



AN ILLUSTRATED DEVOTIONAL





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WELCOME TO *GOD WITH US: AN ILLUSTRATED DEVOTIONAL*

Our Illustrated Devotionals are meant to be colored in and doodled/drawn on. You will see opportunities to color, doodle, draw, and respond to prompts throughout the devotional. We invite you to allow the illustrations and spaces for creativity to draw you deeper into reflection.

The stories of Advent are stories for hard times. Jesus was born amid upheaval and historical change and among people who seemed powerless. But when the world feels hopeless, Advent reminds us God is with us. This Advent resource invites you to explore the ways in which Emmanuel, God-with-us, brings us hope, peace, joy, and love, especially during hard times. Use this Advent guide to center your thoughts on the ever-present hope that sees us through change and challenge. Each week you will explore how the good news of God-with-us changes our perspective and gives us courage for each day. We rejoice in Jesus' birth because God is with us!

We encourage you to explore how these ideas and themes influence how you view God, your faith, and the world. This Advent devotional is written to be used individually or with a group, intergenerationally, or with youth groups or adult studies. **So grab a pen, some crayons or colored pencils, and start working through the devotional.**

As you use these resources, we would love to hear what was helpful and meaningful, as well as any suggestions and comments you have for improvement. Your feedback helps us continue to create quality faith formation materials. You can reach us at info@illustratedministry.com or find us on the following social networks:

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Media Kit: We have a media kit that includes variations of the "God With Us" logo, as well as some promotional images you can use in newsletters, social media, and your website. You can download the media kit here: illstrtdm.in/MediaKit-GodWithUs

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Peace be with you!

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Thanks for understanding, and we appreciate your support!

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WEEK ONE

MATTHEW 1:1-17

“**A**n account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and

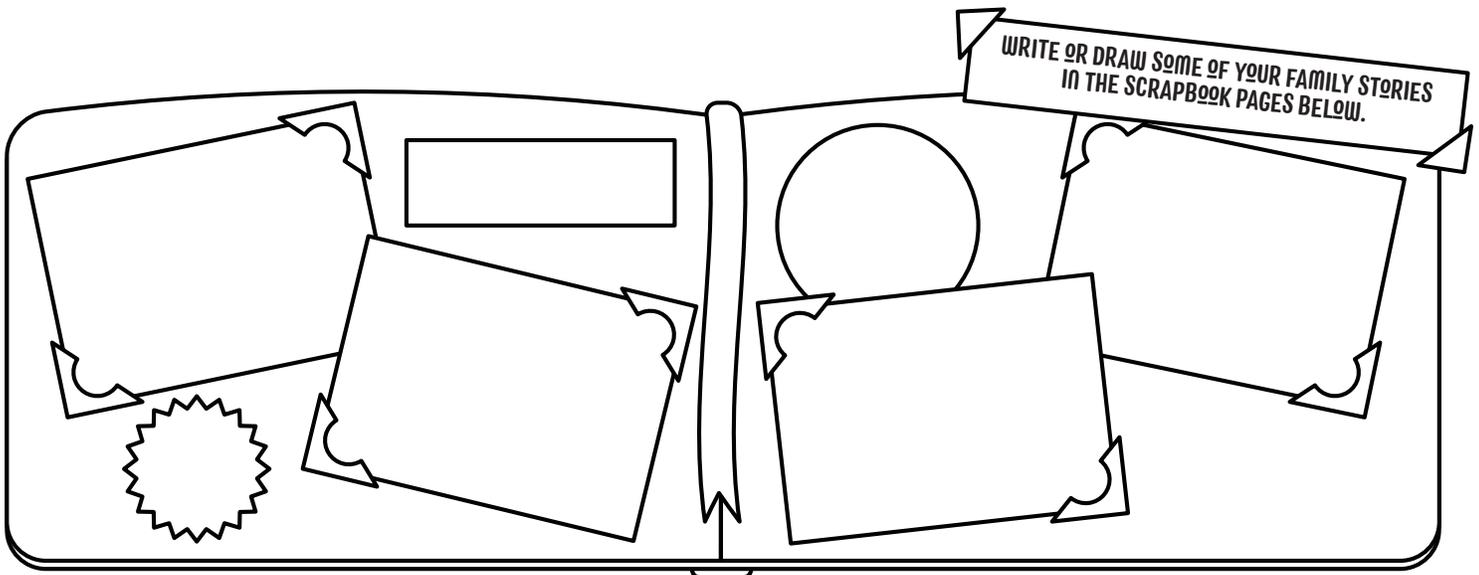
Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.”

What is your family's story? Who are the people that care for you? Who are the people who came before you, gave you your curly hair, your first book, your love of soccer? Where did they make a home? How did they share love and pass on wisdom? What did they endure? What did they celebrate?

Every family has a story. The stories are captured in different ways: videos record first steps and piano recitals; scrapbooks display photos of birthday cakes and family vacations; reunions invite folks to tell and retell favorite moments from long ago.



Some stories don't get told until something **sparks a memory**. When I was pregnant, I sat on the edge of my grandmother's bed. She asked me when my baby was due and when I told her, "Christmas Day," she said, "I was supposed to be born on Christmas Day!" I hadn't known this; her birthday was Halloween, which would've made her a pretty early baby.

"What happened?" I asked.

She told me her mom was a ticket-taker at the train station, and one day—Halloween of 1920—*the train started to move while she was still on it*. Her job was to punch tickets at that stop, **not ride along**, so when the train started to move, she hurried to the door and jumped out before it picked up too much speed.

The excitement proved to be a lot for the baby in her belly—my grandmother—who decided then and there she wanted to enter the world, two months early. **And she did.**

But she didn't tell me that until she was 88-years-old, when the nearness of my bulging belly reminded her—hinted to her—that she had a story to share.

MATTHEW'S GOSPEL OPENS WITH A GENEALOGY OF JESUS—A LIST OF NAMES FUNCTIONING LIKE HINTS ABOUT WHO AND WHERE HE COMES FROM.

Each name is a story unto itself, and some of them are probably stories people would've preferred to forget or even stories that might have caused people harm to remember.

There's **Tamar**, whose treatment by the family she married into was so unjust she resorted to tricking them in order to survive.

There's **Rahab**, who was cast out by her own people and, in turn, betrayed them.

There's **Bathsheba**, only obliquely referenced as "the wife of Uriah," who survived sexual violence and endured the loss of a child.

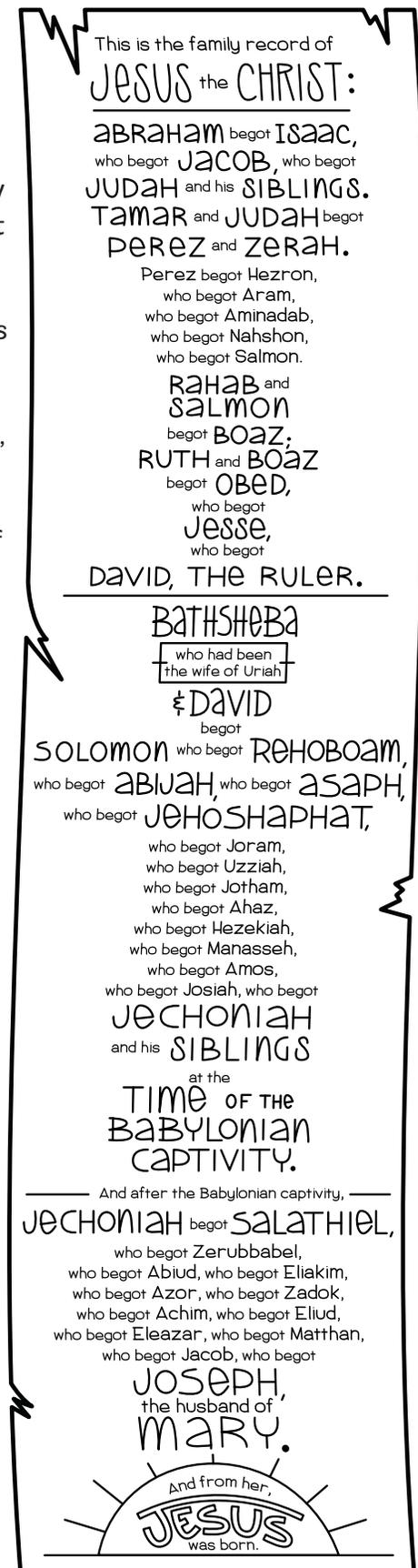
There's **Ruth**, who left her home when it became a place of grief and famine, and learned to be part of a whole new religion and people. *And those are just the named women in the genealogy.*

The men each have their own stories of struggle or scandal, and *many other women are also part of that line who aren't afforded the dignity of being named.*

BUT THERE IS BEAUTY AND RICHNESS IN THOSE STORIES HINTED AT, TOO—SORROW AND HEALING; INJUSTICE AND THE CLEVER THWARTING OF IT; TRAUMA AND SURVIVAL, EVENTUALLY EVEN THRIVING.

Most of the people named are people of Israel, but Ruth is from Moab, and Rahab is from Canaan. This means the ancestral blood and story of Jesus weaves together diverse people—even historic enemies—to make this way for God's coming to the world.

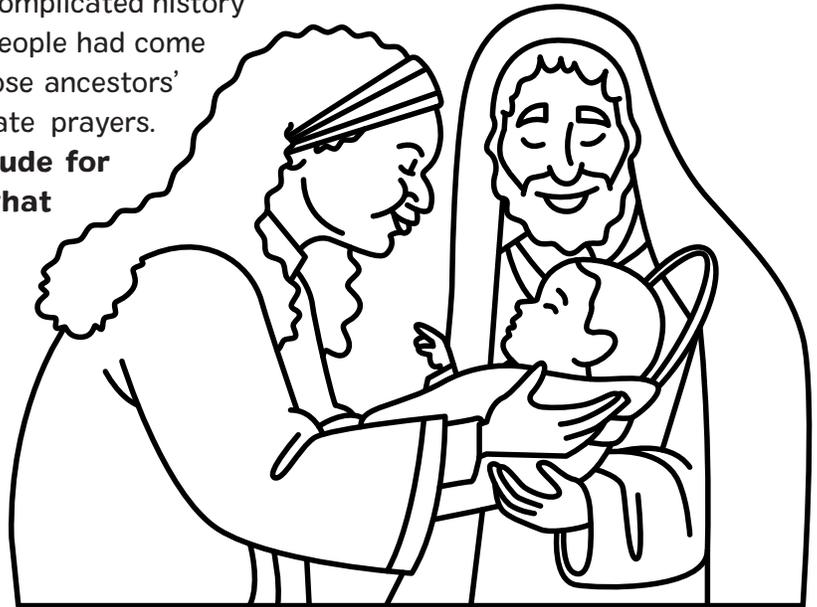
Stories are how we pass down memory and wisdom; maybe they are also how we pass down hope.



Maybe Mary and Joseph *recited this generational listing in baby Jesus' ear as they held him closely*, so he would know the complicated history he inherited and be comforted that his people had come this far by faith. Maybe they invoked those ancestors' names at family gatherings or in private prayers. Maybe each invocation was **part gratitude for what has been** and **part hope for what might still be**.

**BECAUSE HERE'S
WHAT STORIES DO:**

THEY INVITE
MORE STORIES.

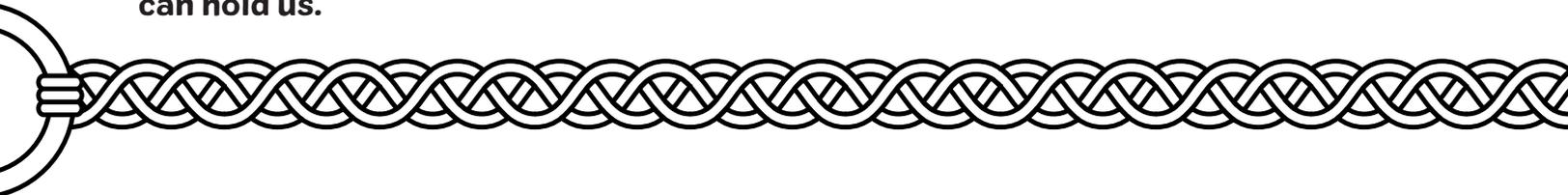


When the Gospel of Matthew opens with this listing of generations, those of us who hear and read it know we are invited, too. **We are children of God. Jesus is our sibling.** Those listed in this genealogy are our **ancestors in faith**. We locate ourselves in this litany of people, and we know our stories find a place among these others—our struggles held alongside theirs, our scandals snuck into a corner with theirs, and our triumphs displayed proudly next to theirs.

We know the God who wove together this ancient story takes ours, too, and **carefully folds it in with these**.

We're promised in Ecclesiastes that a **three-fold cord is not easily broken**.

Maybe Advent comes after a difficult year, holding out hope like a cord woven together from stories of yesterday and stories of years ago and stories yet to be told. **And maybe we grab on, trusting it can hold us.**



QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

*What's one way you are similar to others in your family?
What's one way you're different from them?*

What's a story you like to tell about your family?

GOING DEEPER

What is one difficulty your family has survived? Do people tell the story of that difficulty, or hold it quietly?

What's a story that's been passed down to you that gives you hope?

When you hear the story of Jesus' genealogy—and remember all that it hints at—what story do you feel it inviting you to tell?

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WEEK TWO

MATTHEW 1:18–25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

I wonder if people told Joseph to “sleep on it.” He was worried. He was upset. He felt compelled by the law and betrayed by Mary. He didn’t understand what was happening. He didn’t want to treat her badly, but he just didn’t see a way out.

I wonder if his friends told him to sleep on it.



I wonder if they knew the stories of their tradition, the ones about **God speaking to people in dreams**. I wonder if Joseph knew those stories. They would’ve been part of his inheritance—some of the people named in Jesus’ genealogy, traced through Joseph, were called, challenged, or comforted by God in dreams.

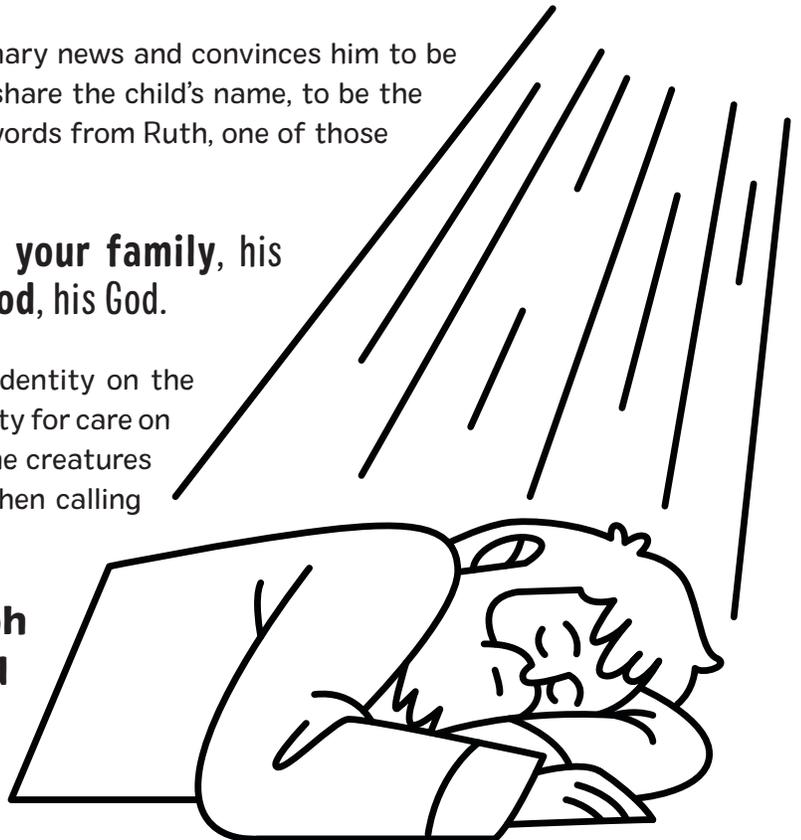
Whether he’s heeding good advice or just exhausted, Joseph rests his weary head one more time before doing anything rash. Then, when he’s asleep, he receives the direction he’s been seeking.

A messenger of God visits him with extraordinary news and convinces him to be part of this way God comes to the world—to share the child’s name, to be the child’s father. It’s as if the angel borrows the words from Ruth, one of those stories hinted at in the genealogy:

Your people will be this baby’s people; your family, his family; your stories, his stories; your God, his God.

In scripture, naming is a big deal. It confers identity on the named and affirms both power and responsibility for care on the one who names. The first human names the creatures in the garden of Eden. God renames people when calling them to new ways of being in the world.

However disconnected Joseph may have felt from Mary and her baby, the angel gifts him with a name, a gift which reconnects him to this family.



True, Joseph doesn't really name the child; he communicates the name. Maybe that's okay. Maybe there are enough things for him to think about after he learns his kid will bear God to the world.

In a 2012 interview, then-President Barack Obama explained how every morning when he dressed for work, his only choice was between a blue suit and a gray suit. He had too many more important decisions to make throughout the day needing energy than what to wear.

Maybe this is what the angel is helping Joseph with here. *"I know this is a lot to take in. I know your head is probably spinning, and your heart is beating almost out of your chest. So listen, here's one thing decided: call the baby Jesus. That's a name reflecting his power to save. And whenever you call him, call to mind Emmanuel. It means God-with-us."*

Joseph comes to Mary with these names on his tongue, practicing them. **Jesus. EMMANUEL.**



They never have the conversation so many parents have, making a list and crossing off choices one by one:

- Joseph had an ex-girlfriend named Sarah, so not that;
- the Nathan in Mary's class was always a troublemaker, so not that;
- it's too easy to make embarrassing nicknames out of some of these others, so not them.

They don't have to debate about naming the little one after Mary's favorite uncle or some Hebrew word meaning all the various hopes they carry for her.

They don't practice whispering different names to Mary's belly to see which one might elicit a response, a flutter kick.

The one who saves. **God-with-us.**

Those are ambitious names. Probably not ones that would've made the list. But with the gift of these names, the angel not only spares Joseph and Mary the decision-making fatigue of choosing one. Instead, the angel grants them peace in that moment and for all the days their child will live.

Every time they call his name, they can be reminded this child is God-with-us.

This child will save.

Cuddling the baby close, calling after the precocious toddler, scolding the kid for being harsh with his sister, yelling for the teenager to come in for dinner, saying they love him, or they're proud of him, asking him questions about his day, or his studies, or his journeys—*in all that, they're invoking God.*

Any time they are confused, or scared, or sad, *they can speak their son's name and be reminded God is as close as their own flesh and blood.* Any time they're celebrating, rejoicing, dancing, *they can call out for him and delight that each of their days is sacred because they are shared with this one who bears God to them, for them.*

The peace of God's presence isn't a promise that everything will be easy or good, **but a reassurance that whatever happens, they are not alone.**

Maybe Advent comes now to promise us all that peace. Whenever we turn our attention to the sacred companions accompanying us each day, whenever we name God's presence near us, we experience that **peace.**

QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

If you know and would like to, share the story of why you have the name you do.

Is there a word you say, or an image you view, or a smell, or a taste, which brings you peace? Why does it have that power? When do you use it?

GOING DEEPER

Where in your life or the world do you yearn for peace?

How have you known God's peace companioning you on your journey?

How is Joseph's peace connected to the peace of his community? How is each individual's sense of peace connected to the experience of peace for the larger whole?

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WEEK THREE

LUKE 1:39-48

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies you, O God,

and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.

For you have looked with favor on the lowliness of your servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed."

Over more than a decade, the photographer Philippe Halsman asked his subjects to jump. When they did, he caught the moments, mid-air, black-and-white, all that energy forever captured in images still bursting with it.

The people he photographed for this experiment were primarily famous people, recognizable from their work in film or other arts, or as national political leaders—people the viewing audience would know from their serious endeavors elsewhere. But jumping, they somehow became less recognizable, or maybe audiences recognized something new in them. Halsman said,

“When you ask a person to jump, their attention is mostly directed toward the act of jumping, and the mask falls, *so that the real person appears.*”⁽¹⁾

TRY IT.

Put down this devotional now, and jump.

Again. A few times.

Are you in your room? Jump on your bed. Are you near some stairs? Climb just a few(!) of them, and hop off. Or try some other movement. How else do babies move? Lots of kicking, right?

Or swing your arms out at your sides, and raise them high into the air. Press at the edges, the boundaries around you, even if they’re imagined. Try some turns and twists. Can you do a somersault? A cartwheel? *Here’s your chance.*

WHAT VERSION OF YOURSELF DO YOU FEEL LIKE WHEN YOU JUMP?

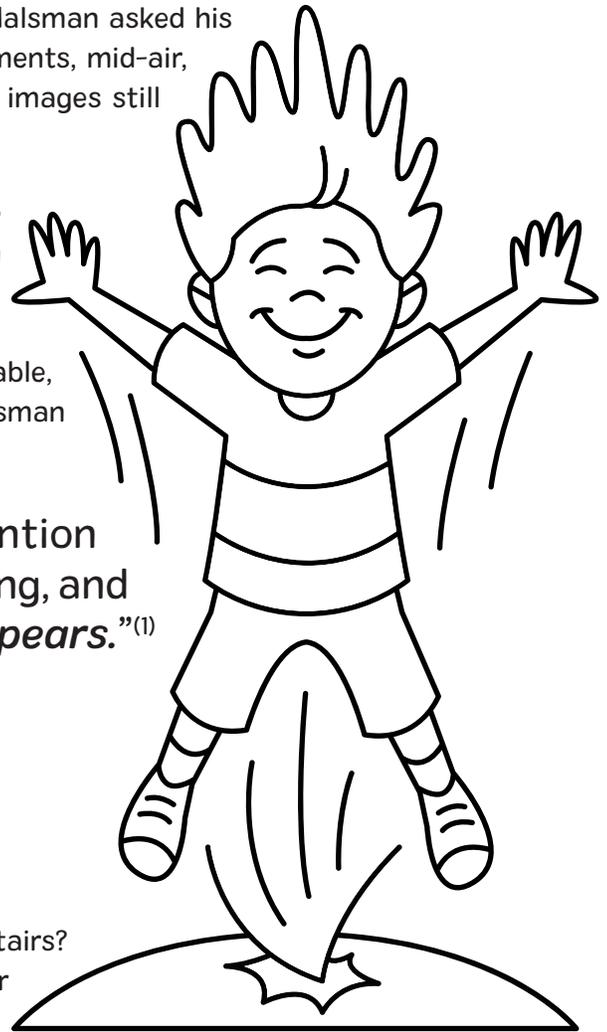
Somehow, Elizabeth knew the baby in her belly wasn’t jumping because he needed to stretch his limbs or because he was exploring his space—he was **“leaping for joy.”**

What does joy feel like in your body?

How does joy move you?

What masks fall off when you let joy inhabit your being?

If someone were to capture you on film in a moment like that, would you be recognizable to those who know you? *To yourself?*



In this story, Elizabeth's joy comes from recognition: she sees that it's Mary at her door, and her elation is not just a smile on her face but an all-over celebration—**so deep and real the baby she's carrying knows the same feeling.**



Or, at least, that's how she interprets it; she attributes the movement she feels to her own rejoicing.

And after the movement, there's the tumbling out of all those words: *Elizabeth blesses Mary, she blesses Mary's baby, she calls Mary's arrival a blessing*, and pretty soon Mary has picked up that same language—

“Yes, yes, and generations from now, people will still be calling me blessed!”

She's imagining the lines of the genealogy that will be written long after her own lifetime, imagining her own name among those others, her own story hinted at. She's imagining those who come later investigating those hints, saying to each other, **“Remember Mary? She was blessed by God.”**

Together these cousins bask in the joy of blessing—even while Zechariah stares on speechless, even while Joseph stays behind, surrounded by skeptics, even while the pains of pregnancy loom large and the struggles of family life lie just ahead.

All of that can be dealt with in time. **For this moment, THEY REJOICE.**

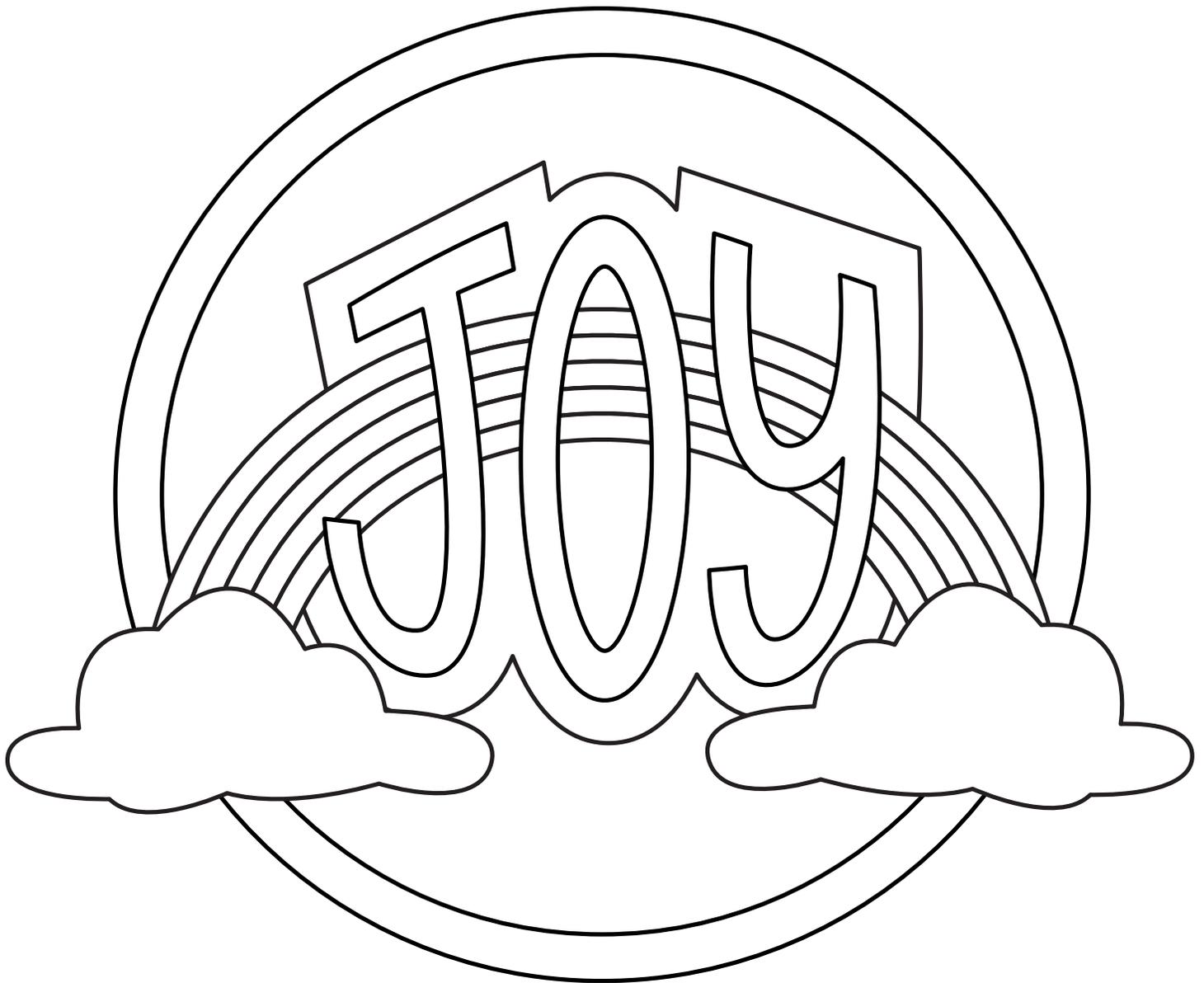
In this moment, they jump, and their masks fall off. They are fully themselves, with and for each other, celebrating each other.

And maybe something of this moment lingers. Ingrid Fetell Lee claims, *“Joy's power is that **small moments** can spark **big** changes.”*⁽²⁾

Is that what happens here? Mary's greeting is a small moment, the baby's leaping is a brief event, but immediately after this rejoicing, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. Does that experience stay with her? Does she know the presence of that power, that comfort, that creativity, throughout the rest of her days? Does the Spirit accompany her as she births her baby, as she and Mary raise their sons, as she tells the community the story of her blessings?

It makes me wonder about the small moments of joy that come every Advent season: bells ringing, snowflakes falling, spaces greening, carols rising, the feeling that the world can be made new again.

Maybe those moments that catch us, that call us away from the ordinary, are how the Holy Spirit tries to get our attention. **Maybe this Advent, the Spirit tosses joy onto our path, into our midst, so we might open ourselves just a bit, allowing the Holy Spirit to LEAP into that open space.**



QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

What little things bring you joy during the Advent season?

Have you ever experienced a contagious joy, either that you spread or that you caught? What was that like?

GOING DEEPER

Has a small moment of joy ever sparked a big change in your life? What happened?

What is the connection between joy and blessing for Elizabeth? For Mary? For you?

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WEEK FOUR

LUKE 1:57–80

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for you have looked favorably on your people and redeemed them.

You have raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of your servant David, as you spoke through the mouth of your holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus you have shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and have remembered your holy covenant, the oath that you swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve you without fear, in holiness and righteousness before you all our days.

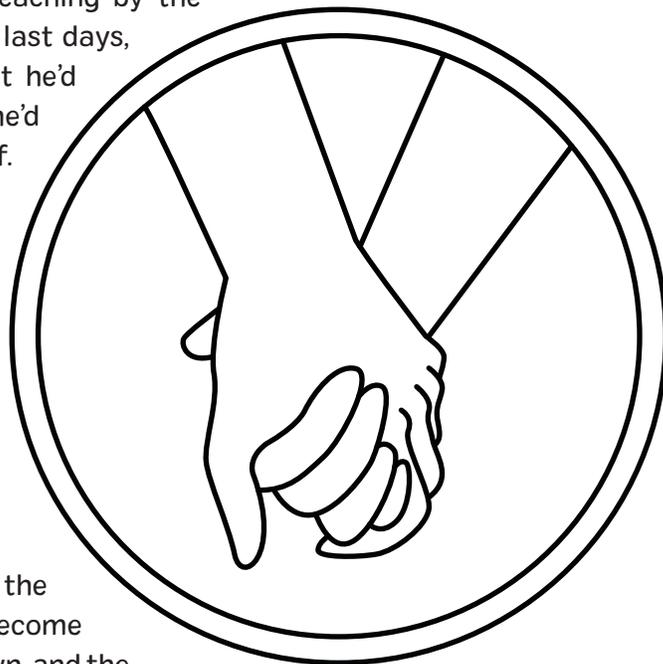
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before our God to prepare God’s ways, to give knowledge of salvation to God’s people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.”

Clyde was a gracious elder. He and Carol had raised four children, and they were actively involved in the lives of their grandchildren. He'd been in leadership roles in churches and community organizations for decades. He'd retired from teaching by the time I met him, but remained a student even until his last days, always learning more, always wanting to share what he'd learned from the last book he'd read, or lectured he'd listened to, or social change project he'd been part of. ***But sometimes, what he wanted to share was something he'd discovered on his own.***

"You know, sometimes people ask me my secret," he told me one day, unsolicited. ***"They ask me how I could be married to the same woman for more than 60 years."*** He smiled toward the door he expected Carol to come through at any moment; she was just out for a walk with a neighbor.

"And I tell them: I haven't been. I tell them: she's not the same woman. And I'm not the same man. We've both become different people over the years. We've changed and grown, and the Carol I know now is not the woman I married. But I'm not the man she married either. ***The trick is,***" he leaned in, conspiratorially, ***"we've become different people together."***



If other stories are hinted at in each of these Advent stories, this story about the birth of John the Baptist also gives us some clues to the love story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The scripture tells us they've spent many years together. *I wonder about the different people each of them were over those years. What had they hoped for when they married? What had they seen each other through over the years? How had they grown, and changed, and become different people together?*

And, most intriguingly: what had those nine months been like, as Elizabeth's pregnancy wore on, and Zechariah was silent?

Was it ***fun*** at first?

Did she tease him? Or was she ***frightened***?

Was this a ***bad omen*** for the baby?

Did she wish he could have ***answered*** her questions?

Did she yearn to hear words of ***comfort*** from him?

Was she enjoying the ***quiet***?

They must have learned to communicate in other ways. Elizabeth says her child's name is John, even though the angel shared that name with Zechariah when he was alone in the temple. Right after that—**because he voices doubts at the ridiculous notion of having a child, at his and Elizabeth's ages—he was struck silent.**

How did he share that news with her?

And what did they do for those nine months? Did he motion to Elizabeth, as he did to the others in this story? ***Had that writing tablet become part of their daily communication?*** Did they develop their own system of symbols and gestures? How did they grow and change together to accommodate this new reality?

However they did it, Zechariah emerges from this involuntary silence changed. His doubts have turned to awe, his questions to praise.

Maybe he still senses something of the ridiculous in this new turn their lives are taking, but now he's laughing at the strangeness instead of scoffing at it, opening his arms to the possibilities instead of closing off his mind to this new reality.

His response leaves his friends and neighbors with one solid assurance:

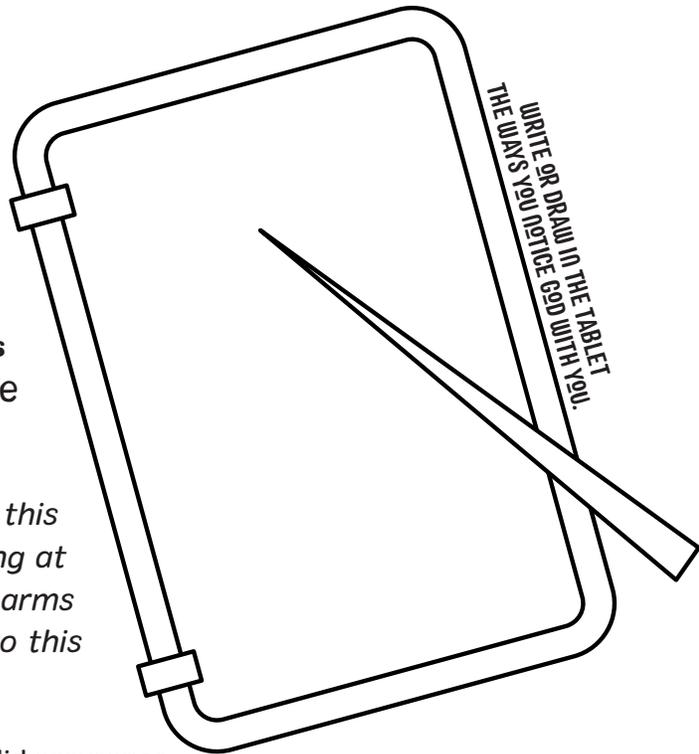
GOD IS WITH THEM.

God is with Zechariah, they can tell. They hear it in his returned voice, in the songs he now sings, in the way he now speaks of himself as one in a long line of people, a covenant community. And God is with Elizabeth and the baby that will be born to them. **How else could something like this happen?**

In this news—news which would have been unbelievable, except they could see Elizabeth growing rounder by the day—the community knows God has come near to them, too. **And they hear the promise in Zechariah's song that it is a tender kindness, a gift of love, that brings God close.**

It leaves me wondering about how they all changed and grew together as a community. How, after this, they took turns noticing God in their midst, pointing out the holy presence where they saw it, coming to understand God had been with them all along.

Maybe Advent is one way we—individually and together—prepare for our relationship with the sacred to change, so that even as we are continually becoming different people, **we might grow towards one another in love.**



QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

What's something that seemed ridiculous to you at first and ended up changing your life?

Where do people in your family or your community notice and name God's presence?

GOING DEEPER

Do you think it was the enforced silence, or the passing of time, or something else that brought about Zechariah's change of heart? How do you explain it?

How has someone who loves you been faithful to you as you've changed and grown?

In what ways has your understanding of God's love changed over the years?



WEEK FIVE

LUKE 2:8–20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

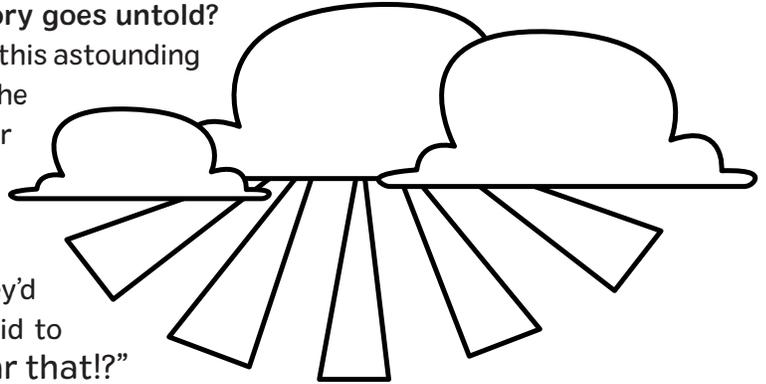
“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom God favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Do you ever wonder how much of the story goes untold? Like, do you really think that after hearing this astounding news from the angels, the first thing the (admittedly terrified) shepherds say to each other is, “**Let’s go!**”?

Might there have been some rubbing their eyes, blinking frantically, trying to figure out if they’d been dreaming standing up? Might one have said to another, “Did you see that, too? Did you hear that!?”



Might there have been some discussion of “Messiah” and “manger” being used in the same sentence? Or some thought of waiting until morning to check it out?



Maybe the shepherds don’t have a hard time believing God has come to be with them. **This isn’t a new idea, only a new expression of it.**

Their history is one long story of these encounters: *God creating the world* and stamping it everywhere with signs of the divine; *God hearing people’s cries* and delivering them from oppression; *God speaking to people* in their dreams and visions, sharing God’s own hopes, laments, and longings through the prophets.

And the genealogy of Jesus names many shepherds who came to know God-with-them in their own ways. Maybe there’s something about the fundamental realities of their existence—*devoting their lives to care, positioning themselves in wide-open spaces, staying watchful*—that makes shepherds well-suited to recognize God in their midst.

Even so, there are also times—whole songs recorded in the book of Psalms—where people cry out, asking where God is, asking if God cares, yelling at God to please wake up and offer some evidence of attention, some reason to hope.

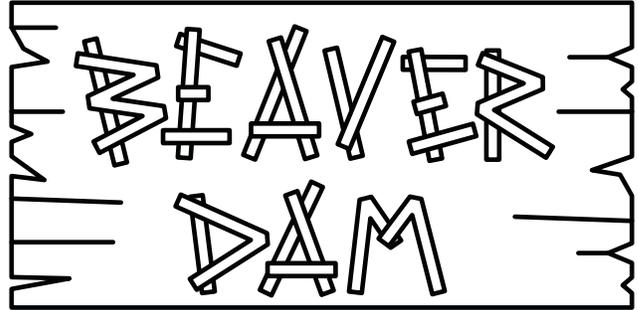
Like our own lives, this history is filled with that experience. Surely the shepherds would have known that, felt that, too.

There is a park at the edge of town where my family and I go some Sunday afternoons. By “park” I really just mean “land set aside.” There’s not much to do there besides walk around, or sit around, which is part of what makes it such a great place to visit.

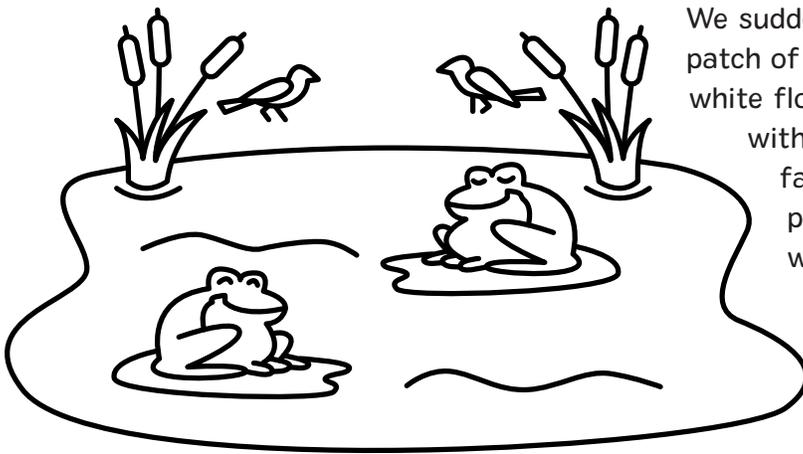
We’ve been there often enough to know what to expect: some red-wing blackbirds in the cattails, a few young deer along the forest trail, occasionally a hawk overhead or a lizard underfoot.

On our most recent visit, when we came near the pond, we saw a makeshift sign had been erected with an arrow pointing toward the water, **announcing: beaver dam.**

We drew closer and spied the rounded structure, all the layered wood, all the effort. We didn't see the beaver but decided we'd sit nearby, hoping it would come out if we were patient.



We were staring lazily at the patches of lily pads not far from the water's edge when suddenly my youngest said, "**Look! Look at that one!**" Finding "that one" was tricky, but eventually, we saw what he was pointing at—a small frog, a shade of green almost identical to the lily pad it sat on. And then, once we'd seen it, the strangest thing happened—we started seeing others. Everywhere.



We suddenly realized that what we'd thought was a patch of plant life, big flat leaves with an occasional white flower popping through, was actually teeming with tiny frogs, some perched perfectly still, facing away; some staring right back at us; one pulling itself up; one hopping off and into the water.

We started whisper-shouting to each other, "Did you see that one?!" "Look, over here!" "There's a giant one at the edge of the patch, and a dragonfly just buzzed by him!"

We never did see that beaver. But when another family approached, we scooted over to make room there at the water's edge, and passed our binoculars, and they saw it all, too, and **squealed with delight**. They saw things we hadn't, and showed us—the pad where two were perched together, the frog swimming underwater right near us.

I think about how this has happened throughout my life:

times I've been wandering, and someone has drawn my attention to a moment I would've been otherwise oblivious to;

times I've been hurrying, and something has slowed me down, only for me to later understand that interruption as protection;

times I've been ignorant, and someone has taught me how to pay attention, and what to pay attention to, and why.

WE NEED EACH OTHER FOR THIS. WE RELY ON EACH OTHER FOR THIS.

The worlds we would construct for ourselves are not wide enough, full enough, to see the whole truth of our own lives and each other's, to notice God-with-us in it all.

That's why we share stories, read scripture, and sing songs. That's what this baby Jesus will grow to do: open us to the hurt and hope, struggle and peace, sorrow and joy, pain and love, of our lives, and each other's, and of our shared world.

Even the shepherds, under their endless night sky, wouldn't have known how everything had shifted had the angels not burst in to tell them. ***So this Christmas, we can recognize what a gift other voices and other eyes can be for all of us.***



QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

If you received this incredible news from the angels, what do you imagine your first reaction would be?

What's a moment you would've missed if someone else hadn't drawn your attention to it?

GOING DEEPER

Who or what can you listen to, watch, or read that would make your world wider, fuller?

How can you offer someone else the gift of awareness, or openness, or presence?

*What does the promise of God-with-us mean for you this Christmas?
What might dwelling in that presence make possible for you or your community?*

ENDNOTES

- (1) Roberta Smith, “The Joys of Jumpology,” *The New York Times*. May 23, 2010, accessed October 5, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/24/arts/design/24halsman.html>.
- (2) Ingrid Fetell Lee, *Joyful: The Surprising Power of Ordinary Things to Create Extraordinary Happiness* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2018), 11–12.



AN ILLUSTRATED DEVOTIONAL

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