



GOD *with* US

Week 1: Daily Advent Devotionals

THE *Vine* ^{ATX}

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Advent is the proof and the promise that Jesus is with us in the experience of life.



As the skies turn gray and the air turns chilly and we light fires and put up lights, the whole world invites us to slow down and remember that God has given us more than a Son who saves, He's given us a Son who sympathizes.

In the Spring, as new life breaks all around us, Easter will interrupt our rhythms to remind us that our Jesus has made a way for us to get to God. We'll remember the purchase of the Cross and the proof of victory in that empty grave. We'll turn our attention to the act that interrupted all of human history and changed eternity the most for us human creatures and changed us human creatures most for eternity.

But, Advent isn't just a preview or teaser for Easter. It isn't just a hint that salvation is coming or a story of rescue. It carries another glorious truth. If you listen closely you'll hear Advent whisper to you that God is with us in the messiness of this life.

That's the song of Advent, the story of Christmas. God is not found on the other side of chaos or pain or loss or joy or disappointment or boredom, but he instead, dwells directly in the middle of it.

Consider that Holy Night. Imagine the mixture of odors in that barn: sweat and blood and animals. Hear the truth of Advent: messy is not the enemy of the miraculous.

The twists and turns of our stories teach us: life is messy. It really is. And what a gift it is — to not just notice that, but embrace the truth that Advent teaches us — Jesus is found in the midst of messiness.

This Advent, our prayer is that as you look at that baby born in chaos on a messy night in a stable, as you look at the man he became facing the chaos of this messy life, you will gain a new confidence that you have a Savior who is with you in whatever you face.

Day One GOD *with* US

Emmanuel: God with us. That's the song of Advent, the story of Christmas. A God who has come - not just to make a way for the next life, but to be with us in this life.

READ | HEBREWS 2:10-18

- In your own words, summarize what verses 14-18 say about what Jesus had to do and why he did it.
- How is this purpose distinct from his purpose in coming to die on the cross?

REFLECT

Advent is the proof that Jesus came — not just to save us — but to be with us in the experiences of life.

Meet your God revealed in Advent: Jesus did not come for salvation alone. God cares about being with you; about sitting with you in whatever you're going through today and telling you a truth that Jesus earned the right to say: I know how this life feels.

What's ahead!

- Grab a notebook you can use to work the Scripture processing questions (we always need an excuse for a pretty new notebook)!
- Each day over the next 27 days, we'll walk through a different human experience and practice encountering Emmanuel: God with us in that experience.

PRACTICE

There's a comfort to be had in sitting with someone who has been through what you're going through and hearing their story. There is a unique intimacy forged in those moments and conversations. To experience Jesus with us, we're going to practice hearing HIM tell us about his experiences, (rather than hearing others tell us about his life.)

This Advent season we're going to squeeze our eyes shut and ask Jesus to "tell us again" the stories we've heard a million times before. We're going to practice hearing the stories from Jesus.

It can be a strange thing at first, and we will need to engage our imaginations. Before we begin, let's practice just noticing Jesus with us. Pull up an extra chair at your table, or light a candle to remind you of Jesus' presence. And now practice, not just processing, but sharing honestly with your friend, Jesus:

- Share with Jesus how you are feeling today.
- Ask Jesus if he can relate to those feelings.

Day two

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WHEN LIFE IS BUSY.

Tis the season, right? Schedules are hectic, end-of-year deadlines approach, and all those blocks on the calendar already have plans scribbled in. And if you're not careful, you'll find yourself longing for the blank slate of the New Year and wishing December away.

No matter how you try to carve out a quiet corner, work and life and the needs of others seem to find you, creeping under every door you close like smoke.

The obligations in this season can leave us feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and trapped.

Advent is the evidence that we are not alone in that trapped feeling. We do not have a God who is unable to sympathize with how it feels to be a human with limited capacity, limited energy, limited hours in the day. We have one who has lived with us, as one of us, and who gets it.

READ | MARK 1:35-37, MARK 6:31-33

- What do these verses emphasize about what Jesus' life was like?
- What do you think this kind of life would feel like physically? Emotionally? Spiritually?

REFLECT

Take a few minutes to think through:

- What is pressing on you today? What are the commitments, people, problems, choices, and to-do's that are crowding in on you?
- How does it make you feel to have so much going on?

Jesus was God. He spent time in a way that honored God — drawing righteous boundaries and serving with a heart filled with love and compassion for those around him. But make no mistake. Jesus had a human body that grew tired and hungry; a body that didn't work well on little sleep. Jesus had a human brain that could do one thing at once, and that needed space and time to rest and renew.

Jesus knows how it feels to have to rise while it is dark and fight to find space and time with God, to have the weight of others' pain and needs pulling at him constantly.

PRACTICE | LISTEN TO JESUS

Today, ask Jesus to tell you what it was like to live the verses you read today. If you're not sure how to do that or you feel weird, start by reading the text to yourself and replace "Jesus" or "he" with "I," as if he was telling you the story himself. Or, summarize the verses in language that makes sense to you and imagine you're reading a text or an email from a friend.

Practice hearing Jesus tell you the profound truth that part of the reason he subjected himself to a crowded life was so that he could sit with you in this moment and tell you he knows how it feels.

As you become aware that Jesus is sitting there with you, share with him what you wrote in the reflection section. Be mindful of the default of our brains to process rather than pray and stay present in your conversation with the real person of Jesus who lived a real life that we read about today.

Ask Jesus to be with you in the busy today. When it feels overwhelming today, take a minute, squeeze your eyes shut and ask him to tell you again what it felt like for him.

Day three

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IN OUR EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

The word “incarnation” sometimes pops up around Christmas time. It’s a fancy word to describe what those shepherds saw as they huddled around the manger: God wrapped in flesh, God embodied. Our God, “now in flesh appearing.”

It is - in some ways a scandalous miracle - a God embodied. A God who can be present with others; who can touch us and a God whom we can touch.

READ | MARK 7:31-35

- What do the people beg Jesus to do in v. 32?
- How does Jesus heal the person in this passage? Do you think the touch involved was necessary for healing? Why or why not?

REFLECT

Do you remember the early pandemic days? We were cut off from one another physically and we discovered Zoom was for more than just work and we told the people we love through screens: “*I can’t wait to hug you again.*” Our minds and spirits could still be together, but it wasn’t the same. We wanted to be present. We wanted to be embodied with each other.

- Who is someone you haven’t been able to hug recently? Who is someone you long to sit with, be physically present with again?
- Who are some people you will encounter today? It’s so easy to take for granted, but reflect for a minute on what a gift it is to be able to be with them in person today and to be able to reach out and hug them?

PRACTICE | LISTEN TO JESUS

Jesus limited himself when he wrapped himself in human flesh. He limited his ability to be able to be everywhere with everyone in every room. But he gained something in his embodiment - the ability to be physically with us, to touch and be touched.

- Ask Jesus today about the days, years, centuries of watching and loving his people but not being able to physically touch them with human hands and be touched by them.

- Ask Jesus about that very first moment that his parents held him as he entered the world in flesh. What was it like to finally be touched, and to finally reach out a hand and wrap his hand around his mother and father's fingers?
- Ask Jesus about the person you read about in the passage today. What was that moment like for him? Does he remember what it felt like to touch that specific man?
- What will it be like for you when you are able to hold Jesus in your arms and be held by him? Ask Jesus what that will be like for him.
- Ask Jesus how he longs to hold the other people in your life. What would it be like to be his hands and arms today as you encounter those people?

He, who loved us since before we even existed, who loved us since before the world existed, finally was born - able to dwell among us. We think so often about the joy of that first Christmas for us: our God with us. But imagine for a moment, what that moment was like for Jesus. To finally be able to hold us, touch us, heal us, bring good news and rest and heal with his own hands.

Day four

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IN ANTICIPATION

Anticipation. It's everywhere around us this time of year. It's in the faces of the kids standing in line to meet Santa, or the laughter at the Christmas Tree Farm. It's the sensation that keeps little ones from sleeping on Dec 24th, and makes us smile at strangers in the check out line.

Anticipation is the unique experience we have when we are waiting for something that is (1) guaranteed and (2) positive. It carries its own kind of glee. It's not just the joy of receiving the thing we wait for, but the sensation that comes while we wait for it. There is a pleasure to be had before something good is guaranteed to take place.

READ | MARK 1:1-15

- What are the first words we hear Jesus say in the book of Mark? Write them out.
- The word translated as “come” is a word that means full. The time is full. It's similar to the word in Galatians 4:4. Read that verse
- What comes to mind when you hear that the time has “fully come”?

REFLECT

- What is a moment in your life that you have anticipated with eager expectation?
- Think about the joy you experienced in the moment the thing was happening. What did it feel like in the moment the time had “fully come”?
- Think about the time leading up to that moment - what did anticipation feel like in your body and soul?
- Is there anything you are anticipating now? Look ahead even at the small things that are coming your way this week or month. What moments do you expect to enjoy? What would it look like to cultivate anticipation?

PRACTICE | LISTEN TO JESUS

- Ask Jesus about the thousands and thousands of years waiting to come and dwell among us. What was that sensation like?
- Ask Jesus what it felt like the very first time he was able to touch someone with a human hand and finally demonstrate in a physical body all the love he had held for them in his heart.
- Ask Jesus about the first years of his human life - knowing who he was and what he was going to share about the good news of the coming Kingdom - all the people he was going to heal. Ask him what it felt like to anticipate the moment he would be set free to do that.
- Ask him what he anticipates now.

“Late in time, behold Him come.”

For all the years before that first Christmas, Jesus anticipated. He anticipated being among us, being with us and for us in a new way.

Then, in his life, even as he faced pain and suffering, he endured it because of the power of anticipation. For the joy set before him – with that joy in mind – he endured the cross. What was it that he was anticipating? You. Being able to share this moment with you.

What is it that he is anticipating, even now? The day when he will make all things right, the day when he will hold you in his arms again. Spend a few moments today thinking about what that will be like: all things made new and fully united with Christ. May the two of you anticipate that together today.

Day five

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WHEN WE FEEL ALONE

We each have a deep and eternal need for a person who can climb underneath the burdens we carry, who can take our hand on the path and walk into the dark with us. Many of us have had tastes of it, glimmering moments and stunning precious seconds, but it seems to be the case that some parts of this life are experienced alone, no matter how many people are with us.

He could have written into his human experience perfect friends who encouraged him in his mission, who stayed awake, who carried the cross with him every step of the way. But he wanted to become like us in all things, so, he let time and space interrupt his eternal intimacy with God and trapped himself in a human body — and subjected himself to being alone.

Jesus could have won the world for you without ever having to experience the absence of human partnership.

READ | MATTHEW 26:36-43

- In Matthew 26, what does Jesus ask the disciples to do? How many times does he ask this? What does he share with them about what he's going through? How do they react?

REFLECT

Take a few minutes to think through:

- What choices, pains, tasks, burdens, or relationships are you facing right now where you feel unsupported? Without a partner?
- Think through what your soul wants in a partner: what would make you feel helped and supported in what you're facing?

PRACTICE | LISTEN TO JESUS

Now listen as Jesus tells you what it feels like for him.

- Ask Jesus how it felt that night in the garden. Ask Jesus how it felt to be vulnerable with his friends and how it felt when they couldn't even stay awake to pray for him.
- Ask him how it felt to be single in this mission, without a romantic partner.

- Ask Jesus how it felt to have people around him who promised to be his partners but proved unable to truly do that.

Jesus could have won the world for you without ever having to experience the absence of human partnership. He could have written into his human experience friends who encouraged him in his mission, who stayed awake, who carried the cross with him every step of the way. But he wanted to become like us in all things, so he emptied himself of his eternal partnership with God and trapped himself in a human body — subject to the same aching need we all have for a true partner.

Jesus endured isolation in his human life so that he would be able to give you a partner who needs nothing from you, who understands you perfectly, who advocates for you constantly, and who is cheering you on for the life and mission ahead.

Today, before you go any further, ask Jesus to fill you with this partner — his Spirit. Consider what it might look like to lean into the Spirit as a partner who is with you in the messiness of this imperfect world.

Day six

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WHEN WE GROW

Many of us have a complicated relationship with the experience of growth. We like the finish line, and we like the achievement of accomplishing something, but the truth is - to reach a goal means that we have to learn. We have to grow.

And growth - well, it can be uncomfortable for some of us. But, if we can let go of our fears and insecurities, it's one of the glorious parts of being a human, and a sensation that Jesus has entered into with us.

READ | HEBREWS 5:8 | LUKE 2:40; LUKE 2:52

- What do you notice about Jesus in these passages?
- In what areas did he grow or learn?

REFLECT

- In what ways have you grown this year?
- Think of challenges you've faced this year. How have you seen yourself navigate them? What proof do you see that you have made progress in some area?

In a culture that is obsessed with achievement and progress, learning and growth aren't always high values. They aren't measurable, and they imply - by very definition - an imperfection.

It can be easy to think that our need to learn or grow - the fact that we don't know how to be or do everything perfectly - is a sign of brokenness in us. But look at Jesus: he is the fullness of God - and still with us in the human experience of growing and learning. He knows how it feels to be tempted to compare, to be tempted to look at how far you have to go, and he knows how it feels to take a second and feel the joy and satisfaction in noticing your own growth.

PRACTICE | LISTEN TO JESUS

- Ask Jesus how it felt to grow and learn as a child. Was there joy in that experience? Fear? Anticipation?
- The message translation says, “Though he was God’s Son, he learned trusting-obedience by what he suffered, just as we do”. Ask Jesus to tell you about the ways he learned trusting-obedience.
- Make a list of areas you have grown physically, spiritually, emotionally, and mentally over this past year or few years. Then reflect on the sensations along the way. Which parts of growth were painful? Which parts enjoyable? Together with Jesus, celebrate and reflect on the ways you have grown this year.
- Dream with Jesus about the future. What are some ways you would like to grow in the coming year?

Day seven

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WHEN LIFE GETS MESSY

Jesus is found in the messy. And that's kind of shocking when you think about it. The King of the Universe — the only Uncreated One, who is altogether holy and perfect in every way — became like us in our weak, frail state, and put himself right in the middle of the mess.

We rob ourselves of the gift of Advent when we downplay the chaos and pain and mess of Jesus' entry onto the scene. Too often, we turn the bloody story of Christmas into a Hallmark special

with our picturesque Nativity Sets and our tender fairy lights and our fluffy wool lamb costumes. But it wasn't like that. It was real life. And turns out, much like life, it's a little messier and a lot bloodier than we might like.

Before we go any further — take a minute to pray and ask God to help you just let go of all your preconceived notions about that first Christmas night and read the scriptural accounts remembering they are about real people with real fears telling you about a real chapter in their lives.

READ | LUKE 2:1-7 | MATTHEW 2:13-21

- Take a few minutes and write out all of the things that Mary and Joseph go through in these passages.
- What do you think God wants you to notice about the context of the birth of Jesus?

REFLECT

Spoiler alert: the message of Advent is that Jesus dwells in the messy. As we prepare our hearts for Christmas, let us practice finding Jesus — not on the other side of the messy — but in the midst of it. Take a few minutes to identify the messy areas of your own lives.

- Physical: think through your job, responsibilities, to-do list, and physical needs. What parts feel messy?
- Emotional: think through your relationships and emotions. What longings, disappointments, rejection, tensions are you facing?
- Spiritual: think through your faith. What is currently messy? Where are you finding unanswered prayers, disappointment, apathy, numbness, duty instead of delight, discouragement?

PRACTICE | LISTEN TO JESUS

As you look through the list you made above, ask Jesus where he can identify with anything you are experiencing.

- Are there any parts of your messy life that you are afraid to let Jesus into?
- Ask him how he feels about your messy life. Does it intimidate him? Irritate him? Confuse him? Does he need you to wrap up some loose ends or make some progress before he will appear in glory?

Turn your attention to that nativity scene and let it be your comfort: Jesus is the proof that God's presence and miraculous power dwell right in the midst of the messy.