



WALKING *with* JESUS

Devotions for
Advent & Christmas



Editors of *Mornings with Jesus*

A GUIDEPOSTS DEVOTIONAL

HOPE

O holy night! The stars are brightly shining;
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope—the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!
Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!
O night, O holy night, O night divine!

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word
I put my hope. Psalm 130:5 (NIV)*

WHILE ORDERING MY CHRISTMAS GIFTS online last year, I spent so much money that the retailer offered me a desk lamp for free. Oddly, I had just set up a new workstation in the corner of my living room and the area was dark. I couldn't wait for that light to arrive to brighten my space.

Over the next few weeks, package after package arrived, none of which contained that lamp. Still, I waited with hopeful anticipation for what would illuminate my desk, making it easier for me to work. I'd no longer have to exert my eyes to see what was before me. Finally, it arrived! I rushed to plug it in, and, voilà! That lamp truly does light up my corner workstation, making my desk so much brighter.

Like my freely given lamp, Jesus gives Himself freely too, and His divine light will pierce the darkness soon. We don't have to strive to earn His love or prove ourselves worthy in any way, we only have to believe. Just as we keep an eye out at the mailbox, front door, or driveway for deliveries, we need to keep the eyes of our heart looking, seeking, and waiting with hope. When Jesus does arrive, He'll illuminate the corners of our heart, mind, and world. Receiving Him with open arms will help us see more clearly all the other gifts before us, the ones He blesses us with all year through.
—CLAIRE MCGARRY

FAITH STEP: *Sit near a lamp and consider what you're hoping for this season. When you see the mailman or a delivery driver pull up, imagine that hope being delivered directly to you.*

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior
and my God. Psalm 42:11 (NIV)*

IN THINKING ABOUT MY COUNTENANCE in terms of color, at this time of year, my spirit usually felt poinsettia red and Christmas tree green—bright with hope. But a hard year had faded the brilliance into more muted tones. My mom’s health had declined rapidly in the spring, causing her to bounce between hospitals and rehab centers for several months. She went to be with Jesus in June.

I opened the Christian radio app on my phone, now playing around-the-clock holiday favorites. I sang along with cheerful tunes and tried to recapture the wonder of the season. Then, an old, familiar carol began. “O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant! O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem.”

Though I’d heard the song all my life, two words stood out to me for the first time: joyful and triumphant. What beautiful messages those adjectives represented, messages I needed to hear. I had allowed the worries of my world to change “joyful and triumphant” to “downcast and defeated.” The song invited me to return to Bethlehem, look upon the manger, and find refreshed hope through the birth of baby Jesus.

I raised the music volume and lifted my voice in praise. “O come, let us adore Him; O come, let us adore Him; O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!” Once again, my spirit radiated like red poinsettias and glowed like the green of my Christmas tree.

—BECKY ALEXANDER

FAITH STEP: *On this first Sunday of Advent, listen to or sing “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” Focus your thoughts on the hope Jesus brings, regardless of circumstances.*

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*But when the set time had fully come,
God sent his Son. Galatians 4:4 (NIV)*

I DISCOVERED A 52-WEEK SAVINGS plan that totaled \$1,378 by year's end. Save one dollar in week one, two dollars in week two, and on through all 52 weeks. I followed the plan week after week as a surprise for my husband.

Over dinner at the end of the year, I slid an envelope across the table with the cash I'd been scrimping and stashing away. He was amazed. We repeated the savings year after year, and he used it for his dream hunting trip to Argentina for a significant birthday.

We decided to save for my big birthday trip next. We've accomplished that, and the birthday came and went two years ago. But I've put off the trip because I haven't decided where to go and it never seems like the right time. I've leaned into such excuses as I can't make up my mind, and my teenagers and their schedules need me. Honestly, I've had the place narrowed down for a while (the English countryside) and my kids will be fine.

I've enjoyed the anticipation, but lately my inclination to stop waiting and go sounds like a friendly nagging voice in my head. It is time to move past anticipation and act.

Advent holds anticipation that leads to something big—Jesus's birthday. I'm so grateful the time came for His Father to move past humanity's anticipation and send Jesus as our Savior.

—ERIN KEELEY MARSHALL

FAITH STEP: *Make your own Advent calendar. It can be a simple checkbox or something ornate. As you enjoy this month of anticipation and Advent's miraculous finale, thank Jesus for His willingness to act in the perfect way and time.*

FIRST MONDAY OF ADVENT

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. James 1:17 (NKJV)

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, Christmas was an annual, uneventful event. My parents would fill my stocking with oranges, nuts, and a piece of candy, and my grandmother would give me a gift of socks and underwear. I never asked for any of these things. Ever. Apparently my loved ones considered these items essential to life, and as a result, I was blessed every Christmas with clean knickers, fresh socks, and healthy snacks. I could count on it!

In a small way, my family modeled what my Heavenly Father did for me when He sent His Son to earth. I never asked for Jesus to be born in one of the most humble of fashions. Or for Him to live a sacrificial life that paved the way for me to live an abundant one. Jesus came to give me what I never asked for or could never have paid for myself—salvation (John 3:16). My family's gifts were temporary essentials, but my Savior's gift was eternally essential. I could count on both—the extravagant love of Jesus as well as those juicy oranges, mixed nuts, and fresh Fruit of the Looms! —KRISTEN WEST

FAITH STEP: *What organization would cherish essentials? Hygiene items to a shelter? A check to your favorite nonprofit? Whatever you do, add something extravagant to reflect what Jesus has done for you.*

FIRST MONDAY OF ADVENT

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. Deuteronomy 6:6–9 (NIV)

OUR FAVORITE STEAK RESTAURANT IN Houston is well-known for its elaborate Christmas decorations. Each year, the entire restaurant goes through a total transformation from its everyday Texas-themed decor to gorgeous holiday-themed embellishments that adorn every inch of the walls and waiting areas.

This year I was thrilled to discover a new addition to the festivities: a collection of more than one hundred expertly crafted Steinbach nutcrackers beautifully displayed in one room of the restaurant. While we waited for a table, I explored the details of each, and I couldn't help but calculate the cost of such an investment. I doubted I'd ever purchase a nutcracker from such a world-famous craftsman, much less dozens.

Then I remembered an article I read about the owners of the restaurant, and their design choices made more sense. The article said they consider the restaurant their mission field, and they begin each day by walking through every room and praying for their employees and customers. For them, their Christmas decorations are part of their strategic ministry. They infuse their restaurant with beauty to bless the community and to honor Jesus for how He's blessed their business. I'd like my Christmas decorations, whether humble or elaborate, to do the same. —EMILY E. RYAN

FAITH STEP: *Find a Christmas decoration that points people to Jesus and display it prominently, for all to see.*

FIRST MONDAY OF ADVENT

If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I lie down in the grave, you are there. If I rise with the sun in the east and settle in the west beyond the sea, even there you would guide me. With your right hand you would hold me. Psalm 139:8–10 (NCV)

WHEN MY CHILDREN WERE YOUNG, our family traveled to visit extended family at Christmas. After our kids moved away in different directions, my husband's job changes brought a few relocations for us. Christmas included even more travel: either airline flights or a two-week road trip of a few thousand miles, with stays in several different homes, hotels, and/or rentals. The radio may have been playing, "Oh, there's no place like home for the holidays," but I had learned to pack Christmas up and take it with me.

My favorite version of *A Christmas Carol* is the 1999 movie starring Patrick Stewart. I love the scene when the Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to different locations where "Silent Night" is being sung: a poor cottage in England, a remote lighthouse high on a rocky cliff, a ship bouncing around on stormy seas, and a place where workers were emerging from an underground coal mine.

Christmas doesn't depend on being where I want to be, or even on observing cherished traditions. Christmas happens whenever I honor the birth of my Savior, the One who promises to be with me no matter where I am—geographically, emotionally, or spiritually. He is always with me. —DIANNE NEAL MATTHEWS

FAITH STEP: *Take out paper and pen and read Psalm 139:1–18. List any places where Jesus would not be with you. (Since your page is blank, draw a big heart with His name inside.)*

FIRST TUESDAY OF ADVENT

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. 1 Thessalonians 4:13 (NIV)

I PICKED UP THE BOX of ornaments, struggling to hold back tears. This was the first Christmas without my grandmother, and decorating the tree was one of her favorite things about the holiday. I had a few boxes of her Christmas decorations, so to keep her memory alive, I decided to place her ornaments on the tree first. I unwrapped an ornament with an image of the Montreal skyline, a gift I'd given her shortly after I moved to the city, and hung it on a limb. There were also framed photos of her children and grandchildren. I remembered asking her why she felt the need to scatter her family members on her tree's limbs. "If they can't be with me physically, I like to think they are here in spirit," she said, engulfing me in a big bear hug.

Whether it is the first holiday or many years have passed since losing a loved one, navigating Christmas without their presence is difficult. But I cling to the hope that one day, I will see my grandmother again. Until that time comes, I'll cherish the hand-painted bauble and the rest of her ornaments knowing Grandma is here in spirit. —LAURA BAILEY

FAITH STEP: *Have you lost a loved one this year? Place a commemorative ornament on the tree or find something to do that keeps their spirit alive this season.*

FIRST TUESDAY OF ADVENT

But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Luke 18:16 (NIV)

I LOVINGLY LIFTED MY CHERISHED ceramic sculpture of Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus from the closet. A gift from years back, the vibrantly painted figures took my breath away each time I looked at it. Mary’s and Joseph’s expressions reflected awe as the baby raised outstretched arms toward them. Every year, this Nativity was the first thing I set out at Christmas and the last thing I put away. Did I dare risk displaying it this year, with my young grandchildren coming for a visit? If they broke it, my heart would break too. The thundering of small hooves signaled the arrival of the four kids, ages two, three, four, and five. Having seen them successfully dismantle a house in ten minutes, I headed them off at the pass, intending to divert them to the toy room, but something, Someone, stopped me.

“Kids, come see,” I said, as I led them to the table. “This is the baby Jesus and His mommy and daddy.” I gave them a mini version of the Christmas story, and then, throwing caution to the wind, I invited them to touch the sculpture. Chubby fingers gently caressed each figure in the Nativity, and then they were off to the toy room. My heart soared!

I vowed to worry less about breaking my statue and more about building my grandkids’ faith. —PAT BUTLER DYSON

FAITH STEP: *Ask Jesus to place people in your life, including children, with whom you can share His story.*

FIRST TUESDAY OF ADVENT

This was how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. Matthew 1:18 (GNT)

HUBBY AND I ARE BECOMING experts on the Christmas movie genre. We even created a laminated, bingo-like game card with forty-eight common Christmas movie clichés, such as an engagement, travel, small town, opening gifts, pickup truck, gingerbread house, Christmas pajamas, ugly Christmas sweater, a mean neighbor, a Christmas miracle. Upon spotting these clichés while watching Christmas movies, we cross them off our game card with a dry erase marker.

Sadly, most Christmas movies completely miss the whole point of Christmas. Conversely, when we watched *The Nativity Story*, not surprisingly, the movie didn't seem to have any of the stereotypical Christmas movie clichés. But, as I looked at my laminated card, I began to notice some things. There was an engagement (Mary and Joseph), travel (from Nazareth), a small town (Bethlehem), gifts (from the Wise Men). There wasn't a pickup truck, but there was a donkey, which Mary rode to Bethlehem. There wasn't a gingerbread house but another unusual structure: a stable, where Jesus was born. There weren't festive pajamas or an ugly Christmas sweater, but there were swaddling cloths, wrapped around baby Jesus. There wasn't a mean neighbor; but there was a mean king who wanted to kill the baby. And there were Christmas miracles upon miracles (an angel appeared to Mary, Immaculate Conception, God born as a baby). Recognizing these correlations, I now have a deeper understanding of the sacred symbolism of the Nativity story tucked into Christmas movies. Clichés aside, I pray I'll stay focused on the real point of Christmas—remembering the birth of Jesus. —CASSANDRA TIERSMA

FAITH STEP: *Put on a Christmas sweater or festive pajamas, make some popcorn, and watch your favorite Christmas movie. Look for symbols of Jesus amidst the usual Christmas movie clichés.*