



ADVENT DEVOTIONAL





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Writing: Erika Marksburly

Illustration: Corby Ortmann

Concept: Allie Lee and Rebekah Lowe

Editing: Renee Purtlebaugh

Layout & Design: Adam Walker Cleaveland

Director of Product Development: Rebekah Lowe

Founder: Adam Walker Cleaveland

Illustrated Ministry, LLC.
829 Wisconsin Ave
Racine, Wisconsin 53403
illustratedministry.com
info@illustratedministry.com



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NOW IN FLESH APPEARING ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

The illustrated editions of our 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 theme for this edition of Advent Devotional is *Now in Flesh Appearing*. As we journey through this season of Advent together, you are invited to remember the story of Advent is about God taking on a physical body like ours. As you wait with anticipation and prepare for baby Jesus to be born this Advent season, we invite you to discover the awesomeness of incarnation and what it means for God to move, act, and live with us. This Advent resource invites you to explore the ways in which we can claim:

Body, have **HOPE!**

Brain, practice **PEACE!**

Self, feel **JOY!**

Heart, feel **LOVE!**

Everyone, **CELEBRATE!** We are alive!

This Advent, we will explore how God came to be human and lived among 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.

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 “Now in Flesh Appearing” 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-NowInFleshAppearing

We also love to see photos and hear stories about how you are using our products. When you post photos or comments online, please use the hashtag [#illustratedministry](https://twitter.com/illustratedmin) or tag us in the photos so we can see them. That allows us to be part of the conversation and you to be part of our online community. Additionally, checking the hashtag on social media is a great way to see how other families and churches are creatively using our resources.

Peace be with you!

-Illustrated Ministry



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Email: Depending on the size of your congregation, we encourage you to email files to those who want to use the resource. Another option is to put an announcement in your bulletin, asking those interested in receiving the files to email the person with access to the resource.

Note: Please do not include attachments or links to download our files in any emails/newsletters that are posted publicly online with services like Mailchimp, Constant Contact, etc. Links of this nature are searchable by Google, and the files become accessible to the general public.

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Note: Please do not include the password in a bulletin or newsletter that is posted publicly online.

Print: Most congregations who purchase our digital files choose to print out the materials. Printing the materials is probably the easiest way to share the resources with your community.

Thanks for understanding, and we appreciate your support!

Illustrated Ministry



WEEK ONE

JOHN 1:1-5, 14a

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

The Word was in the beginning with God.

Through the Word
all things came into being,
and without the Word
nothing came into being
that has come into being.

In the Word was life,
and that life was the light of all people—

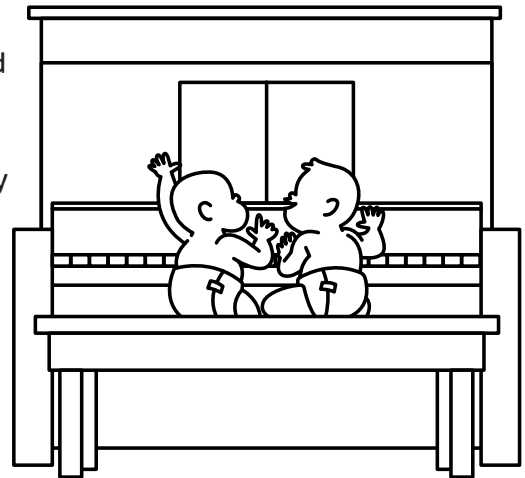
A Light that shines in the darkness,
a Light that the darkness has never overtaken...

And the Word became flesh
and stayed for a little while among us.

When my children were very young, we lived with my grandma. My grandpa—her husband of nearly seventy years—had recently died, and she was having a hard time navigating the world without him. To be honest, she was having a hard time navigating a day and her home without him. Our whole family agreed it would be helpful if she didn't live alone. So, two weeks after he left that house for the last time, my husband and I and our two boys—one three years old and one just six months—moved in.

The small house was suddenly full of bodies in all different stages of life: a tiny one not yet walking and an elderly one who stepped very gingerly; a toddler exploring all of the ways his frame could move, bend, kick, flip, and twist, and two parents, not quite young, learning their bodies anew as they changed with time (surely I am not old enough for this pain in my hip?). All those bodies in all those different stages meant we were constantly bumping into each other and constantly figuring out how our bodies could share that space.

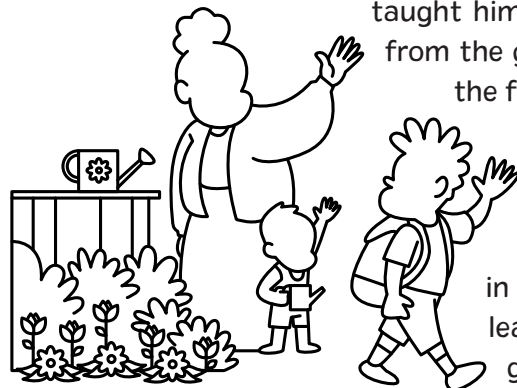
My boys sat themselves at the piano and banged away at it. My grandma was used to hearing those keys only as my grandpa would pick at them. A lifelong musician, he would practice the separate parts for the church choir piece he was directing; he would run through scales with the students who came for lessons; he would pluck out a line that had been dancing in his head. That's what my grandma was used to hearing.



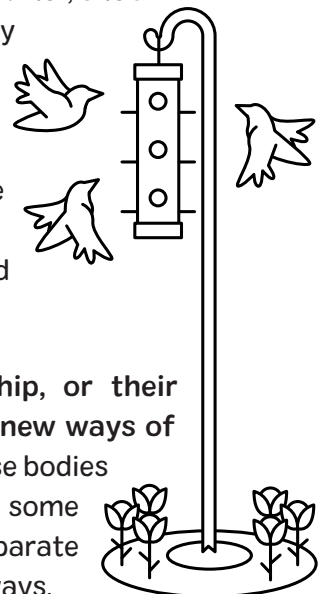
My boys sat side-by-side in diapers on the piano bench, pounding at the keys and squealing with delight at the cacophony. That poor woman.

But she loved them.

She loved them before we'd moved in, of course. But living there enabled a new expression of that love. Now, when she'd settle into her favorite armchair, the toddler would climb on top of her, she'd wrap an arm around him, and they'd do word searches together. Now, when the baby cried, she'd say, "bring him to me," and she'd bounce him gently, singing and soothing him until he was content. In that house, the toddler grew to be a kindergartner where she helped him load his backpack and waved to him from the porch every morning as he set out walking to school. The baby grew to be a toddler, and she taught him how to water the flowers, pluck radishes from the garden, and name the birds that frequented the feeders.

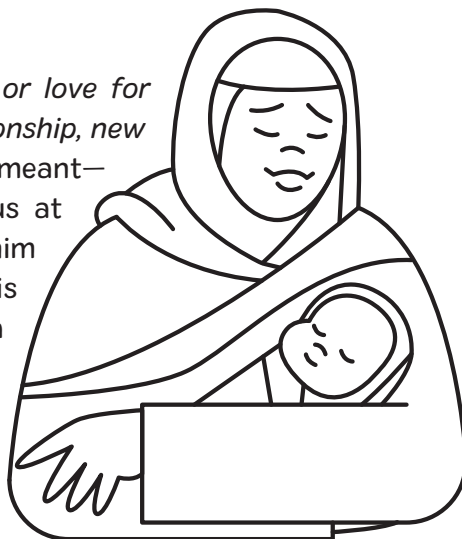


Proximity didn't make their relationship, or their love, possible. Proximity made possible new ways of relationship, new expressions of love. Those bodies in the same house meant some adjustment, some learning of one another, and it meant these separate generations were real to each other in new ways.



The Word became flesh *and dwelt among us.*

God's incarnation didn't make a relationship with God's people, or love for them, possible. The incarnation made possible new ways of relationship, new expressions of love. The becoming flesh, the dwelling among us, meant—for people—new encounters with the divine: dancing with Jesus at weddings, receiving bread and wine from his hands, sitting with him on a hillside and listening to his stories, and being healed by his touch. And it meant—for God—a solidarity with all of creation: a new kind of accompaniment layered with empathy, understanding, compassion.



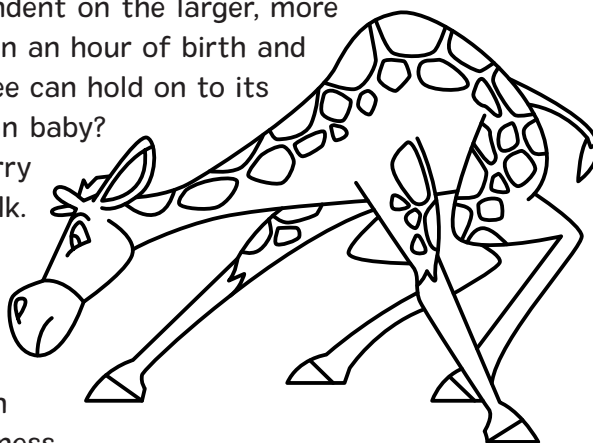
And it meant **vulnerability.**

It meant the *highest level* of vulnerability.

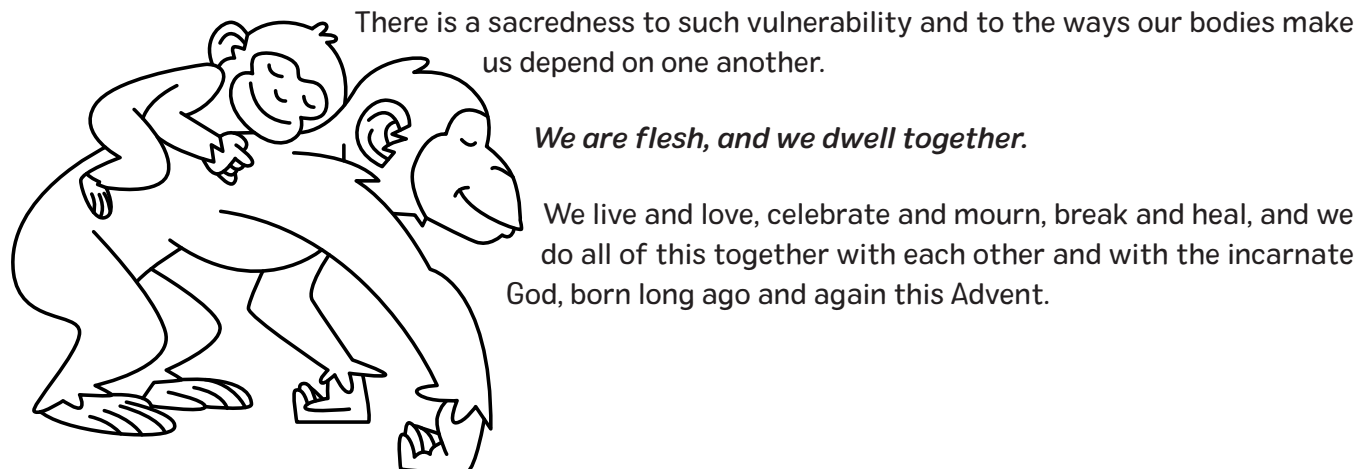
Because the incarnate One was—*like all of us*—born a baby.

Babies, with their tiny, squishy bodies, are entirely dependent on the larger, more solid bodies around them. A baby giraffe can stand within an hour of birth and flee a predator the same day it's born. A baby chimpanzee can hold on to its mother and position itself for nourishment. But a human baby?

Jesus needed those around him: To nurse him. To carry him. To hold his hands as he learned to sit, crawl, stand, walk. To protect him from danger. **To cradle him in love.**



Babies are often understood as *signs of hope*—that we haven't given up on the world, that something new is possible. I wonder if the hope isn't just in the birth, but also in how the baby calls those around to a new kind of togetherness, a new chance at paying attention, a new opportunity for generosity. Because a baby can only survive through the care of others, through other bodies offering themselves to its thriving.



There is a sacredness to such vulnerability and to the ways our bodies make us depend on one another.

We are flesh, and we dwell together.

We live and love, celebrate and mourn, break and heal, and we do all of this together with each other and with the incarnate God, born long ago and again this Advent.

QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

What about your body are you grateful for?

What does hope feel like in your body? Where would you locate it?

GOING DEEPER

What are some ways you have depended on other people? What are some ways other people have depended on you?

What is the connection between vulnerability and hope? How do those intersect in your own life or in the communities you belong to?



WEEK TWO

MATTHEW 1:18–25 & LUKE 1:26–38

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 pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, an upright person unwilling to disgrace her, decided to divorce her quietly.

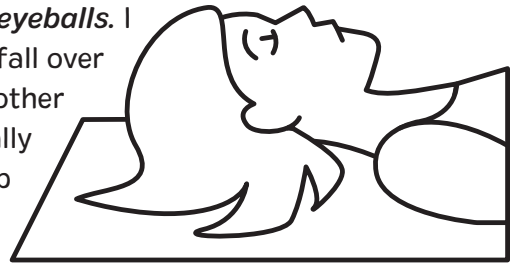
This was Joseph's intention when suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to wed Mary; for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She is to have a son, and you are to name him Jesus—'Salvation'—because he will save the people from their sins." All this happened to fulfill what God has said through the prophet:

"The virgin will be with child and give birth, and the child will be named Immanuel," which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; they went ahead with the marriage, but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth; she had a son, and they named him Jesus.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a young woman named Mary; she was engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. Upon arriving, the angel said to Mary, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Mary was deeply troubled by these words and wondered what the angel's greeting meant. The angel went on to say to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Jesus the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

I remember the first time a yoga teacher told me to *relax my eyeballs*. I only attend an occasional yoga class and am often worried I'll fall over when we're supposed to be holding a balance pose, or in some other way embarrass and out myself as someone who doesn't really belong in that tranquil, serene space. I want to love it and develop a discipline with it; I can feel the difference it makes in my body and my mind. But the first time a yoga teacher told me to relax my eyeballs, *I had to stifle my giggles*.



What did that even mean? It was the end of the class. We were lying on our backs, legs stretched out in front of us, arms at our sides, palms facing upwards. She had turned on soft music and invited us to give ourselves over to the moment.

She started at the bottom: "Relax your feet." "Relax your toes and your ankles." "Relax your calves, your kneecaps."

She concentrated mostly on big muscle groups as she moved us up our bodies. But when she came to our heads, she named every small part. "Relax your jawline." "Relax your cheeks." "Relax your temples, your browline, your eyeballs..."



I don't think I was laughing because it was silly. I think I was laughing because I was nervous. Because I didn't really understand what she meant. I could feel the stress in my shoulders, in my jawline; I could feel it leave my body when she directed my attention to those places, when I focused my awareness on releasing it. *Directing awareness to my eyeballs was a new kind of practice, one that required a little more letting go of myself, a little more trust in my teacher, and a little less concern for all the ways I might mess up.*

I wonder if Joseph or Mary *laughed* when those angels paid their respective visits.

Not because the angels' pronouncements were funny, but because they were so outrageous. I wonder if Joseph and Mary laughed nervously because this seemed like it could be good news, if it was possible, if there was any chance it could be true—why them? Why carpenter Joseph and young Mary? What is this wild story?



Remember, Joseph had already come up with a plan upon first learning Mary was pregnant. He would end their arrangement, privately, in a way that protected them both as much as he could. Had he made peace with that plan when the angel came to tell him something new? **Had he resigned himself to the way things would be, when an unexpected guest arrived to unsettle it all and to tell him nothing was as it seemed?**

The way Luke tells Mary's story, she asks just one question: **"How can this be?"**

Can that be right? Only one question? Is Luke condensing the conversation here? Or does the angel's reply—"nothing will be impossible with God"—answer all the others that were on the tip of Mary's tongue, before she'd ever had the chance to speak them?

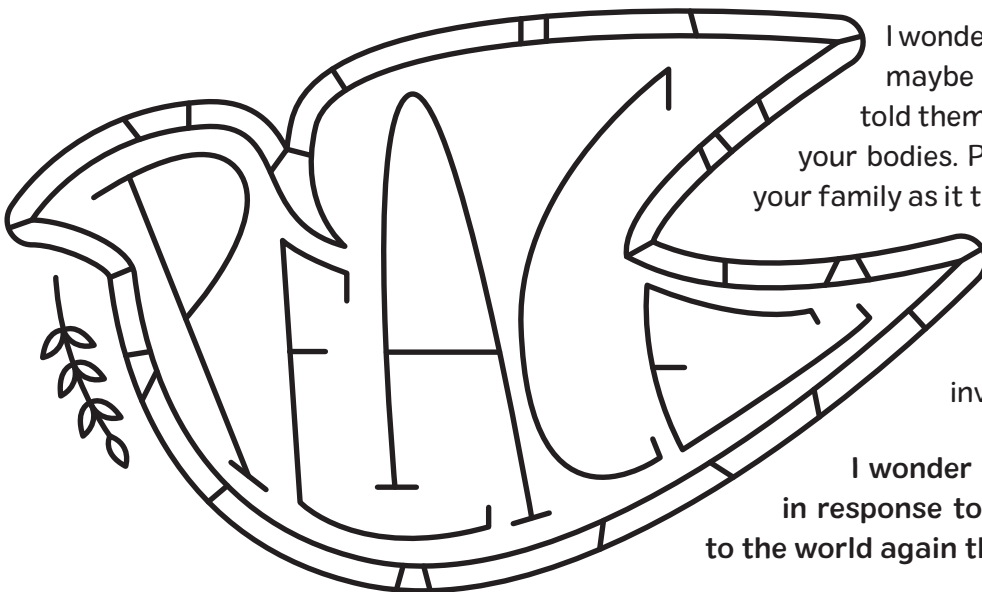
Matthew tells us Joseph wakes from his dream and **sets out to follow the angel's instructions**. Luke tells us Mary ends her encounter with the angel by **presenting herself as partner in this work of God being born**.



Does that mean they've both come to peace with what's been presented? Or are they stifling their giggles here, as well as their nervousness about what will become of their lives now? Do they tuck away their fears for each others' sake, trying to be brave for one another? Do the gospel authors not give us a full emotional picture of what this teenage mom and her unsuspecting fiancé might be going through in order to keep the story focused on their faithfulness?

I don't know those answers, of course. ***I do know it's unfair to assume fear and faith are at odds with each other.*** Sometimes fear arises in us as a natural response to what might be unknown or dangerous. Sometimes it protects us. Sometimes it's our cue to leave an unhealthy situation. And sometimes it's an encouragement to look again, to listen anew, to ask about what's really happening, what new adventure we're being invited to.

Fear might arise in us automatically; **faith** gives us options for responding to it.



I wonder if Joseph and Mary laughed, maybe a bit nervously, as the angels told them, "Peace to your minds and to your bodies. Peace to your fears. Peace to your family as it takes shape in this miraculous way. Peace to your hearts."

I wonder how long it took them to relax into the invitation.

I wonder how we might do the same in response to our invitation to bear God to the world again this Advent.

QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

What questions would you have had for the angel if you were Mary? What questions would you have had if you were Joseph?

Where in your body do you feel peace? Where are you in need of it?

GOING DEEPER

Do you remember a time when initial fear or nervousness gave way to something different, something life-giving? What was that like?

What practices work for you as you seek peace? What movement, prayer, song, or memory helps you cultivate peace in your own life?



WEEK THREE

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 appeared to 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. Today in David’s city, a savior—the Messiah—has been born to you. 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 to those on whom God’s favor rests.”

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 God 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 reported what they had been told 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, just as they had been told.



One of my favorite pictures from the birth of my second child is a picture of my first child. He's two and a half years old, and he's crouched down in front of a pair of imposing, carved wooden doors. He's facing away from the doors, toward the camera. The biggest grin you can imagine is spread across his face, and he's been caught mid-fist-pump like he's celebrating he's just won a great game.

A friend captured the photo, and I don't actually know what it was my kid was celebrating. At the time, I was on the other side of those wooden doors, in labor. I like to imagine this grin-and-fist-pump moment occurred as I gave my last push, as his little brother emerged into the world, as he let loose with his first cry, and I fell back in exhaustion.

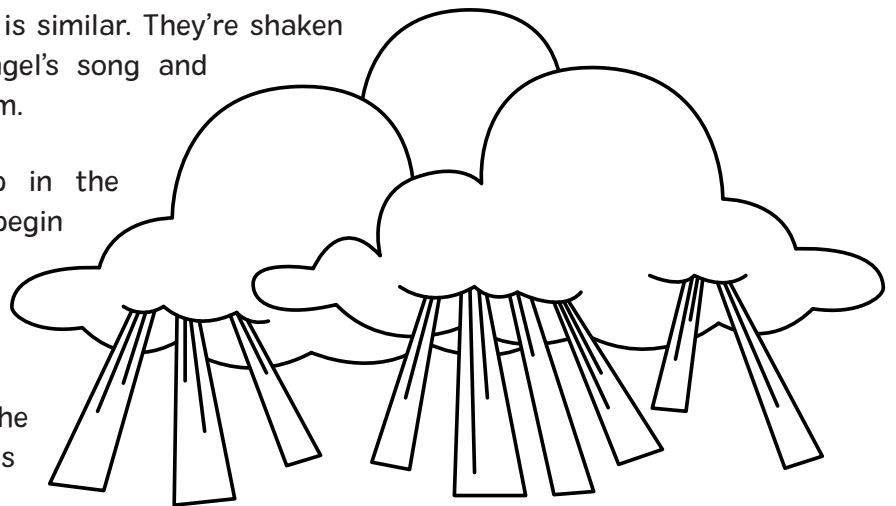
The big brother's look of triumph is one fitting of that moment.

The funny thing is, he doesn't really know what's happening on the other side of those doors. And he doesn't have any idea in the moment what it will mean to be a brother, to share parents and a bedroom and all his books and toys. **He just knows something big is happening**, people around him are excited, and he catches the excitement, too. He takes it into his own little body, and he offers it back up to everyone around him. Whatever is happening, he's part of it, which is more than enough reason to celebrate.

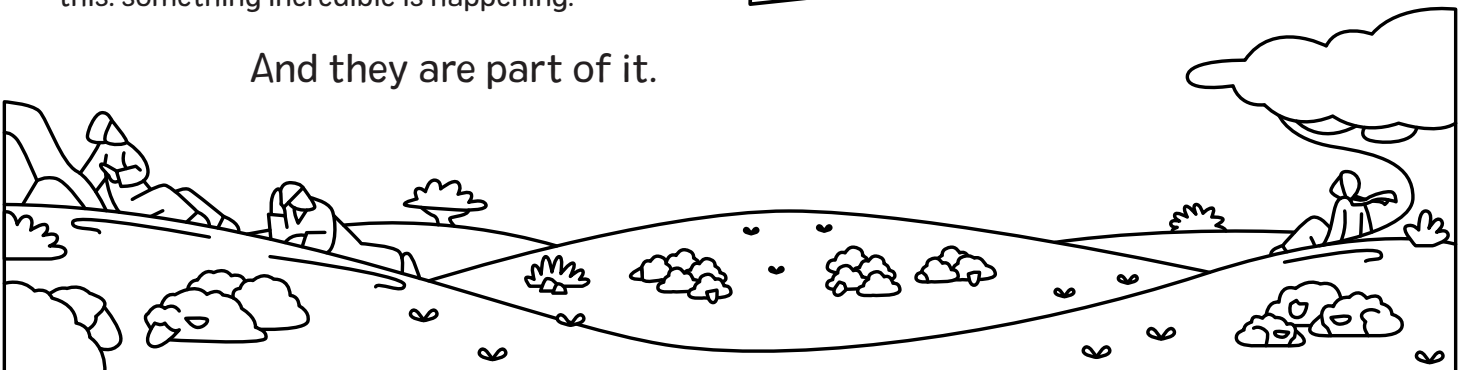
I wonder if the shepherds' experience is similar. They're shaken awake in their fields that night, angel's song and heaven's light streaming all around them.

How could they not be caught up in the excitement? How could they even begin to understand the enormity of the message?

First, they're **frightened** and **frozen** in place; then, they're **following** on the journey. I'd imagine all they can know is this: something incredible is happening.



And they are part of it.



Listen to how their dialogue is recorded. “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, *which the Lord has made known to us.*” There are two unbelievable parts of this story:

first, the thing that has taken place,
and *second*, ***the fact that they were told about it.***

The birth is a reason to celebrate, of course. But they don’t know yet what it means. They might have some vague memory of a prophecy, and they might carry some far-off hope for a redeemer, but even if they do, this announcement of a baby—wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger—is *probably not the news they thought they’d been waiting for.*

But that second part—***the fact that they were told about it***—is, in some small way, the good news they don’t yet know.

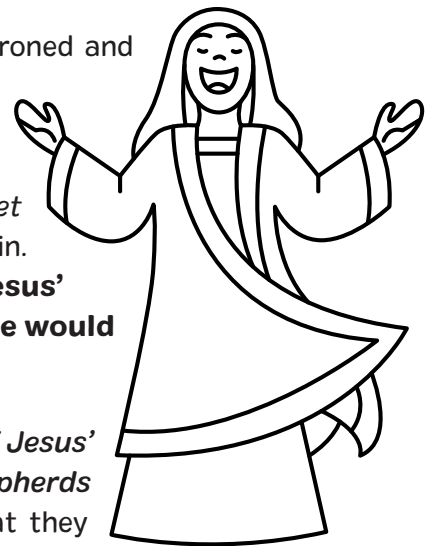
This baby in a manger ***turns the world upside down.***

Whatever they might have learned about a coming messiah, they did not learn that they would be the first to know about his coming. They did not learn the glorious announcement would come not to emperors on their thrones but to shepherds in their fields. But that’s what happens.

Before Jesus is born, his mom sings songs of the powerful being dethroned and the forgotten being lifted up. *When he’s born*, choirs of angels light up the sky to bring the good news to these often-overlooked shepherds on the graveyard shift. *When he grows to care for the vulnerable*, the Shepherd-God of Psalm 23 will be remembered. *When he grows to set people free*, the Liberator-God of the Exodus will be made known again.

Throughout his life, beginning here at the very beginning, Jesus’ story includes, centers, uplifts, and celebrates people who maybe would not have assumed they’d have any place in the story at all.

And what **joy** comes from that! *The angels celebrate the good news of Jesus’ birth*, and they celebrate getting to tell it to these shepherds. *The shepherds rejoice at the coming of the long-awaited one*, and they rejoice that they are the ones the news came to. *Mary treasures her newborn child*, and she treasures the words and songs from the shepherds and the angels that accompanied the birth. *The people praise God for what’s happened*, and they praise God the shepherds have come and told them.



None of them—not the angels or the shepherds or Mary or the people who hear the story when the shepherds return—none of them know what will happen next. None of them can anticipate the ways this baby will change their own lives or change the world. None of them ever anticipated being characters in a story like this. In so many ways, this story is not about any of them.

Except, it is their story too. They don’t have to fully understand it at this moment, or ever. *Whatever is happening—whatever this new thing God is doing in the world is—they are part of it. And so are we. And that is enough reason for joy.*

QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

If you could experience the joy of a character in this story—the angels, the shepherds, Mary, or the people who hear the shepherds' story later—whose joy would you choose? Why?

What happens in your body when you feel joy? How do you express it?

What story has brought you joy? What role do you play in the story?

GOING DEEPER

What are some ways you can include people—maybe even people who wouldn't expect it—in something you're celebrating?



WEEK FOUR

LUKE 1:39-46

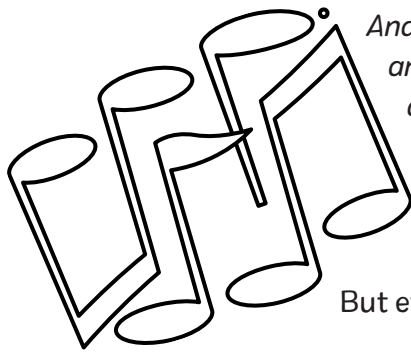
In those days, Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth.

As soon as 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. But why am I so favored, that the mother of the Messiah should come 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 what our God said to her would be accomplished!"

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord..."

There is so much I love about Christmas traditions. I love baking with my kids the same cookies my mom did with me: snickerdoodles, pecan bars, rolled sugar cut-outs iced and sprinkled, and some concoction with busted pretzels as reindeer antlers.

I love finding and decorating a tree and the sparkle and color that adorns everything. I love the way windows in my neighborhood are illuminated by lights from various traditions all celebrating at the same time: candles in wreaths for Advent, in menorahs for Hanukkah, in kinara candle holders for Kwanzaa. I love the special outings, the silly crafts, and all the list-making.



And I especially love the music that is everywhere and the ways sacred and secular mix like during no other time as the bells and the carols and the pa-rum-pa-pum-pums swirl in the air all around us.

I love most of the music, that is. I cannot bring myself to listen to *Away in a Manger*. I know it is up there with all the beloved traditional carols. I know it's often sung by children's choirs, upping the adorability quotient. But every time we get to the "little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes," ***I revolt.***

Why do we sing that? Do we think that? It's not what the stories tell us. And if it had been true—if that just-born little boy hadn't been making a sound—that would've been a really concerning sign, not one to celebrate.

A baby's cry is a communication of a very human need; the baby is hungry, or wet, or tired, or hurting, or wants to be held. Babies cry because they need attention. And of course they do. ***We all do.***

A cry is unsettling, but that's exactly the point, right? ***It's unsettling because it is trying to let us know that something is not right with the world.***

I've always been irritated at the song because ***I've thought it doesn't take the incarnation seriously.*** If God really does become embodied in this world, like you and me, then it means all ***we are*** and all ***we feel, God is*** and ***God feels***. Discomfort and hunger and thirst. All the needs and desires, hopes and sorrows that are connected to living in a body, God experiences. Ecstatic joy like Elizabeth's and weary trepidation like Mary's. And, of course, tears. Because all is not right with the world. We know this in our bodies, and some bodies know and bear the burden of it in more ways than others.

What makes you cry? A broken toe, a broken promise, a broken heart, a broken system? The reasons get more complicated as the years go by.



The same Jesus who cried in the stable as a baby and as the cattle were lowing also cried on a hillside as an adult as he looked over his homeland and worried about what was becoming of it.

He cried again when he heard about the death of his friend.

Again from the cross when he felt abandoned by God.

The gift of incarnation and the struggle of it are one and the same—the felt experience of what it means to be human.

Maybe it's not as singable, or the words wouldn't rhyme, but what might a verse that actually took into account all the emotion in the stable sound like?

Would it mention that *Jesus was fussy?*
That *Joseph was overwhelmed?*
That *Mary was in pain?*

Would it mention the blood, sweat, tears, and milk of the scene? Would it acknowledge that yes, all of it is messy, and yes, it is also part and parcel of the miracle of birth, every time it happens? Would it tell the truth that our emotions are both human and holy—our noise as much as our quiet, our tears as much as our laughter?

And if it did, **would we sing it in church?** Would we play it at our parties? Would we let those assertions be part of the soundtrack of the season?

Away in a Manger might not do it, but **there is a Christmas song** that gets at all this complication.

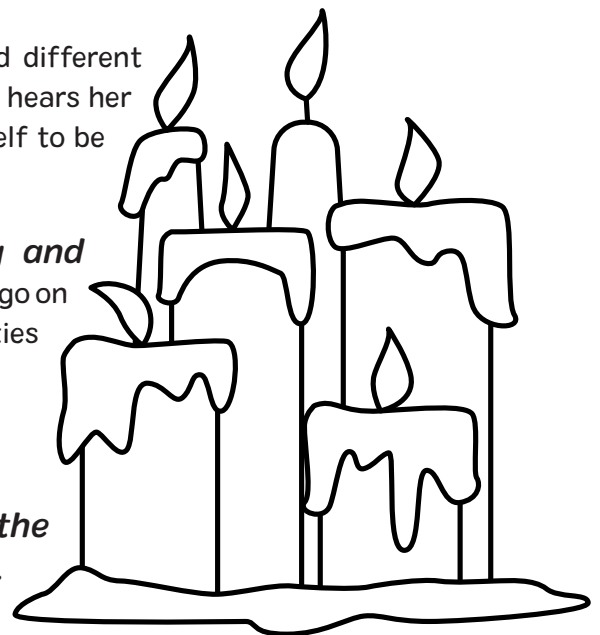
It's the one we hear in the first line of this scripture when Mary tells Elizabeth, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

Maybe she's arrived at her cousin's house with a hundred different thoughts and emotions rushing through her, but when she hears her exclamation and is gathered up in a hug, Mary knows herself to be welcomed, beloved, once more.

This experience of being known is life-giving and empowering. Her song—the next nine verses in Luke—will go on to tell of all that is not right in the world and of the possibilities of making it right, being born even now, even through her.

Maybe her song is our song, too.

Maybe this Advent, we can sing of the ways the world might still be made right, even through us.



QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

What are some beloved traditions of this season for you? What are some you could do without?

Have you ever felt like your emotions were messy or unwelcome? Have you ever felt like they were holy or necessary? How did you respond?

GOING DEEPER

What does it mean to you that God's heart can hold all that you feel, think, and experience?

Have you received, or given, love like Elizabeth greets Mary with in this story—love that is enthusiastic and welcoming, life-giving and empowering? Can you share that story?



WEEK FIVE

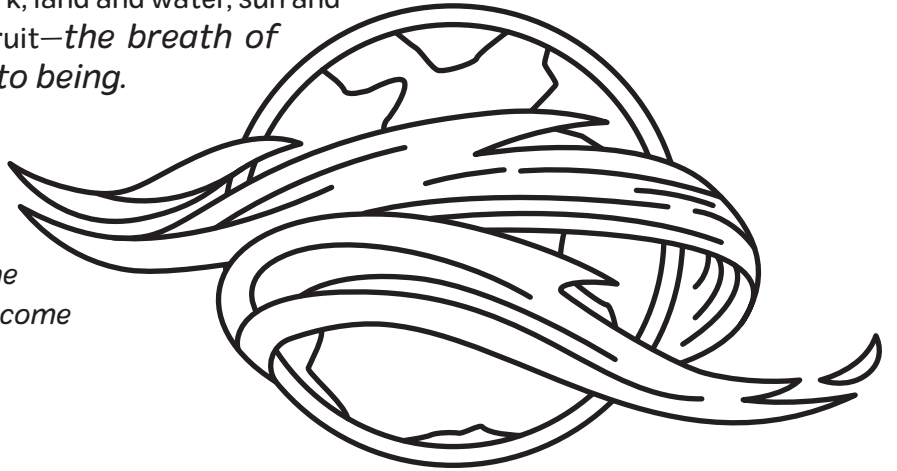
LUKE 2:1-7,15-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the whole Roman world should be registered. This census took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All the people were instructed to go back to the towns of their birth to register. And so Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to the city of David called Bethlehem, in Judea, because Joseph was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn...

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 God 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 reported what they had been told 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, just as they had been told.

Our sacred stories tell us that when everything began, the world was chaos, and God breathed over the expanse of it. In its own time, each piece came into being, claiming its space as part of the whole. Light and dark, land and water, sun and moon and stars, birds and trees and fruit—the *breath of God covered it all and coaxed it into being.*

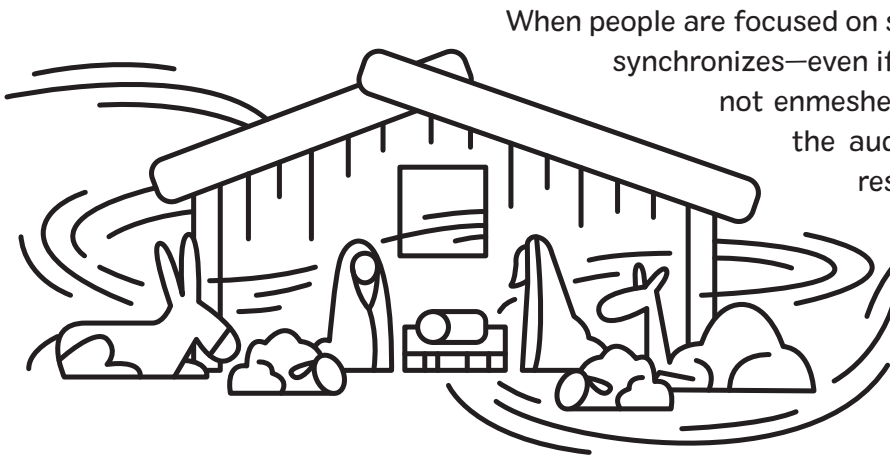
And so many lifetimes later, that same breath—the one that created and continues to hold all that is—*held the stable, that held the family, that held the manger, that held the baby that would come to hold all the world in his heart.*



Could they feel it?

Mary and Joseph, with their expectant, labored breathing—*could they feel God’s spirit cradling them?* Could the shepherds, breathless in their haste to arrive at the scene in good time—*could they sense God’s spirit powering their journey?* Could the animals, making space for these new creatures who’d moved into their space—*could they tell God’s spirit was at work in their midst?* Could the innkeeper, the other guests, and the folks passing through town—gasping in surprise at what was happening right there—*could they know God’s spirit binding them together in this wondrous moment?* Could Jesus, drawing his very first breaths—*could he intuit, even then, that God was alive with and in and through him?*

Did they have any idea how they were all connected through that breathing?



When people are focused on something together, their breath often synchronizes—even if they are observing an experience and not enmeshed in it themselves. In a movie theater, the audience will often gasp all together in response to what’s happening on the screen or let loose a collective exhale when a moment of tension resolves. When a caregiver holds a crying child to their chest to comfort the child, it isn’t long before the two breathing patterns are in sync with one another.

Our heartbeats do a similar thing. Researchers have found the hearts of people who practice fire-walking, as part of their religious and cultural traditions, beat in time with one another, though they wouldn’t say they put any effort into that or had any awareness of it. But it’s not just those engaging in that intense act that experience this phenomenon; *the heartbeats of those who gather to witness the fire-walking also conform to one another.*⁽¹⁾

And when our hearts beat in time, and when we breathe in and out together, those physical connections create social and emotional bonds, too. We know ourselves as part of a greater whole. Our bodies know it, and they adjust their rhythms to those around them. If our hearts and our lungs can form a kind of unity without even trying, ***what might be possible if we intentionally worked to find common ground, to bridge differences, to make compassion and justice real in our midst?***

I wonder about those who witnessed Jesus' birth: *the locals* who might have seen an incredibly pregnant Mary as she and Joseph came into town that night; *the other travelers in nearby inns* who might have heard her labor cries through thin walls; *the thoughtful ones* who might have gathered round with bread or blankets when they heard a baby had been born.

They could not have known who he would grow to be, but that's true of every child. We cannot know all the ways God will come alive through them as they grow. Yet those strangers who in those moments were breathing together, whose hearts were beating together, they are part of the very first Christmas story, and it is part of them.

And the story is part of us, too, since we have inherited it, since each year we retell it, since God's incarnation was not a one-time event long ago and far away but is an ever-present reality when we trust that God's spirit continues to breathe with and over and through creation.



The word ***conspire*** comes from combining the Latin words for *together with* and *breathe*.

During this season, as you sing and feast and share and celebrate and tell the story, ***with whom does your heart beat?*** When you breathe in and out the gifts of this season, ***who breathes with you?***

Might Christmas be God's way of conspiring with us to birth more hope, more peace, more joy, and more love into this world we all share?

QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

In what ways are you, your family and/or your community part of the Christmas story?

What are some ways you might conspire with others to share the gifts of this season?

GOING DEEPER

Describe an experience that took your breath away. What was it like? Were you alone or with others? What did you notice about your sense of self, or your sense of connectedness, following that experience?

Practice slowing down your breathing.

Try this prayer: as you breathe in, let your heart say, "I am held."

As you breathe out, let your heart say, "in God's loving embrace."

After a while, you might substitute "I am held" for "we are held," and later, "all the world is held."

ENDNOTES

- (1) Shapiro, Ari, Lauren Hodges, and Ashley Brown. "Rituals Are Important to Human Life - Even When They Seem Meaningless." National Public Radio. NPR, September 13, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/13/1122796534/rituals-are-important-to-human-life-even-when-they-seem-meaningless>.



CONTRIBUTORS

writing **ERIKA MARKSBURY** is Senior Pastor of the creative and welcoming First Baptist Church of McMinnville, Oregon, and mom to two exhausting, inspiring boys.

editing **RENEE PURTLEBAUGH** is the Associate Pastor to Children and Their Families at Highland Baptist Church, where she has served for 15 years. She makes her home in Louisville, KY, where days revolve around life with her husband and daughter. Renee delights in a good cup of coffee to begin the day, watching her daughter sound out words, and designing experiences for children that are Reggio-inspired.

illustration
illustrator & graphic designer **CORBY ORTMANN** is a digital illustrator and animator whose work includes caricatures, graphic design, children's books, and animated commercials/music videos. He currently lives in St. Paul, Minnesota with his wife and daughter, who help him to step away from the art table every so often. You can find more of his work at corbyortmann.com.

concept & editing
director of product & operations **REBEKAH LOWE** develops and cultivates Illustrated Ministry's ever growing library of resources. She earned a BA in Biblical Studies from Azusa Pacific University and served as the Director of Children's Ministry at Brentwood Presbyterian Church (USA) in Los Angeles, California. She resides in Austin, Texas with her husband and their two children.

layout
founder **ADAM WALKER CLEVELAND** is an artist, pastor, pastor's spouse, and father of four (two living). Adam is an ordained Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and after doing youth ministry for over 15 years, he founded Illustrated Ministry, LLC in 2015. He resides in Racine, Wisconsin with his wife and their two children.