



Hope, Love, Joy, Peace
An Advent Study Guide

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World Vision United States is grateful to World Vision Canada for allowing this resource to be adapted for use in the U.S.

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Cover photo: A girl in Ethiopia attends a candlelight ceremony for the Hope and Light Association, which combats the stigma of AIDS.
Photo by Jon Warren.

Foreword

Looking Both Ways

The elementary school I attended as a young boy was only a block from my home. Although it was so close, there was a busy street to cross to reach the school grounds. I have a vivid memory of a crisp autumn morning when my mother grasped my little hand at the side of the road and warned me firmly that I must “always look both ways before crossing the street.”

It seems to me that many Christians today have forgotten the necessity of “looking both ways.” I don’t mean looking to the left and right on a specific street, of course, but rather to events in the past and events in the future. Like the rest of our culture, all too often we get so caught up in the urgency of our daily lives that we fail to notice the larger picture of which we are only a small part.

The word “advent” comes from the Latin word *adventus* and means “arrival” or “coming.” The season of Advent, which originated in the 6th century A.D., is a four-week period preceding December 25th during which Christians dedicate themselves both to remembrance and to anticipation. Advent is all about looking both ways, because during these four weeks, we take time to slow down and look behind us to Christ’s first coming (the Incarnation) and ahead of us to the Second Coming (the *parousia*).

The important thing Advent helps us remember is that we are located between these two arrivals, seemingly stuck somewhere after the “already” but still within the “not yet” of God’s kingdom. Jesus Christ, the Lord of Life, has *already* come in the flesh. He has *already* been crucified. He has *already* been resurrected. He has *already* defeated death. The victory has *already* been won.

Nevertheless, we do *not yet* see the full effects of Christ’s victory played out in our world. Death is *not yet* merely a distant nightmare. Our lives are *not yet* free from all sin. Peace and justice are *not yet* ubiquitous. Hunger has *not yet* become a thing of the past. HIV and AIDS have *not yet* been defeated.

Admittedly, this can seem quite confusing. We may find ourselves despairing—wondering why, if Christ were *really* victorious, so many awful things continue in our world. Why does my friend have cancer? Why can’t I find a job? Why do thousands die every day from lack of clean water or millions in the developing world suffer from treatable diseases?

No, things most certainly are not as they should be. Yet the great hope of the good news we profess is that all things will one day be put right. We look both ways at Advent to remind ourselves of this. But we mustn’t do this lightly or halfheartedly. After all, the whole point of looking both ways before crossing the road is so you’ll know what you ought to do: If there is a car approaching, you shouldn’t step into the street. By helping us remember exactly where, or rather *when*, we are, Advent reminds us of the *kind* of people we ought to be during the brief years we are given in this life.

And in the meantime, we wait. Too often, though, we think waiting is a passive thing. We just go about our business, and sooner or later, God will do His thing. But this thinking is deeply flawed. Again and again in the New Testament, Jesus gives us parables that suggest that waiting must be active. This waiting is less like watching a sunset and more like preparing for winter: The wood must be chopped and stacked, the harvest brought into the barn, the leaky roof mended. After all, it is the slothful and lazy servant—the one who merely buries the talent he’s been entrusted with by the master—who receives a harsh punishment upon the master’s return (Matthew 25:14-30).

By looking into the past, we’re reminded of all that Christ *has done*. By looking into the future, we’re expectant of all Christ *will do*. Advent helps us remember that we’ve got work to do while we wait. Not *so that* God will love us, but rather *because* He already does. We love, after all, because “he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). The intentional practices of Advent frame our responsibilities and help us take a good, sober look at our lives during the in-between times.

Christ has come. Christ is risen. Christ is coming again. He’s given us work to do in the meantime. How are we living: selfishly or selflessly? Are we caring for our world? Are we loving our God? Are we loving our neighbors?

May our Lord move in and through you as you read the following pages, and may He help you to look both ways during this Advent season.

—Mike Yankoski

Author of Under the Overpass: A Journey of Faith on the Streets of America and executive editor of Zealous Love: A Practical Guide to Social Justice

Introduction

How to Use This Study

This Advent study invites individuals and groups to journey through the four weeks of Advent. Each week focuses on one of the Advent themes: hope, love, joy, and peace.

The resource provides you or your group with tools to move from reflection, meditation, and celebration to action and engagement. It is designed to be flexible so that you can pray and reflect at your own pace and in a way that fits your schedule.

Consider these possible uses:

- Self-study: for individuals to experience the deeper meaning of Advent.
- Small-group study: for those growing together during the season.
- Family study: for learning and engaging one another while preparing for Christmas.
- Churches: for posting daily or weekly Advent reflections on the Web or in church bulletins or newsletters.

Special Features

Advent Candlelighting

The custom of lighting candles each week of Advent is familiar to many Christian traditions. Symbolically, the light represents Jesus as the promised Light of the World. With each successive week, an additional candle is lit, culminating on Christmas Eve, when the full brightness of all the candles reminds us that Jesus has come and is leading us forth to be light for the world. If you choose to include the candlelighting each week, you can obtain an Advent wreath or create your own centerpiece by placing four candles in a circular pattern and the fifth in the center of the arrangement.

Give a Gift

Each week of the Advent study features a different gift from World Vision's Gift Catalog. The Gift Catalog allows you to donate from a wide array of life-changing items and gives you the option of donating in someone's name. The Gift Catalog can be viewed online at www.worldvisiongifts.org.

As an alternative to traditional Christmastime gift-giving, consider donating Gift Catalog items in honor of family members and friends. These gifts have a huge impact on the lives of people around the world. By giving to those in need, we live out the true meaning of Christmas—Christ coming into our world to *“preach good news to the poor . . . proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor”* (Luke 4:18-19).

Video Clips

At the end of each week, you will have the opportunity to watch a short video online. The video clips show what World Vision is doing to bring hope, love, joy, and peace to children and families around the world.

Children's Component

A separate resource, *Sharing Christ's Love*, is available for teachers, church leaders, and parents who wish to engage children in kindergarten through 8th grade in the season and themes of Advent.

For each of the four weeks leading up to Christmas, you will find lessons designed to help young people understand that the world into which Jesus was born 2,000 years ago and the world of today are not that distant from each other. Through stories—from the Bible and from today—and through creative and engaging activities, young people will learn how poverty and injustice affected people in the Christmas story and how they continue to affect people today.

Sharing Christ's Love is available at no cost, and can be downloaded at www.worldvisionresources.com.

About Advent

The word Advent means “coming” or “arrival.” The focus of the season is the celebration of the birth of Jesus the Christ in his First Advent and the anticipation of the return of Christ the King in his Second Advent. Thus, Advent is far more than marking a 2,000-year-old event. It is celebrating a truth about God—the revelation of God in Christ, whereby all of creation might be reconciled to God.

Advent also symbolizes the spiritual journey of believers as they affirm that Christ has come, that He is present in the world today, and that He will come again in power.

Advent is marked by a spirit of expectation, anticipation, preparation, and longing. There is a yearning for deliverance from the evils of the world, first expressed by the Israelite slaves in Egypt as they cried out in their bitter oppression. It is the cry of those who have experienced injustice in a world under the curse of sin, and yet have hope of deliverance by a God who has heard the cries of oppressed slaves and brought freedom.

It is this hope, however faint at times, that brings to the world the anticipation of a King who will rule with truth, justice, and righteousness over His people and in His creation. That hope now anticipates anew the reign of an Anointed One, a Messiah, who will bring peace, justice, and righteousness to the world.

The Advent Wreath

The Advent wreath symbolizes the beginning of the church year. It is a circular evergreen wreath (real or artificial) with five candles, four around the wreath and one in the center. Each aspect of the wreath has special meaning, contributing to the compelling story it communicates as a whole.

The wreath's circle reminds us of God Himself, His eternity and His endless mercy, with no beginning or end. The green speaks of the hope that we have in God, the hope of renewal, of eternal life. The four outer candles represent the waiting period during the four Sundays of Advent, which themselves symbolize the four centuries of waiting between the prophet Malachi and the birth of Christ.

The candlelight reminds us that Jesus is the Light of the World who comes into the darkness of our lives to bring newness, life, and hope. It also reminds us that we are called to be a light to the world as we reflect

God's grace to others (Isaiah 42:6). The progressive candlelighting symbolizes our waiting experience. As the candles are lit over the four-week period, the darkness of fear and hopelessness recedes and the shadows of sin fall away as more and more light enters the world.

The center candle—the Christ Candle—is traditionally lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. The central location of this candle reminds us that the Incarnation is the heart of the season, giving light to the world. When the Christ Candle is lit, worshippers rejoice that the Light has come into the world—the promise of long ago has been realized.

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Day 1

This first week of Advent centers on the hope that comes from the announcement of Christ's birth and the expectation of His certain return.

Candlelighting and readings

Read the passage below, individually or as a group, and light the "hope" candle when instructed to do so.

Advent is a time of waiting, of holy expectation for what is to come. It is a time of preparing our hearts and our homes for Christmas joy. Just four weeks from now, we celebrate God's revelation of true love in the person of Jesus.

During Advent, we remember the incarnation of Jesus, born to a young woman who, but for love, would have been an outcast. Born in a barn, God incarnate had a rocky start.

The God we meet in Jesus is a God of compassion, righteousness, and profound love like no other. The God who created the heavens and the earth becomes flesh and dwells among us: Emmanuel, God with us.

There was a man in the desert who called people to wait for Jesus. He reminded them of an ancient prophecy and told them it was about to come true. In Matthew 3:3, this man—John the Baptist—tells us to "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him," reminding us of the prophecy of Isaiah 40: "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it."

In our world, there are valleys, the way is rough, and the road is often crooked. Things are not how God intends them to be. Mary, the mother of Jesus, walked a very rough road. The world tried to condemn her, but the strength she received from God carried her through her trials, as it does so many in today's troubled world.

Day 1, cont.



Lighting of the candle

We light this first candle in gratitude for God's divine and perfect love, made visible at Christmas. We light this candle as a symbol of God's light shining in the darkness. The Light has come into the world. It shines as brightly now as it did then. The darkness didn't overcome it then. And it never will.



Let us pray

God of Advent, we are an impatient and busy people. We are propelled into the Christmas season and swept away by activity. Help us to slow down and savor Advent. Teach us in this rhythm of expectation to see You at work in our lives and in the world. Your Son was not born in a castle to strong rulers. He was born in a barn to a vulnerable young woman. That teaches us something about You. Open our eyes to the vulnerable around us in our own communities and in our global home. Guard every child in need. Equip us, Your people, to fill in the valleys and make the rough ground level.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.

Don't forget to blow out the candle when you're done.

Day 2



Mary's story

Next to the baby Jesus, his mother, Mary, is probably the most intriguing character in all the Bible readings linked to Christmas. Hers is a highly sought-after role in nativity pageants, with little girls vying for the honor of portraying her. With history on our side, we know when we read Mary's story that both great joy and searing pain lie ahead for this woman who calls herself a servant of the Lord.

Read Luke 1:26-38.



Bible background

Mary's story is one of daring risk, sacrifice, deep faith, and the power of love and family. It is a story for today.

Mary's "yes" to God changed the world forever. But it also changed her life right then and there. Mary faced rejection and the threat of a hostile response—at the most extreme, stoning—from her society.

Thankfully, the worst didn't happen.

God placed people in Mary's life—family—to walk with her on this journey. Joseph, her husband, followed God's call to care for his young wife. Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, became her confidante in God's miraculous movement into history.

Family encircled Mary. The world did indeed change forever.



Think about it

Think of a time in which you said "yes" to God, even though the consequences may have been difficult. What was the outcome of saying "yes"?

Day 3

Advent is a time of waiting expectantly. Our hope is found in the promise of Jesus as we place our trust in His unfailing love.

Take some time to read this quote and reflect on the questions that follow.

“Just imagine what Mary was actually saying in the words, ‘I am the handmaid of the Lord ... let what you have said be done to me’ (Luke 1:38). She was saying, ‘I don’t know what this all means, but I trust that good things will happen.’ She trusted so deeply that her waiting was open to all possibilities. And she did not want to control them. She believed that when she listened carefully she could trust what was going to happen.

“To wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life. So is to trust that something will happen to us that is far beyond our own imaginings. So, too, is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life, trusting that God molds us according to God’s love and not according to our fear. The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction. That, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control.”

—Henri Nouwen



Reflection questions

- Do you find it difficult to wait and trust in God’s love? Why or why not?
- We often think of waiting as being passive. However, Nouwen describes the waiting we see in Scripture as very active. He writes, “Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it.” Have you ever thought of waiting in this way? What are some ways in which you can practice active waiting?
- In general, do you try to control your life or do you allow God to define your life? Does it scare you to trust God with your future?

Day 4

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

—Isaiah 9:6

It is fascinating to read the story of Christ's birth and see who played the major roles. Mary, an unwed teenager, is chosen as the mother of the King of Kings and Savior of the world. Other major characters were the shepherds—considered outcasts by their society. God gave value to those whom society deemed unworthy, lowly, unclean, and common. This shows us a great deal about the character of God and the hope He brings to all people.

In a world in which the poor and weak continue to be oppressed, God's message of hope rings true. As followers of Christ, we are commissioned to be instruments of hope to those whom society marginalizes.



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Agnes' Story

by James Addis

Sitting outside her one-room home, Agnes Njobvu, 42, tells a story that sounds faintly reminiscent of the biblical book of Job. But it's difficult to hear her at first. She has to speak above the din emanating from a boom box at the Bluebar and Tavern—a vile drinking den next door. It's one of many that ill-serves the people of Chainda—a rough settlement on the fringes of Zambia's capital, Lusaka.

Agnes explains that she once had a husband, five sisters, and a brother. Sister Loveness died in 1989. Then at regular intervals, so too did Agnes' husband and sisters Ireen, Grace, Mary, and Queen. Finally, brother Frankie also died. Each death was preceded by a long illness featuring vomiting, diarrhea, and overwhelming weakness that kept the sufferer confined to bed.

(continued on next page)

Day 4, cont.

As each sibling died, Agnes took care of their children. “They had no one else,” she explains. The partners of her brother and sisters were either already dead or disappeared when the sickness came. So last year, Agnes, a widow, found herself responsible for 13 children—seven orphans, three children of her own, and three grandchildren from her older daughters.

Then, like Job, she got sick herself. The symptoms were familiar—diarrhea, vomiting, weakness. “I thought it was witchcraft,” she says. “I thought my whole family was bewitched.”

Agnes dragged herself out of bed to seek spiritual help from Cosmas Tembo, a local Pentecostal pastor. Unbeknown to her, Pastor Tembo also happened to be a World Vision-trained AIDS caregiver and counselor. He persuaded Agnes to go to a health clinic, a 15-minute bus ride away. Agnes had to lean on Cosmas’ shoulders as he helped her onto the bus. At the clinic, she tested HIV-positive. Cosmas found a quiet place to reassure Agnes that the news was not all bad.

“He started encouraging me. He told me that there were plenty of others who were HIV-positive but were now using ARV [antiretroviral therapy] and were living OK,” she says. “He said I could, too, but I must take the drugs consistently.”

That day was the start of a firm friendship. Cosmas began to visit Agnes’ home every other day. Through World Vision, he secured extra clothes, blankets, food, and mosquito nets for the struggling family. Agnes began a course of antiretroviral treatment. She soon began to feel better and found some work. “There’s encouragement. I have a new lease of life,” she says.

They call it the Lazarus Effect—people suffering from AIDS literally getting up from their deathbeds and living again.



Think about it

Although Agnes’ life has been filled with pain, she finds hope in the love and care of Cosmas Tembo. We all possess resources that can bring hope to others. What talents or resources do you have that could bless and bring hope to those around you? Write some of those things down, and ask God to help you be a vessel of His hope to those who are hurting.

Day 5



Breath prayer

This week, we will engage in “breath prayer.” Adele Ahlberg Calhoun describes breath prayer in *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*:

“Breathing is an unconscious thing. And breath prayer reminds us that just as we can’t live on one breath of air, we can’t live on one breath of God. God is the oxygen of our soul, and we need to breathe him in all day long. Breath prayer reminds us that each breath we are given is God’s gift and that God’s Spirit is nearer to us than our own breath.”

“Breath prayer or ‘prayer of the heart’ has been practiced in the church for millennia. The Eastern Orthodox Church in particular has seen breath prayer as a way of living out Paul’s instruction to ‘pray without ceasing.’”

“To practice breath prayer, ponder the nearness of God. Settle deeply into the truth that Christ is in you. Deeply breathe in, repeating any name of God that is dear to you. As you exhale, voice a deep desire of your heart. When you exhale, offer up the desire of your heart. The brevity of the prayer allows it to be repeated over and over throughout the day.”

Feel the freedom to come up with whatever phrase you desire as you engage in breath prayer. A common breath prayer comes from Luke 18:13, in which Jesus tells the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee. The tax collector prays, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Jesus points to the humility of the tax collector and encourages others to take the same attitude. As a breath prayer, one would breathe in, saying “God” or “Jesus, Son of David” or “Abba.” Then, as you breathe out, say, “Have mercy on me, a sinner.”

As you reflect on the theme of hope this week, consider praying this breath prayer from Psalm 39:7: Breathe in “Father,” breathe out “My hope is in You.” Repeat this phrase as you breathe throughout the day and allow it to transform you.

Day 6

This week, we have been engaging with the idea of hope as it relates to the Christmas story. Consider responding to this hope through one or more of the following actions.



Live it out

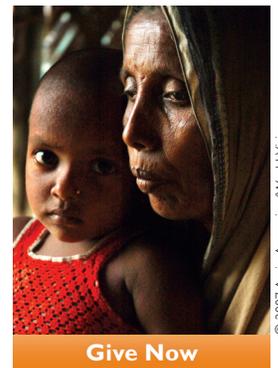
Think about people in your community or elsewhere who need hope this Christmas season. Write down the name(s) of one or a few of these people. Then think of some ways you can bless them during Advent. Maybe you can write a note of encouragement to a friend going through a difficult time. Maybe you can volunteer to serve a meal or help at a local shelter. Maybe you can invite someone who doesn't have family nearby for a meal. Be creative and follow through with whatever you decide to do.



Give a gift

World Vision's Gift Catalog allows you to give life-changing gifts to children and families in need—things like goats, wells for clean water, or seeds—in the name of someone special.

This week we read the story of Agnes and the immense impact AIDS has had on her and her family. As millions die of AIDS, widows and orphans are left in the wake of the tragedy, with little hope for a better future. You can help provide hope by making a donation to the **Orphans and Widows Fund**. Go to www.worldvisiongifts.org for more information or to donate.



Give Now

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Advocate

Advocacy is a way to offer hope to people like Agnes. Advocacy is speaking out on behalf of someone else, amplifying their voice, and defending them from injustice. As American citizens, our voices have great strength to effect change for those suffering with HIV and AIDS. AIDS devastates the lives of millions of children around the world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. The Global AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Bill is the U.S. government's commitment to those most affected by diseases such as AIDS, with special funding reserved for orphans and vulnerable children. While there is government commitment behind it, it is not yet fully funded. You can use your voice to speak out

Day 6, cont.

for AIDS-affected children by advocating for the government to maintain and fulfill its promise through this bill.

Advocacy is a long-term effort. When we faithfully use our voices, we extend hope to millions of children worldwide by making our friends, families, communities, and governments aware of the plight of the poor. You can also join World Vision's advocate network. Visit www.worldvision.org/advocacy to become an advocacy partner with World Vision.

Day 7

This week we have focused on the hope and expectation found in Christ's birth. You have had the opportunity to both engage and respond to this hope. Next week we will focus on the love of God. Our hope comes from knowing that God loves us so much that He sent His Son to die for us.

As we wrap up this first week of Advent, you are invited to go online to watch a brief video about the AIDS pandemic. This video reveals the immense havoc AIDS has wreaked around the world, but also shows the hope that has come from World Vision's work. Watch the video at www.worldvision.org/advent.

Today, reflect upon all you have learned this week.



Let us pray

Dear God,

Christmas is Your light breaking into the darkness. We confess that we are sometimes blinded, not by Your glory, but by consumerism, greed, and the oppression of packed schedules. Help us this year to see and respond to Christmas differently. Strengthen us to resist the lure of getting more in a world where so many have so little. Equip us to use this time to remember Your birth and think about how we do Your will here on earth, as it is done in heaven. By breaking into human history, You showed us a different way—the way of reconciliation, redemption, and resurrection. As we celebrate *how* You came, help us remember *why* You came—and live differently because of it.

Amen.



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Day 1

This second week of Advent centers on the love of God and how that love transforms us to love others.

Candlelighting and readings

Read the passage below, individually or as a group. Light the “hope” candle, followed by the “love” candle, when instructed to do so.

As we prepare our hearts for the coming of our Lord, we prepare our homes for the arrival of family and friends. We imagine what it will be like to dine and visit with loved ones. We treasure thoughts of home—a place of safety and love.

Mary and Joseph had to leave home, just when they needed home the most. Their arduous journey to Bethlehem meant they were alone at a time when they most needed community. Yet God was present to Mary and Joseph in their wandering. They experienced God as Protector and Sustainer as they traveled to the unfamiliar surroundings of Bethlehem for the census.

Once there, they experienced God as Keeper of Promises. Jeremiah 33:14-16 says: “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.’”

God makes a promise through Jeremiah, and He keeps it in Bethlehem. Jesus is born, and nothing will ever be the same.

Today, in a world that makes the barn in Bethlehem feel like a very long time ago, God calls us to help keep children safe and give shelter to those who are homeless.

Day 1, cont.



Lighting of the candles

We light this first candle for children of God who have been separated from home. We light this candle in acknowledgement that God wants children to live in safety; in repentance that this is not always the case; and in commitment that we will work to make it so.

We light this second candle as a symbol of God's light shining in the darkness. The Light has come into the world. As we are told in the first chapter of John, the darkness has not understood it. But the darkness will never overcome it.



Let us pray

Dear God,

You are our hearts' home. Your home is safe, loving, and eternal. But so many of Your children are trapped in homes that are not safe. Or they are forced to leave safe homes for nightmares they may not escape. You chose to incarnate Yourself into a family that had little else but love on the night You were born. Rescue us from our preoccupation with ourselves, so that we can see the needs, and the hope, around us. Draw us closer to Your light as we draw closer to Christmas.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.

Don't forget to blow out the candles when you're done.

Day 2



Born in a barn

For those who know Luke's account of Christmas well, there are probably no more familiar words than "In those days Caesar Augustus ..." We know the rhythms of the story. It is the beginning of a turning point. We are getting closer to the birth of Jesus. And that short passage in Luke 2, verses 1 to 7, covers a journey that plucked a very pregnant Mary and steady Joseph from the comfort and security of home and family, then sent them down a rocky trail to a barn in Bethlehem. Yet somehow, hope and home came along with them.

Read Luke 2:1-7.



Bible background

Romans ruled the land into which Jesus was born. The Jewish government reported to the authority of the local Roman government, represented by King Herod. Herod, in turn, obeyed Rome and the infamous Emperor Augustus. It was Roman law that required the family to travel for the census when Mary was preparing to give birth.

A barn in Bethlehem would not be anyone's choice for a birthing room. But Mary must have packed the swaddling cloth and linen strips that she knew she would need. She was prepared. Her Son would be born homeless, and that's how He would spend a good deal of His life. Yet hope, home, and a community of sorts would exist that night in Bethlehem, in the most unlikely of holy places.

And hope, home, and a ragtag community would follow Jesus wherever He would go.



Think about it

Where is the most unlikely place you have experienced a sense of home, family, or community?

Day 3

Take some time to read the following Scriptures and quote. Then reflect on the questions that follow.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 8:38-39

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

—I John 3:16-18

“In Christ’s human life, there were always a few who made up for the neglect of the crowd. The shepherds did it; their hurrying to the crib atoned for the people who would flee from Christ. The wise men did it; their journey across the world made up for those who refused to stir one hand’s breadth from the routine of their lives to go to Christ. Even the gifts the wise men brought have in themselves an obscure recompense and atonement for what would follow later in this Child’s life. For they brought gold, the king’s emblem, to make up for the crown of thorns that he would wear; they offered incense, the symbol of praise, to make up for the mockery and the spitting; they gave him myrrh, to heal and soothe, and he was wounded from head to foot and no one bathed his wounds. The women at the foot of the Cross did it too, making up for the crowd who stood by and sneered.

“We can do it too, exactly as they did. We are not born too late. We do it by seeing Christ and serving Christ in friends and strangers, in everyone we come in contact with.”

—Dorothy Day

Day 3, cont.



Reflection questions

- Describe a time when you truly felt you were caring for Christ when caring for another person.
- Do you live in a way that trusts that Jesus is speaking truth when He says, in Matthew 25:40, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me”?
- What makes it difficult for you to see others as Christ Himself?
- What would help you remember that caring for others is caring for Christ?

Day 4

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

—John 13:34-35



Zeinabou's Story

by Andrea Peer

Zeinabou stands more than a foot taller than her sibling next in line. At the age of 14, she helps take care of her younger brothers and sisters. She teaches them to draw and solve math problems. She helps her mother fetch water, clean clothes, and sweep the house. But grief is apparent on her face. She will never forget that someone is missing.

“One of my brothers died. He died from malaria, a long time ago,” she says.

Zeinabou's brother Issakou was 3 when he died from malaria. With a high fever and infection invading his vulnerable body, help couldn't come fast enough. His little heart stopped beating.

Zeinabou knows what malaria feels like. “I feel cold. I feel fever. I can't sleep because I get a headache,” she remembers. But, as a sponsored child, she no longer has reason to fear malaria. After caring for everyone else, she now has someone to take care of her.

“When you are ill, World Vision will take care of you,” she says with a look of relief.

“When I was sick, World Vision carried me to the clinic and bought medicine for me. I was sick with malaria.”

World Vision also sponsors several of Zeinabou's siblings. Their family has received lots of gifts from World Vision, such as food, goats, clothes, and school supplies. And they've received two mosquito nets to protect the entire family.

Her mother says, “There is a change [since before] we got mosquito nets and now. When we didn't have mosquito nets, mosquitoes used to bite us, but now that we have them, they don't. Our health is better.”

Zeinabou can sleep easier knowing she and her siblings are protected. “It makes me happy,” she says.

Day 4, cont.



Think about it

There are problems everywhere; it is just a matter of opening your eyes to see the needs around you and allowing God's love to flow through you. What are some practical ways you can love those around you today?

Day 5



Liturgical prayer

This week, we will engage in liturgical prayer. According to author Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, liturgical prayer enables you to “open [your]self to God through established patterns or traditions of written prayers and readings.” This practice may be very familiar to you, or it may be completely different than what you are used to.

Calhoun explains in *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*:

“Though our age tends to value spontaneity and individuality, a growing number of people are searching the depths of liturgical prayer. Alongside the popularity of conversational prayer, with its up-to-the-minute spontaneity, stands the desire to be rooted in something ancient that has survived the centuries. Liturgy can reach back two thousand years to the early church practice of daily prayer, which included the Lord’s Prayer and the Psalms.”

The prayer that follows is known as the Prayer of Saint Francis. Although most scholars believe that it was not actually written by Saint Francis of Assisi, it reflects the life he lived and speaks profoundly to our calling to love others. Read the prayer below and open yourself to what God has to teach you through it. Pray it multiple times, meditating over the words as you make them the cry of your own heart.

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.*

*For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Day 6

This week, we have focused on the love God showed us by sending His Son into this world to die for us. Now it is your turn to respond to this love through one or more of the following actions.



Live it out

God's love for us is radical. It is entirely unmerited, yet given fully and freely. We cannot even begin to fathom how wide, how deep, and how great is the love of Christ. However, those of us who have experienced a glimpse of this love are forever changed. In the next few days, challenge yourself to love someone radically. This may require going far outside your comfort zone, but the love Christ calls us to isn't safe or comfortable. Who in your life is difficult to love? Is there a certain group of people against whom you hold prejudices and whom you fail to love genuinely? Find a way to love this person or people this week. Maybe you can write a letter to or have coffee with someone against whom you've held a grudge. Maybe you can try to get to know someone and start changing the stereotype you have of the group to which he or she belongs. Maybe you can spend time with and love someone you know will never be able to thank you. Whatever you do, be sure to do it without the need for praise or recognition.



Give a gift

World Vision's Gift Catalog allows you to give life-changing gifts to children and families in need—things like goats, wells for safe water, or seeds—in the name of someone special.

This week we have discussed the malaria crisis and the tremendous toll it takes upon communities around the world, especially when it comes to children. You have the opportunity to love someone by donating the gift of **malaria prevention** for one family. Go to www.worldvisiongifts.org for more information or to donate.

Day 6, cont.



Advocate

As followers of Christ, we show love when we speak out on behalf of others. Malaria is a preventable and curable disease. It is unjust that as many as 2,000 children die every day from this disease—caused by one bite from an infected mosquito. By raising awareness about malaria among those around you and advocating with the U.S. government to support the fight against malaria, you can show love for and solidarity with those most affected by this disease. There are two ways you can act:

Host a “Night of Nets” event at your church, on your campus, or in your community. By sleeping outside overnight under a bed net and inviting others to join you, you will cause others to stop, look, and ask questions. You can help them understand the impact of malaria on the poor and invite them to respond through giving and advocacy. To learn more, visit www.nightofnets.org.

Speak out. Partner with World Vision to urge the government to increase funding for the fight against malaria. You can also join World Vision’s advocate network. Visit www.worldvision.org/advocacy to become an advocacy partner with World Vision.

Day 7

This week we have looked at the great love displayed by God in giving value to those whom society deemed unworthy. Next week we will focus on the joy that comes from knowing Christ was born and is alive today.

As we wrap up this week, you are invited to go online to watch two short videos. The first video highlights the malaria crisis and invites you to participate in the “Night of Nets” event we talked about yesterday. The second video is narrated by a young girl in Africa. She takes us around her village and shows us all that World Vision has done to help her and her community. Watch the videos at www.worldvision.org/advent.

Today, reflect upon all you have learned this week.



Let us pray

Dear God,

Christmas is Your light breaking into the darkness. We confess that we are sometimes blinded, not by Your glory, but by consumerism, greed, and the oppression of packed schedules. Help us this year to see and respond to Christmas differently. Strengthen us to resist the lure of getting more in a world where so many have so little. Equip us to use this time to remember Your birth and think about how we do Your will here on earth, as it is done in heaven. By breaking into human history, You showed us a different way—the way of reconciliation, redemption, and resurrection. As we celebrate *how* You came, help us remember *why* You came—and live differently because of it.

Amen.



Day 1

This third week of Advent, we will focus on the joy that Christ's birth brings to all people.

Candlelighting and readings

Read the passage below, individually or as a group. Light the “hope,” “love,” and “joy” candles when instructed to do so.

During Christmas, surrounded by family and friends, we feel the warmth of knowing we belong in this place, with these people. Or we experience the jarring disappointment that can come when we feel we do not belong. This season is a time of opposites—highs and lows, joy and depression, rushing when we want to stand still.

Within the Christmas story itself, we find opposites. Angels, heaven's most glorious citizens, visit with shepherds, Bethlehem's least. The God who chose to partner with an unwed mother and be born in a barn also chose shepherds, the outcasts of the day, to be the first to hear the news that Emmanuel has come.

The world has a habit of discarding what doesn't fit. Our God does the opposite. Isaiah 40:11 says, “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.”

God sends angels to shepherds and gathers in what the world throws out. As we read in Jeremiah 30:17, God restores people to health and heals their wounds because they are called outcasts. And He does this very thing on that night in Bethlehem.

In these final days leading up to Christmas, we see angels visiting shepherds. And we remember that God cares for us as lambs. God loves when we do not. God calls us to love everyone, no matter what.

Day 1, cont.



Lighting of the candles

We light this first candle for every child of God who has known what it is to be an outcast. We light this second candle in acknowledgement that God does not shut out, but welcomes in.

We light this third candle as a symbol of God's light shining in the darkness. Genesis 1:3 reminds us that a long time ago, God said "Let there be light." And there was light.



Let us pray

Dear God,

You are the light of the world. In You, there is no darkness at all. There are no outcasts, no one who is not good enough. As we continue on our journey through Advent, help us remember that those whom the world says do not belong, You welcome with open arms.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

Don't forget to blow out the candles when you're done.

Day 2



Unlikely heroes

The God who chose to partner with an unwed mother and be born in a barn continues the themes of love, courage, family, and a community that rises to the occasion as we read further in Luke. Probably only in a God-story would angels and shepherds mingle in a field outside of Bethlehem. This says something important about angels and shepherds—and about you and me.

Read Luke 2:8-20.



Bible background

These shepherds of the nativity certainly aren't the first or only shepherds mentioned in the Bible. David was one, after all. So were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And God is compared to a shepherd in Psalm 23.

But the guys who were on duty that night in Bethlehem were most likely the other sort of shepherds—the ones with the bad reputations.

Hired shepherds were known for being thieves. They were often alone for long stretches of time, and if sheep or produce went missing, it was the shepherds who were blamed. The pious were even warned not to buy anything from shepherds, because the goods were probably stolen. One ancient Jewish philosopher wrote that the livelihood of looking after sheep and goats was “mean and inglorious.”

But that night, glory was not in short supply. It shone all around. The angels appeared and told the shepherds that the Savior had been born. But their message went deeper than that. By announcing the dawning of the kingdom to the lowly, God said something about the value of those the world dismisses. God is saying that still.



Think about it

If we are totally honest, all of us probably could confess to discriminating at some point in our lives against a group other than the one to which we belong. Why do you think that is? How does this part of the biblical story challenge us to grow beyond prejudice?

Day 3

Take some time to read the following Scripture and quotes. Then reflect on the questions that follow.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”

—John 15:9-11

“Joy must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and Pleasure. Joy has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again ... I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is.”

—C.S. Lewis

“A life of intimacy with God is characterized by joy.”

—Oswald Chambers



Reflection questions

- What is the difference between happiness and joy to you? When do you experience joy? How does this differ from an experience of pleasure or happiness?
- Lewis states, “Joy is never in our power.” Why is this the case?
- What does the verse from John say in regard to where our joy is found? How can joy be complete in your life?
- Do you agree with Chambers’ statement about a life of intimacy with God being characterized by joy?
- Has joy typically been the outcome of your walk with God? Why or why not?

Day 4

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

—Romans 15:13



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Clean Water Brings Joy

by Andrea Peer

In 2006, Mariama Kwando gathered with a crowd of people from her village to watch a well being drilled by World Vision. They used strange machinery she had never seen before.

As she recalls this significant occasion, her eyes open wide with awe. “When they built the well, I saw metallic materials, pipes, big vehicles, and I saw the water come out,” says Mariama, 10, a World Vision-sponsored child. “When the water first came out, I was so happy. I laughed with all my friends. We were joyful. The joy was because before we had to go far to get water, but now [the well] is very close to the village, and we are happy.”

The previous well was old, with questionable water quality. “People used to get sick from the other well,” says another sponsored child in the village, Zalifa Lamine, 14.

The old well also stole much of the villagers’ time—time that children could use instead to study or play, and time that adults could spend working in their fields or caring for their children. The old well was a long walk for anyone in this hot, desert country, but especially long for a child.

Mariama used to spend more than two hours every day fetching water, walking two kilometers (1.25 miles) each way in the morning and evening. “I was very tired by the end of it,” she says. “Now the distance is short.”

Thanks to World Vision, Mariama can easily walk to the new well, get clean water at all times of the day, and still have energy for school. She is enrolled in fourth grade at a school World Vision improved by building classrooms and latrines. Mariama has been sponsored for three years. “World Vision gave me shoes, a mosquito net, and clothes,” she says.

Zalifa says, “I used to go two kilometers to a well. It took 35 minutes to get there. I would go three times a day. It’s much easier now. The water tastes better, too.”

Day 4, cont.



Think about it

Mariama experienced joy when World Vision drilled a well in her village so they could have access to clean water. Clean water is something that most people in the United States take for granted. We walk a few feet to the kitchen or bathroom and turn on the faucet. Imagine what it would be like to spend much of your day walking to a well to retrieve water and then having to worry whether that water will make you or your family sick. Take some time to reflect upon and thank God for the access you have to clean water.

Day 5



Prayer walking

This week we will engage in a prayer walk. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun describes prayer walking in *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*:

“Some people do their best praying while they are moving. Prayer walking can be a wonderful gift for those who like to get up and move around. This type of intercession intentionally invites people to go to the site of their concern: the office, the conference room, the dining room, the kitchen, the school, the hospital, the government buildings. The immediacy of context can fuel prayer and offer a way for listening more deeply to God, to what his concerns for this place might be.”

Think of a place where you would like to go on a prayer walk. Invite friends to go along or just do it by yourself. You may prefer to pray in the rooms of your own home or walk around your neighborhood. You may also decide to drive to a local school, hospital, or other community facility and pray for those who are there. Remember that Jesus is walking with you during your time of prayer. Ask Him to give you His heart and reveal to you the needs along your route.

As you focus on the theme of joy this week, pray for joy to infiltrate the lives of the people you are praying for. Pray for those who find it hard to experience joy in the midst of the Christmas season. Pray that we would be reminded of what this season is truly about, and give glory and thanks to God for His great love in sending His Son to die for us.

Day 6

This week, we have been engaging the idea of joy as it relates to the Christmas story. Consider responding to this joy, which comes from knowing we are loved unconditionally by God, through one or more of the following actions.



Live it out

In the next day or two, joyfully give your time, talent, or treasure to someone in need. If you see someone on the street, invite him or her for a meal or coffee and get to know his or her story. Buy Christmas gifts for a family that is struggling to make ends meet this year. Visit a senior living facility and spend time with those who do not have family nearby during Christmas.



Give a gift

World Vision's Gift Catalog allows you to give life-changing gifts to children and families in need—things like goats, wells for clean water, or seeds—in the name of someone special.

This week we read about the joy Mariama experienced through the gift of clean water. You have the opportunity to change lives and bring joy to many by donating to World Vision's **Clean Water Fund**. Visit www.worldvisiongifts.org for more information or to donate.



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Advocate

Clean water is key to the health and well-being of a community—especially its children. As a child-focused organization, World Vision works to ensure child health by providing access to essentials such as clean water, as well as disease prevention and nutrition. Without these key elements, a child cannot achieve his or her full potential. The global economic crisis has had a significant impact on child health—especially nutrition. Food prices have increased, and the poor must eat less, resulting in increased incidences of malnutrition among children. To make matters worse, when the same amount of money buys less food, organizations like World Vision that distribute food to the hungry

Day 6, cont.

cannot help as many people. Because of this, World Vision is asking the U.S. government to increase its response to the global food crisis to ensure that we are doing all we can to help those in greatest need. Add your voice to this call for increased food aid for the world's poorest families.

You can also join World Vision's advocate network. Visit www.worldvision.org/advocacy to become an advocacy partner with World Vision.

Day 7

This week we have focused on the joy that comes from knowing the deep love of Christ. We have looked at Scripture passages, quotes, and stories that highlight this theme of joy. You have had the opportunity to respond joyfully to the love of Christ by giving to others. Tomorrow we begin the final week of Advent, which focuses on the peace of Christ.

As we wrap up this week, you are invited to go online to watch a short video about World Vision's work to bring joy by providing clean water to people in need around the world. Watch the video at www.worldvision.org/advent.

Today, reflect upon all you have learned this week.



Let us pray

Dear God,

Christmas is Your light breaking into the darkness. We confess that we are sometimes blinded, not by Your glory, but by consumerism, greed, and the oppression of packed schedules. Help us this year to see and respond to Christmas differently. Strengthen us to resist the lure of getting more in a world where so many have so little. Equip us to use this time to remember Your birth and think about how we do Your will here on earth, as it is done in heaven. By breaking into human history, You showed us a different way—the way of reconciliation, redemption, and resurrection. As we celebrate *how* You came, help us remember *why* You came—and live differently because of it.

Amen.



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Day 1

This final week of Advent, we focus on receiving the peace that surpasses all understanding as we recognize God's presence among us.

Candlelighting and readings

Read the passage below, individually or as a group. Light the “hope,” “love,” “joy,” and “peace” candles when instructed to do so.

Our waiting is almost over. In these last days of Advent, we stand on the threshold of Christmas.

As we have waited, we have experienced the presence of the One for whom we wait. God's presence brings peace.

We have placed ourselves in the posture of God's people of the Old Testament, groaning for their Messiah. This is one of the promises that kept their faith strong: *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”* (Isaiah 9:6).

Jesus was born into a time of turmoil. Herod, threatened by the birth of the Child people were calling a king, ordered the murder of all male children in and around Bethlehem ages 2 and younger.

We can hardly comprehend it. Like so many atrocities taking place around the world today, when the powerful are threatened, the innocent die.

But God promises that one day, the fighting will end. Isaiah 2:4 reminds us that those who fight will *“beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”* The peacemakers will be blessed indeed.

Day One, cont.



Lighting of the candles

We light this first candle for every child of God who has lost family, home, or innocence to war.

We light these three candles as people who long for Jesus and the peace of God—for ourselves, our families, our communities, and the whole world.



Let us pray

God of Peace,

In these final days of Advent, we wait for the birth of the Christ child, the Prince of Peace. And we wait for Jesus' coming again in glory, when swords will become plowshares. We pray for those who live in conflict, that they will be protected. We pray for the situations that create conflict, that they will be resolved peacefully. We pray especially for the children, who are hurt the most by conflict. Protect them and bring caring adults alongside them to nurture them. Show us how we can be peacemakers in our own relationships, our own families and workplaces, and the world. Help us to be blessed as peacemakers in Your name.

Amen.

Don't forget to blow out the candles when you're done.

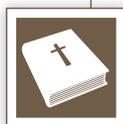
Day 2



God as refugee

It is known as the Slaughter of the Innocents, and it is the dark stain on the Christmas story. Herod, threatened by the birth of an alleged king, orders the murder of all male children in and around Bethlehem ages 2 and younger. Yet God prevailed. Another angel. Another message. Another journey. God's Son becomes, for a time, a member of a refugee family making their way to Egypt.

Read Matthew 2:13-18.



Bible background

King Herod the Great ranks in the world's history books as a despicable despot. His reign is chronicled as one atrocity after another. It is believed that Herod died around 4 B.C. The Slaughter of the Innocents would have been one of his last acts as a ruler, and perhaps one of his most cowardly.

God's messenger assures Mary and Joseph that their Child will be safe. They are given specific directions and a promise of further communication when it is time to leave Egypt. We see that Herod's grasp for worldly power is impotent against the demonstration of God's saving power.

In this story, throughout the Bible, and even in today's world—when conflict rages and even when innocents die—God is still doing the work of redeeming, restoring, and protecting. People like Herod commit atrocities. But it is also people whom God uses to bring peace.



Think about it

During Christmas, we prefer not to focus on the account of the Slaughter of the Innocents. How does acknowledging this event add to or detract from your feelings about Christmas?

Day 3

Take some time to read the following Scriptures and quote. Then reflect on the questions that follow.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.

—Colossians 3:12-15

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

—John 14:27

"Keep your eyes on the prince of peace, the one who doesn't cling to his divine power; the one who refuses to turn stones into bread, jump from great heights, and rule with great power...; the one who touches the lame, the crippled, and the blind, the one who speaks words of forgiveness and encouragement... Keep your eyes on him who becomes poor with the poor, weak with the weak, and who is rejected with the rejected. He is the source of all peace.

"Where is his peace to be found? The answer is surprising but it is clear. In weakness. Few people are telling us this truth, but there is peace to be found in our own weakness, in those places of our hearts where we feel most broken, most insecure, most in agony, most afraid. Why there? Because in manipulating our weakness our familiar ways of controlling and manipulating our world are being stripped away and we are forced to let go from doing much, thinking much, and relying on our self-sufficiency. Right there where we are most vulnerable, the peace that is not of this world is mysteriously hidden."

—Henri Nouwen

Day 3, cont.



Reflection questions

- What has God taught you through these passages?
- How have you experienced the peace of God that surpasses all understanding?
- In what ways is it difficult to see God's peace in a world so filled with conflict? What would help you to experience peace in the midst of pain?
- What are some ways that you could be a peacemaker to those in your community and those around the world? List a few ideas.

Day 4

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

—Matthew 5:9



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Welcome Home

by Rich Stearns, from The Hole in Our Gospel

We gathered together in a group of about 60—me, my wife, and my daughter Hannah, along with a few World Vision Uganda staff and perhaps 40 children of various ages. We were waiting for them to arrive, planning to greet them with songs and celebration. We had been told they would arrive that morning.

As the metal gates creaked open, our anticipation grew—they were here. The SUV slowly pulled in, inched its way toward us, and finally came to a stop. Then the doors opened, and two teenage boys tentatively stepped out to face the crowd. I could see both fear and confusion on their faces—they clearly weren't expecting this kind of welcome, not for two mass murderers.

I don't think I've ever been to a place as spiritually dark as Gulu, in northern Uganda. Gulu is the epicenter of more than 20 years of violent atrocities committed by the so-called Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and its leader, Joseph Kony, a monster who has declared himself to be the son of God. If Satan is alive and manifesting himself in our world, he is surely present in this cultish and brutal group whose trademark was the kidnapping of children who are subsequently forced at gunpoint to commit murder, rape, and even acts of cannibalism. During his reign of terror, it is believed that Kony has kidnapped more than 38,000 children, killing some and forcing the rest to become killers themselves by conscripting them into the LRA as child soldiers. As a part of their brutal indoctrination, the children are often forced to hack their own brothers or sisters to death with a machete—because bullets are too precious to waste—and then to drink the blood of those they have killed. The girls, often just 12 or 13, are gang-raped and forced to become sex slaves and “wives” to the rebel commanders. As a result of the LRA's grisly raids over two decades, some 1.5 million people have been driven from their land and forced to live in camps for internally displaced persons in and around Gulu. It was in this unlikely backdrop that I witnessed the awesome power of the gospel that has become so tame to us in America.

(continued on next page)

Day 4, cont.

For more than a decade, World Vision's Children of War Center has worked to rehabilitate and restore the children who are rescued or manage to escape from the LRA rebels. These are children with unimaginable spiritual, psychological, and emotional wounds, kids who are typically feared as monsters and rejected by the very communities they once came from because of what they have been forced to do. Sometimes their own parents do not want them back; their childhoods have been stolen from them and their very souls desecrated by horror after horror. Intense spiritual and emotional counseling, forgiveness and reconciliation, and even job skills training have been provided to thousands of these damaged children. The two boys entering the compound that day had also been subjected to the depredations of their own captivity by the LRA. They, too, had been forced to kill and maim.

Their eyes were hollow and vacant—eyes that had seen unspeakable things. Their souls seemed dead. I could see no life in them. Jesus in His most distressing disguise. They had been captured by the Ugandan army, and now they were being brought to World Vision for help, for redemption, for healing. They had names, Michael and Joseph. Michael's left arm was withered, the result of a gunshot wound sustained before he was fully grown, in some past firefight. The LRA warned their child soldiers that they would be murdered by their own people if they ever tried to go home. They were even told that if they were taken to the Children of War Center run by World Vision, they would be poisoned—or worse. That is why these boys were terrified that day, stepping out of the car.

The 40 other “children of war”—damaged souls all—surrounded them and began singing and clapping joyfully. These songs of praise to God, anthems of healing and forgiveness, were more beautiful than any choir of angels. Michael and Joseph were dumbstruck at this welcome, so different from what they had expected. They began to see faces they knew, other kids who had escaped—who had, like them, also known the brutal hand of the LRA and had murdered at their command. Some spark of light began to return to their hollow eyes. Hesitant smiles slowly turned up the corners of their mouths, as high fives and hugs were offered by this one and that. Soon, all 50 of us poured into the makeshift chapel of corrugated tin and rough wooden benches in the compound.

A spontaneous worship service erupted as the songs of God's healing forgiveness and power were sung over and over again. *Welcome home, welcome home, Michael and Joseph. You are home now.* The good news—the glorious, life-transforming gospel—washed over Michael and Joseph, and in that moment the unthinkable possibility of forgiveness broke over them like a new dawn. They could be forgiven, restored, made whole again. This was almost impossible to believe, the “glad tidings” so overwhelmingly good.

(continued on next page)

Day 4, cont.

“He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

—Luke 4:18-19

Even a small match lit in a place of total darkness gives off a blinding light. So great had Michael and Joseph’s darkness been that the light of the gospel, the whole gospel, was brilliant and blinding, shining with intensity, authority, and hope. Jesus, too, had been abducted. He, too, had been beaten and maimed. And He, like them, had faced unspeakable evil—and defeated it. Jesus had made forgiveness possible.

It was Easter week, and two days later, I was asked to preach at the chapel service at the Children of War Center, to the 40 child “soldiers” who had found the meaning of Easter in one of the darkest corners of the world. I decided to speak on the parable of the prodigal son, of the father embracing his estranged boy, forgiving every transgression unconditionally, slaying the fatted calf, celebrating the lost son being found—and restoring him to his place at home, welcoming him home. As I preached, I watched Michael and Joseph, now just two more faces in the choir, as they listened to the message with a new hope in their eyes and fervent praise on their lips. Prodigal sons too, they were home now, in the arms of their Father. They had experienced the good news, the gospel, and found in it their own redemption—just as I had.

“But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

—Luke 15:32



Think about it

Michael and Joseph faced unimaginable tragedy while in the Lord’s Resistance Army. However, they were able to experience the peace of God at World Vision’s Children of War Center. Try to put yourself in Michael and Joseph’s shoes. How would you feel hearing the story of the prodigal son? Who do you know that needs to hear the truth of God’s acceptance and love? How can you become an instrument of God’s peace for that person?

Day 5



Live it out

If Jesus has not been the center of your life, this is a great time to recommit yourself to Him. Thank God that He loved you enough to send His Son to die for you. Reflect upon and praise God for the hope, love, joy, and peace that comes from Christ alone.



Give a gift

World Vision's Gift Catalog allows you to give life-changing gifts to children and families in need—things like goats, wells for clean water, or seeds—in the name of someone special.

Yesterday we read about Michael and Joseph and the tragedy they faced as child soldiers in northern Uganda. Children around the world live in other crisis situations, and World Vision is working to restore these children by providing shelter, food, medical care, counseling, education, and love. You can help bring peace to the life of a child by donating to the **Children in Crisis Fund**. Visit www.worldvisiongifts.org to find more information or to donate.



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Give Now



Advocate

In 2008, Congress passed the Child Soldier Prevention Act, which President George W. Bush signed into law just before Christmas that year. This bill, part of a larger human trafficking bill, restricts U.S. military assistance to countries that utilize child soldiers. World Vision was a leader in initiating, drafting, and gaining passage of this law, but the bill took years of advocacy from hundreds of people like you. You can learn more about the bill at www.worldvision.org/seekjustice.

Advocacy does indeed make a difference. When we use our voices to speak out on issues such as child soldiers, we become advocates for peace. Continue to be an advocate for peace by speaking out against child slavery, including child sexual exploitation, child labor, and child soldiers. You can also join World Vision's advocate network. Visit www.worldvision.org/advocacy to become an advocacy partner with World Vision.

Day 5, cont.



Lighting of the Christ Candle

Today marks the final day of the Advent season. We end with the lighting of the Christ Candle, which is symbolically placed in the center of the wreath. Read this passage, individually or as a group, and light the candles when instructed to do so.

We gather to celebrate the birth of the One who is the Light of the World, the Prince of Peace, Home to the homeless, Refuge for the weary.

We have explored what it is to wait expectantly for the best Christmas gift the world has ever known. We have acknowledged that the world needs the hope, joy, love, and peace of Jesus Christ—now more than ever.

Christ is our hope and our salvation. Christ is God's promises made flesh. Christ brings meaning and hope for a world short on both.

We light these four candles again, remembering how we have waited on love—and celebrating that love has not let us down.

We light the Christ Candle recognizing that Christ is the center of all. The Light of the World was born this night. His name is Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. Our waiting is over.

Day 6

Merry Christmas!

Thank you for celebrating Advent with us over the past four weeks. We hope this study has allowed you to hear from God in new and transformative ways.

The celebration of Christ's birth does not stop here. This time is simply preparation for a life filled with hope, love, joy, and peace as we trust in God's unfailing love. Christ is alive, and He is with us today. He invites us to enter into His story of redemption and love.

We invite you to pray the following prayers on this most sacred day and throughout Christmas week.



A prayer for justice at Christmas

Dear God,

It is impossible to read Your Word without hearing Your call to justice for the oppressed and the poor. It is impossible to truly follow Your Son without responding to that call. Help us, we pray.

Even now, as we kneel in wonder at the side of the Bethlehem manger, we know that we will soon be standing in sorrow at the foot of the Golgotha cross. Your life, recorded for us in Your Word, took You among those who were the poorest of the poor in both body and spirit. You made Yourself one of us. We thank You.

This Christmas, as we savor these precious moments of wonder, we ask You to strengthen us to move boldly through the year that is to come. Energize us to live out Your high calling to care for the widows and orphans, set the prisoners free, and find justice for the oppressed whom we see in our own communities and in our global neighborhood. Help us to live, move, and breathe in the knowledge that as we work for Your kingdom to come, we will also be set free from our own prisons of self-interest. Thank You for who You are. Help us become more of what You call us to be.

Amen.

(prayers continue on next page)

Day 6, cont.

A prayer for Christmas offering

Dear God,

Christmas is the symbol of how much You gave us. The gift of Your very self in the life of Your Son humbles us, teaches us, and ultimately saves us. We are moved by gratitude and love to give back to You. Accept these gifts, big and small, and use them for Your work. Continue to transform us so that we may see giving not as an obligation, but as a privilege, because we are a people who have experienced Your love as the sacred gift that it is.

Amen.

Before opening presents

Lord and giver of all good things, the magi traveled for miles to bring the Christ child the first Christmas presents. So may we, too, remember with thankful hearts the love that comes with each present we open. We also thank You for the love You have for each of us, and we thank You for the many gifts that You give us—especially the gift of life itself.

Amen.

Christmas dinner prayers

In the peace of this season, our spirits are joyful: With the beasts and angels, the shepherds and stars, with Mary and Joseph, we sing God's praise. By Your coming, may the hungry be filled with good things, and may our table and home be blessed. Bless us and the feast that You have provided for us, and let us be thankful for the true gift of Christmas, Your Son.

Amen.

God of all gifts, we thank You for the many ways You have blessed us this day. We are grateful for each of those who are gathered around this table. We ask You to bless us and our food and to bless those we love who are not with us today. We remember Your humble birth into our lives and pray for those who are without enough to eat. We remember the stable in which You were born and pray for those who have no place to live. We remember Your challenging message of caring and giving, and we pray for peace in families and nations throughout the world. We bless You and give You thanks through Your Spirit who brings our hearts to life, on Christmas Day and forever.

Amen.

About World Vision

World Vision is a Christian humanitarian organization dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. Motivated by our faith in Jesus Christ, World Vision serves alongside the poor and oppressed as a demonstration of God's unconditional love for all people. We envision a world in which each child experiences "fullness of life" as described in John 10:10. And we know this can be achieved only by addressing the problems of poverty and injustice in a holistic way. That's how World Vision is unique—we bring nearly 60 years of experience in three key areas helping children and families thrive: emergency relief, long-term development, and advocacy. And we bring all of our skills across many areas of expertise to each community we work in, enabling us to care for children's physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

Partnering with World Vision provides tangible ways to honor God and put faith into action. By working together, we can make a lasting difference in the lives of children and families who are struggling to overcome poverty. To find out more about how you can help, visit www.worldvision.org.

About World Vision Resources

Ending global poverty and injustice begins with education: understanding the magnitude and causes of poverty, its impact on human dignity, and our connection to those in need around the world.

As the publishing ministry of World Vision, World Vision Resources educates Christians about global poverty, inspires them to respond, and equips them with innovative resources to make a difference in the world.

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