

INTRODUCTION

The Christmas season is often met with a frenzy of consumerism, gatherings, and preparation for the day we celebrate: Christmas. In preparation we bake, decorate, gather with friends, worry about what we should give and what we hope not to get again this year. We worry if we've given enough or too much, as well as about how we will pay for all of it. To be honest no one really needs another thing at this time of the year, and that is exactly why your souls needs you to find a new Rhythm for you and your family. To help you pursue this *Rhythm* we've put together a 4-week devotional centered on the tradition of Advent.

It's our hope that Advent would become one of your most treasured Christmas traditions. Advent refers to the "arrival" of Jesus. This booklet is designed to lead you and your family in preparation of Jesus' arrival. Your family could be your traditional family like mine (2 parents, 3 kids) or it could be a single parent with kids on the weekend, a married couple and no kids, or it could be your community group. Last year our family experienced Advent in a home with 8 other families. We want you to feel free to use this booklet to work for your "family" in whatever configuration you'd like to use it!

Traditionally Advent is observed on the four Sundays prior to Christmas (November 29th, December 6th, 13th, and 20th) and concludes on Christmas Eve. In this

booklet, you will find 5 family advent sessions and daily scripture readings for the days between the family sessions. There are a few things you will need to have before your first session.

Advent Wreath

First you will need an Advent Wreath & five Candles (3 purple, a pink and a white). You can purchase an Advent Wreath at most stores, or you can make one yourself. You will need an evergreen wreath and 5 candles with holders.

Nativity Set

To add a fun and unique way to tell the Christmas story, we've used the Nativity set. In each session you will see a "Telling the Story of the Nativity" section. You will need your traditional Nativity set and a Stable. I would encourage you to be creative with this and use child-like faith. If you don't have a stable you can use a box and decorate it. Most scholars believe the stable was actually a cave, not the barn that is traditionally portrayed. The key to remember is that it's about helping the kids have a better understanding of Jesus.

Kids' Activity

We've added a kid's activity at the end of each session as an added suggestion so that you can help make the lesson stick in a kid's mind. What will make this most memorable for your family is that you have fun with it.

Daily Scripture Reading

Finding a new *Rhythm* is about slowing down and seeking Christ this Christmas season. Following the family sessions are 5 daily scripture readings that focus on message of *HOPE, LOVE, JOY, & PEACE*. We would encourage you to find time and space in your day to read these passages and let God speak to you through his Word.

Finally, we want you to know that we are praying for you and your family this Christmas season and your journey toward *Rhythm*.

Pat & Mandy Rowland
Family Ministries Pastor

Sunday, November 29th

HOPE

Telling the Story of the Nativity

As we begin our journey, the stable in Bethlehem is empty. Place the empty stable in your living room. (If you don't have a stable, be creative! see introduction) Mary is anticipating the birth of her son and she is with her husband-to-be, Joseph, in Nazareth. Place Mary and Joseph somewhere in the house far away from the empty stable. They will begin their journey to Bethlehem soon, but now they are in Nazareth.

Read Luke 1:26-32, Matthew 1:18-23.

The Advent Candles

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and we begin our journey with the *HOPE* candle. Tonight we light the first purple candle as we reflect on the *HOPE* of the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Light the *HOPE* candle now.

Throughout the Old Testament the people of Israel found themselves in the captivity of foreign kings. These kings were power-hungry, evil men who used the Israelites as slaves, stole from them, and mistreated their children. The prayers of the Israelites always contained a request to be restored to a great nation, pleading with God to rescue them with a great warrior king. The great prophets, who were messengers of God, spoke the promises of God to the people. Their message was that God would send them this King and he would be their Messiah.

Read these Passages:

Isaiah 7:14

Isaiah 9:6-7

Micah 5:2-5

These prophetic words gave *HOPE* to the people of Israel in their most troubling times, and they still bring *HOPE* to us today. For thousands of years wise men studied the writings and teachings of the prophets. We don't know much about the wise men who are spoken of in the birth story of Jesus, but we can strongly assume that they studied these passages. These men of great knowledge knew the signs that pointed to the Messiah, which was what sent them on a journey to find Jesus. They too are very far away from Bethlehem and their journey will take months. Using your nativity set, place the 3 wise men in a faraway place in the house and far away from Mary and Joseph.

As we look at the *HOPE* candle today, we prepare ourselves for the birth of Christ, and we have great reason to *HOPE*. The messiah that the prophets spoke of has come and given us new life. John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." This *HOPE* is alive and available to all.

Pray together to close out your time, and extinguish the candle.

Kids Activity: Hide a baby doll representing the Baby Jesus, have your children dress like wise men and search the house for baby Jesus. If you don't have a baby use some object that can represent Jesus like a cross, or make something out of construction paper. Compare the excitement your children have in finding the baby Jesus to how wonderful it was for the wise men to find him after following the star.

Scripture Reading

Monday, November 30th: Matthew 2:1-11

Tuesday, December 1st: Deuteronomy 18:15-19

Wednesday, December 2nd: Isaiah 7:10-14, 11:1-5

Thursday, December 3rd: Jeremiah 23:5-6

Friday, December 4th: John 1:1-5

Sunday, December 6th

LOVE

Begin your time lighting the first purple candle. Last week we lit the *HOPE* candle and talked about the *HOPE* we have in Jesus. Tonight we are focusing on the second candle or the *LOVE* candle as we learn about the gift of *LOVE*.

Read Luke 2:1-5.

Telling the Story of the Nativity

Caesar Augustus has ordered a census taken of the entire Roman Empire, so all Israelites must travel to the cities of their families' origin. Mary and Joseph have now begun the long journey to Joseph's hometown, Bethlehem. It will take them several days to reach their destination, so you can move Mary and Joseph closer to the empty stable, but not too close as they still have a long way to travel.

The wise men are still making their long journey following the star that will lead them to this new King. Move the wise men closer to your nativity, but keep them in a different room, as it will be many months before they arrive in Bethlehem.

The people in Bethlehem are busy getting ready for all the travelers. Can you help us get the stable ready to take care of the animals of the travelers? Place straw (or shredded paper) in the stable, any animals you may

have for your Nativity set (or even stuffed animals), and an empty manger where baby Jesus will soon lay.

The Advent Candles

In our culture gifts are as much a part of our Christmas culture as a tree. What gift are you hoping for this Christmas? A gift is something that is given to you by someone special. They no doubt have put some time into finding just the right item for you that tells you they really care. When handed that gift you have a choice as to whether you will receive the gift. A gift can be offered and yet not received.

Read John 3:16-17, John 15:13.

God gave us the gift of *LOVE* with the birth of Jesus, and through his death we can experience God's *LOVE*. Jesus came and lived a perfect and sinless life, yet died for the sins of the world. This was God's plan of salvation, motivated by his great *LOVE* for us. Not just for us, but as a gift to all mankind.

Light the second purple candle or the *LOVE* candle.

Read 1 John 4:16-18.

We don't have to wonder if God loves us; He does, no matter who we are or what we have done. *LOVE* is a gift that is offered by God to each one of us, but it is our choice whether or not to receive it. It is also a gift

we can share with others. Because God loved us first, we know how to receive and give love to others.

Close in Prayer and extinguish the candles.

Kids Activity: Sharing God's Love

Tonight or a night this week make cookies (or a special Christmas treat) and take to a neighbor or someone you know needs encouragement. Sing a Christmas Carol and give them your special treat as a gift of God's Love.

Scripture Reading

Monday, December 7th: Zechariah 9:9-10

Tuesday, December 8th: Jeremiah 31:3

Wednesday, December 9th: 1 Peter 3:8-12

Thursday, December 10th: 1 John 3:1-3

Friday, December 11th: 2 Corinthians 5:17

Sunday, December 13th

JOY

Begin your time lighting the first two purple candles. We have already talked about two candles, do you remember what the two candles are called? (*HOPE & LOVE*) Tonight we are going to talk about the pink candle, called the *JOY* candle.

But first, let's **read** Luke 2:8.

Telling the Story of the Nativity

Joseph and Mary have arrived in Bethlehem to find the city busy with people. Place them in the room near the stable, however, not in it just yet. They hope that they can find somewhere to stay tonight because it has been a long, tiring journey, and it's time for Mary to have the baby.

In the hills and fields outside of Bethlehem the shepherds are taking care of the sheep. Place the shepherds in the same room as the stable, but a little distance from it, possibly up on a bookshelf or mantle. Soon Jesus will be born and the shepherds will be the first to experience the *Joy* of worshipping Jesus.

Don't forget the wise men—they are still on their journey. Move them closer, but again they are still a long way from Bethlehem.

The Advent Candles

What is your favorite Christmas carol? (sing them if you would like). What is it about those songs that we like? What I love about Christmas Carols is that they celebrate Jesus. Tonight we are lighting the third candle on the advent wreath and it's the *JOY* candle. At this time light the pink candle.

If your life is like ours then I'm sure you've experienced your share of struggles this year. It could have been a job loss, a death of a close family member, illness, or some circumstance that has brought you pain or sadness. In your family or group, take turns sharing some of the troubles you've experienced in 2009. Now take a moment to celebrate the good things that have taken place in 2009.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

JOY isn't something you experience only when you are happy and peppy and bursting with love. *JOY* is something we can have deep inside of us and can experience even in the worst of times because of what Jesus has done for us. We can experience *JOY* when we don't focus on the circumstances around us rather we focus on Jesus and the *HOPE* that comes from his gift of *LOVE*.

Close in Prayer and extinguish the candles

Family Activity: Candy Canes

Candy canes look a lot like shepherd staffs and can be a reminder of the shepherds being the first to worship Jesus. Place one candy cane on your tree for everything you are thankful for this year.

Scripture Reading

- Monday, December 14th: Psalm 92:1-5
- Tuesday, December 15th: Philippians 2:1-5
- Wednesday, December 16th: Psalm. 98:1-6
- Thursday, December 17th: Isaiah 40:9-11
- Friday, December 18th: Luke 1:46-55

Sunday, December 20th

PEACE

Begin your time lighting the first two purple candles and the pink candle. Ask what each candle is called and what they mean as you light them.

Read Luke 2:8-15.

Telling the Story of the Nativity

Joseph and Mary could not find a place to stay; all the rooms in all of the inns were taken. In a compassionate gesture, the innkeeper offered them the stable as shelter and a place to rest. Place Mary and Joseph in the stable with an empty manger. It is almost time for the baby to arrive, so make sure the manger is ready with straw and a blanket.

The angels appear to the shepherds with a message that Jesus is born. Have the angel go visit the shepherd, then move the shepherds closer to the stable as they are on their way to worship the baby King. Again the wise men are closer in their journey, but not quite to the stable. Move them just inside the room of your nativity.

The Advent Candles

It seems every year Christmas comes and goes so fast with us saying next year, I'm going to slow down. Why is it we always wish we would have enjoyed past moments more than we did in the moment? The

busyness of life plus the busyness of Christmas equals unrest during the holiday.

Light the final purple candle, or the *PEACE* candle. In the midst of unrest, there is a deep longing for peace and space to breathe. The peace we long for can't be fulfilled in this life. We can temporarily experience *PEACE* through a vacation to the beach, breathing the fresh clean air atop a mountain, a new video game or in a bite of gourmet chocolate. We can however, seek God and receive a *PEACE* that comes as we are continually transformed into His likeness.

Read Col. 3:15-17 & 2 Cor. 3:18.

PEACE we long for isn't just a feeling that comes and goes. It comes only from living with God and Him living in us all year long, not just something we hope to find next Christmas.

Close in Prayer and extinguish the candles.

Family Activity: Prayer of Blessing

In Numbers 6:22-26, Moses gives the priest a blessing to say over the Israelites. Parents say this blessing over each child at bedtime tonight.

“May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord make his face shine upon
you and be gracious to you. May the Lord
turn his face toward you and give you
PEACE.”

Scripture Reading

Monday, December 21st: Philippians 4:4-7

Tuesday, December 22nd: 1 Thessalonians 5:19-24

Wednesday, December 23rd: Hebrew 13:20-21

Thursday, December 24th: Isaiah 42:14

(Remember to do the final Advent Candle tonight.)

Friday, December 25th Luke 2:27-32

Christmas Eve

CHRIST

Begin your time lighting all three purple candles and the pink candle asking what they represent and why we remember them.

Tonight we light the *CHRIST* candle (White). The *CHRIST* candle is at the center because Jesus Christ is what brings this whole story, as well as all of creation together.

Without Jesus we would not have *HOPE*, experience *LOVE*, grasp *JOY*, or have complete *PEACE*.

Read Luke 2:1-20. (You may want to divide it up among the family.)

Telling the Story of the Nativity

Place baby Jesus in the manger, move the shepherds there too. The wise men are still on their journey and will see Jesus in a few months, so you can move them closer to the nativity. It is believed that the wise men visited Jesus with their three gifts some time within the first year after he was born (Matthew 2:1).

Tonight was the night baby Jesus, our Savior, came into this world. It was on this night that the Angels watched from above singing, the shepherds worshipped in the stable, and all heaven rejoiced.

Family Activity: Sing Joy to the World

**Joy to the World, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.**

Close in Prayer and extinguish the candles.