we face various things in our lives, things are not always what they seem. There is courage to be taken when we remember that God is in control and that God will work these things out according to His will.

In the name of Christ, we have a tremendous encouragement in the face of fear: IMMANUEL, God with us! Jesus is present with us at all times. He will not leave us or forsake us. Jesus promises that where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them! He is here, with us, today! He comes to us through His Word and the working of the Holy Spirit to encourage, to enlighten, to comfort, and to assure us of the forgiveness of sins.

God is with us. Don't be afraid to share this truth with others this Christmas.
Trust God guiding you, and working in your life!

Welcome to the **twenty fourth** day of Advent.

Kneel at the Manger

Read Luke 2:1 - 7

Jesus didn't enter the world in a palace or in a king's court. Instead, He chose to enter our world right in a pile of mucky, messy, stinky, dirty straw.

Jesus comes and meets you in the stinky mess of your sin. Jesus comes to you small when you feel invisible and rejected. Jesus is with you now, wherever you are, no matter what is happening. Jesus always wants to be with you. The Lord saves. Jesus is with us.

Today, at the foot of the cradle of Christ, like at the foot of the cross of Christ, there are no big people, no powerful people, no proud people. Today, we are all children who straggle to the manger with nothing.

Today, we kneel down before Jesus and reach out our hands that need little
—because we want more of God.

Welcome to the **twenty fifth** day of Advent.

Never-Ending Christmas

Read Luke 2:11 - 19

Can you see it? This day, this night, the Light comes! Can you feel it? Your heart kindling, burning with a love for Jesus that's like a warming fire.

Now the shepherds out in the hills of Bethlehem that night had angels come to them, lighting their hearts on fire. But no one else heard angels—everyone else only heard the news from the hearts-burning shepherds. When your heart burns with love for Jesus, you're like a flaming match that lights up all the other hearts with the news of Jesus.

A heart that really loves Jesus could catch the world on fire with love
and more love, and more love.

Long, long ago, God planned for Jesus to come to us, to make things right between Him and us. It's true: Jesus came into the world for you. And it's true: You came into the world for Him, to let everyone know about Him.

Go! Tell the world!