



There is so much beauty in Christmas. And every year, when this season rolls around, my heart can't wait to take it all in again. The time with family and friends, the special photo cards I receive from across the miles, the homemade sugar cookies decorated by small hands. It all feels like home. And it's the coming-together of all these small experiences that make me feel especially connected and loved.

And in the midst of the celebration, each year I look forward to sitting again with the Christmas story and marveling with fresh eyes at the gift we received 2000 years ago, and every day since.

Our God, who once felt distant, has come near through Jesus. He has gifted us with his presence, he has made us righteous through his blood, so that we can sit at his feet, free of guilt and shame.

Once, we were separated from God. But, because of Christmas — because of Jesus — we have been brought near.

As we walk slowly through the Christmas story, we'll look at how God not only invites us to come near, but through Jesus' example, also teaches us how. Consider Mary; Jesus' radical nearness begins as a baby growing in a mother's womb, being nourished by her body and comforted by her arms. It doesn't get any more *near* than that.

God doesn't *need* us for his plans to be fulfilled, but he *wants* us. He wants us to have an intimate connection with him and so he engages the human experience to tell His profound love story. It's super messy, but that's really the only way we could identify. He uses humble (broken, young, old, barren, stinky, brainy) and available people to tell His story, to remind us that we're all invited.

This Advent we will be moved by the Christmas story as we consider each detail leading up to the birth of Jesus, but we will also look at his supreme example of nearness and how we can live this example out in our own lives.

Love came near 2000 years ago. Love comes near, still. Jesus' love reaches us from the tops of our heads, to the tips of our toes and to the deepest, innermost parts of our heart.

Together, let's celebrate His gift of nearness this Christmas. He is God with us. Our Immanuel.

ABOUT ADVENT

The roots of Advent go very deep. The word "Advent" comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "coming" or "visit." Advent has evolved over the years, but today is most noted as a season of preparation for Christmas and begins the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day.

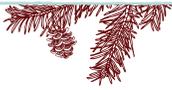


Some people mark Advent by lighting candles or hanging wreaths. Many have seen or used the popular calendars with candy, while some people give gifts. And others do all of the above.

But, one thing I believe we can all agree on is that Christmas is not something we can celebrate in just one day. It deserves a closer look.

So, whether Advent is rooted deep in your personal traditions or it's just a simple reminder to slow down, it is my hope that this 25-day Bible study will enhance your celebration of Jesus' coming, this Christmas season.

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Read Exodus 24:1-2
Write Hebrews 4:16

What are the three levels of access to God's presence defined in this Exodus passage? Who is given access at each level?

This division of access takes place while the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness and is alluding to the tabernacle, where priests (Levites) are the only ones allowed behind the curtain (into God's presence). If you've studied this portion of the Old Testament, then you know that God's presence was (and is) something to be revered. The laws that were set in place while Moses lead the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land, were specific and not to be taken lightly.

What are the specific instructions to Moses in verse 2?

While the people of Israel have no direct access to God, Moses has a direct line. Exodus 33:11 (NIV) says, *"The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend."*

I want to start our time in the Christmas story by looking back, before we move ahead. There are two accounts of the Christmas story in the Bible, one in Matthew and one in Luke. Over the next several weeks, we will read them both. But, especially in Matthew's telling of the story, there is great attention given to the connection between the old and the new. In Christian theology, this is known as "typology;" where a person, event or statement in the Old Testament points to or is fulfilled by Jesus in the New Testament.

Matthew used a lot of Moses typology in his telling of Jesus' birth story. What are some ways you see Moses' life point to Jesus' life? (Read 1 Timothy 2:5)

Moses' life alludes to Jesus in many ways. And, then there's the Israelites. And the Israelites lives and all their feeble efforts to obey... well, they allude to us. *We* are the Israelites; once left knees knocking, uninvited, at the bottom of the hill, relying on the word of another to tell us what to do.

But, now, *because of Jesus*, we are invited to come near.

Read Ephesians 2:13

Because Jesus left his seat at the right hand of God the Father and came to earth, atoned for our sins by his blood and made us holy, we can come directly to his throne. Into his presence boldly and confidently.

Because of Jesus, it's no longer Moses alone who can stand in the presence of God.

A God that once felt untouchable, has now become *"flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood"* (John 1:14) (MSG).

Jesus, our Immanuel. God *with us*.

While the temple curtain won't be torn (a symbol of our direct access to God) until his death, Jesus' display of nearness begins the moment he left heaven and entered a mother's womb. It doesn't get any more *near* than that.



LOVE COMES NEAR

This is perhaps one of the most beautiful parts of the Christmas story and the reason we'll spend time each day this Advent to consider it. Jesus could have come to us in so many ways. He could have simply appeared supernaturally on the scene. But, he used us. He used Mary's womb and Joseph's humility. He partnered with John to spread the word, and gave spotlight to Elizabeth. He worked through the bonds of human love and friendship. He became like us, in every way, including a messy and naked arrival, vulnerable in the arms of a mother. He did this to be near us, but also, to *model* nearness *for* us.



So now, his radical invitation for nearness is also a radical *display* of nearness.

He doesn't just invite us to it. He shows us how it's done.

This Advent, I pray we come near to Jesus and feel overwhelmed by his nearness to us. I pray as we look deeply and intentionally at the Christmas story, we learn by Christ's example, how to better draw near to others and to him.



Advent Family Calendar

This simple Advent Family Calendar will allow you to share Christmas story reflections with your kids, grandkids, or any special kids in your life. Use the chart and mark each day or use the cut-outs to include in your family's Advent calendar.

Each day, you're given one passage to read, one verse to write and a question or thought to consider. The questions were written with kids, ages 6-12, in mind. But, I would encourage you to make any modifications you think appropriate, based on the ages and stages of your own family.

You can enjoy this simple activity during mealtimes or at bedtime. Whatever works for you. Any version of the scriptures you prefer is great, but I really like the NIRV (New International Readers Version) when I'm looking at scripture with my kids. You can access it online or from your YouVersion Bible App.

□ DECEMBER 1

Read Exodus 24:1-2; Write Hebrews 4:16

How would it feel if we couldn't talk directly to God? What does it mean to approach God's throne with confidence?

□ DECEMBER 2

Read Isaiah 9:2-7; Write Isaiah 9:6

Look at all the names of Jesus you wrote from Isaiah 9:6. Which one is your favorite? Why?

□ DECEMBER 3

Read Isaiah 11:1-5, 10; Write Isaiah 11:2

Draw a picture of a tiny branch growing out from an old dead tree stump. Display your picture and think about how the new branch represents Jesus and his gift of eternal hope and joy, whenever you see it.

□ DECEMBER 4

Read Jeremiah 33:14-16; Write Jeremiah 33:16

This passage also talks about the new branch and reminds us that God is a promise keeper. Have you ever not been sure that someone would keep their promise? Why is keeping promises so important?

□ DECEMBER 5

Read Hebrews 7:18-19; Write Hebrews 7:18-19

Why do you think it can sometimes be hard to follow the rules? Jesus came so all of us (even the kids who don't always follow the rules) can have a chance to know Him and be near Him. It's just one of God's many Christmas gifts to us, through Jesus.

□ DECEMBER 6

Read Matthew 1:1-16; Write John 15:16

All of these names are people who weren't perfect, but who God chose anyway to be a part of his story. How does it make you feel to know that God chose you to be in his story, too?

□ DECEMBER 7

Read Luke 1:5-17; Write Luke 1:13

Zechariah and Elizabeth loved God, even when they didn't get their way. But, after a long wait, God blesses them by answering their prayer for a baby. Do you ever feel like God doesn't hear your prayers? What do you learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth's story?

□ DECEMBER 8

Read Luke 1:18-25; Write John 1:16

Zechariah made a mistake by not believing the message from God at first. But, God gives us his grace for our mistakes. Grace is like a band-aid; he covers our mistakes and give us a new chance. He still blessed Zechariah and he can still bless us, even when we mess up. Talk about what it means to you to have God's grace.

□ DECEMBER 9

Read Luke 1:26-38; Write Luke 1:37

Imagine if you were Mary. How would you feel if an angel showed up at your house? The angel gives Mary a big job and she says, "Yes!" What's the hardest challenge in your life right now? God wants to teach us that even when things feel difficult, there's nothing too hard for Him.

□ DECEMBER 10

Read Luke 1:39-45; Write Luke 1:45

When something amazing happens in your life, who usually gets the credit? Mary and Elizabeth were chosen by God to do big things and their first response is to give praise to God. Even the baby in Elizabeth's belly praised God. Every blessing we have in life is from God. Will you be first to give God praise?