



Finding God®

Our Response to God's Gifts

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Special seasonal issue by Julianne Stanz.

A Season of Discipleship

Advent is not just a prelude or warm-up act for Christmas; it is the perfect time to help us grow together as families of missionary discipleship. So, what is a missionary disciple?

The word *disciple* means “a student of the master.” The master is Jesus Christ. A disciple wants to love Jesus and learn from him. The word *mission* comes from the means “to send” and became closely associated with the Jesuits who sent their missionaries abroad to share the Gospel. Missionary disciples share Jesus with others; they help others be disciples.

Advent, which is the beginning of the liturgical year, helps us prepare for our mission to share the birth of Jesus. The lighting of the Advent wreath helps us remain faithful to the meaning and purpose of this sacred time. In this newsletter, we will walk with biblical Advent characters, including Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph and the shepherds, who will show us how we and our families can be missionary disciples. ✚

Mary, Our Mother

Mothers are special. They give us the gift of life, and Jesus' mother Mary is the first and best disciple. She knows her son Jesus better than anyone and can help us grow in friendship with him. If we know Mary, we can know Jesus better too.

We first hear from Mary in Scripture when the angel Gabriel told her that she would give birth to Jesus. When the angel spoke to Mary, she didn't rush to get a to-do list together. Instead, she said, “Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38) She rested in being present to God's plan and his love for her. Mary's heart was open to the gift of new life.

Mary reminds us to set aside our own distractions and agendas so that we can simply be with God and others. Advent



is the perfect time to be present to those we love, to take the extra time to give love and care to our family, friends, neighbors and those we meet.

During these Advent days, allow Mary to speak to you in the silence, joy, and presence of God's love throughout Advent. This is how we learn to make a dwelling place for Jesus to be born in our hearts once again. ■



THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Prayer

God our Father,

This Advent, teach us to have a heart like Mary.

Help us slow down so that we can be present to this time of simplicity.

Give us ears to hear your voice and eyes to see your presence in all we meet.

Amen.

Activity

As you light the first Advent candle this week, remember in prayer all mothers, grandmothers, godmothers, and those spiritual mothers who have helped you grow in friendship with Jesus. Write their names on a piece of paper and place the paper around your Advent wreath as a reminder of your appreciation and love.

As a family, share stories of people who remind you of Mary and her love. ■

Prayer

Begin by praying the Sign of the Cross.

Leader: *Lord have mercy.*

Response: *Lord, have mercy.*

Leader: *Christ have mercy.*

Response: *Christ, have mercy.*

Leader: *Lord have mercy.*

Response: *Christ have mercy.*

Leader: *Saint Joseph.*

Response: *Pray for us.*

Leader: *Joseph most faithful.*

Response: *Pray for us.*

Leader: *Joseph, most strong.*

Response: *Pray for us.*

Leader: *Joseph, Head of the Holy Family.*

Response: *Pray for us.*

Leader: *Joseph, Protector of the Church.*

Response: *Pray for us.*

All: *Saint Joseph, be with us during these Advent days as our intercessor and guide. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.*



Activity

As you light the second candle on the Advent wreath, set aside quiet time as a family. Pray the Litany of Saint Joseph together and turn off all screens and electronics in the house and instead leave time for silence.

How can your family imitate the courage and faithfulness of Saint Joseph? ■

SAINT JOSEPH: A Model of Courage and Strength

150 years ago, Pope Pius IX named Saint Joseph the patron of the whole Church. Saint Joseph is very much a model for our discipleship efforts during Advent. He teaches us two important characteristics that disciples need today. The first one is courage, and the second characteristic is silence.

Joseph traveled many miles in all kinds of weather to lead his family to Bethlehem (see Luke 2:1–7). His wife Mary would soon bear God's son, and Joseph kept them safe from the dangerous people that often traveled the rough roads. He knocked at the door of many places to try and find shelter but was rejected and turned away. This undoubtedly took great courage.

While Joseph never spoke in the Gospels, we know he was a family man for he had a strong faith, teaching Jesus how to pray and to love God (see Luke 2:51). Even though Scripture

doesn't include any of Joseph's words, we can "hear" instead his silence. Joseph teaches us the value of silence in a world that is often loud and noisy. Taking time for silence helps us grow closer to God as disciples. Talking to God in prayer is important, but it is also very important to listen to God as Saint Joseph did (see Matthew 1:20–25).

Saint Joseph reminds us that it is not always easy to be a Christian, but if we surrender our lives as disciples to God's plan, God will bless our courage and generosity. In these Advent days, Saint Joseph walks beside us protecting us, sheltering us, and reminding us to keep our hearts focused on God so that someday we can look upon the face of Jesus, just as Saint Joseph did. ■



God's Word

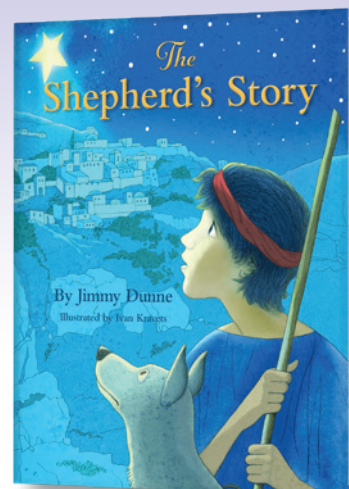


[Listen to Joseph's response to the sudden news of Mary's pregnancy.](#)

Shepherd's Story

The Shepherd's Story provides readers with a profound experience alongside a courageous shepherd boy who is searching for meaning in life. Come along with the curious young shepherd to explore the human and divine natures of the birth of Jesus—and through this shepherd's witness, discover the wonder, majesty, and promise of all human life. ■

The Shepherd's Story by Jimmy Dunne. (Loyola Press, 2020).



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The Gift of Visitors

Connecting with family and friends through gift-giving is often on our minds during Advent as we seek out the perfect gift and finalize our Christmas cards. We make plans to visit people and prepare to welcome visitors to our home, just as Elizabeth did for her relative Mary (see Luke 1:39–56).



Mary went in haste to stay with her relative Elizabeth. Both women were expecting babies—Mary was expecting Jesus, and Elizabeth was expecting John the Baptist. This must have been a very happy time for each woman as they shared the gift of life together and shared their hopes and dreams for the children they were carrying. Mary's visit to Elizabeth teaches us that the best and greatest gift that we can ever give ourselves and others is Jesus. That is what discipleship is all about! Mary and Elizabeth did not exchange material gifts or presents. They shared their happiness at the presence of Jesus, who would soon be born.

Jesus' love is far better than any material gift we can receive because it lasts forever. Many families set out the manger during the season of Advent, and some families have a beautiful tradition of wrapping the figure of Jesus during this time and waiting until Christmas morning to place him in the manger. Before the gifts are unwrapped on Christmas morning, Jesus is unwrapped first. This tradition reminds us that Jesus is the first and best gift that we can give to ourselves and to others.

During this time of year, we may visit family and friends more often. We may invite others into our home just as Elizabeth did. These are all great gifts. But let's remember that this gift is not something that is bought or consumed. The true gift is the presence that we bring to every person in our joy, our peace, and our prayers. ■



THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Prayer

Lord Jesus,

You welcomed the outcast, the lonely, the hungry, the homeless, the broken hearted and the hard hearted.

It is easy during these Advent days to become frazzled and restless. Quiet us down, Lord, so that we can hear your voice speaking to us in those who will come to our home.

Help us welcome all generously, put nervous people at ease, and give abundantly out of great love for you.

We praise you and glorify your most holy name. Amen.



Activity

As you light the third Advent candle this week, reflect on how you can give the gift of Jesus to others. As disciples, we give not out of our abundance, but out of our entire being, as Jesus did. As missionary disciples, choose to give away something out of love to someone who is not expecting it.

Who is someone you would like to share the gift of good news with? How might your family share this gift? ■

Sharing the Good News

If you had good news, whom would you tell first? Most of us would tell the people closest to us, our family and friends, because we know that they would be happy and celebrate with us. But when God had the best news of all to share about the birth of Jesus, whom did he tell? In the Gospel of Luke, we are told that God first announced it to “shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock.” (Luke 2:8) The shepherds then rushed to Bethlehem to witness the birth of Jesus and then went out to spread the word far and wide. That is what disciples do: they rush to share good news!



Jesus was born at a time of great persecution and social upheaval. Bethlehem was overcrowded, and so the king of the universe

was born into the poverty of a stable. There was no room at the inn for Mary and Joseph. Jesus' Death on the Cross echoes that overcrowding, for there was no room in the hearts of the people for whom he had come to save.

The first witnesses to the birth of Jesus were humble shepherds. During the time of Jesus, shepherds were often looked down on because they had no power or influence. Advent reminds us that humility is key to witnessing the birth of Jesus in our hearts. The shepherds teach us that we can make room for Jesus even if it feels crowded during this time with all the things that we need to get done. The shepherds made room in the “inn” of their hearts for the king of the universe. We can too. ■



THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

Prayer

Jesus,

You are the Good Shepherd.

Guide our Advent journey so that we, like the shepherds, can be humble of heart.

Keep us safe, Jesus, so that we do not wander from you.

Bring about a birth of your love in our hearts, today and always.

We ask this in your name. Amen.

Activity

The name *Emmanuel* means “God-with-us.” Advent reminds us of the great lengths that God continually takes to enter our world and to remind us of his love. Jesus entered our world as a baby, a helpless infant. As you light the fourth candle of your Advent wreath, think of a family with a newborn and how you can show them that God is with them. As missionary disciples, reach out by sharing a meal with them, letting them know that you are praying for them, or by sending them a special prayer book for their child.

As a family of disciples, how are you preparing for the birth of Jesus? ■

Contact Us!



We'd love to hear from you! You can send us your questions, comments, and requests by using the QR code above or by e-mailing us at newsletter@loyolapress.com.

Wait in Joyful Hope

We spend our lives waiting: We wait for test results, we wait in lines, we wait for upcoming vacations, and we wait for packages and gifts to be delivered. But during Advent, we are waiting for something much bigger. We are waiting in joyful hope for the birth of Jesus. As the wait of our Advent journey comes to an end, our wait for the return of Jesus will go on.

As disciples, we continue to be nourished in prayer, attending Mass and participating in the sacraments. As missionary disciples, we can share the good news of Christmas by reaching out through the witness of our lives to serve those in need. Advent is a time of preparation, not just for Christmas but for our entire Christian life, guiding us to live with the joy of Jesus in our hearts every day. ■