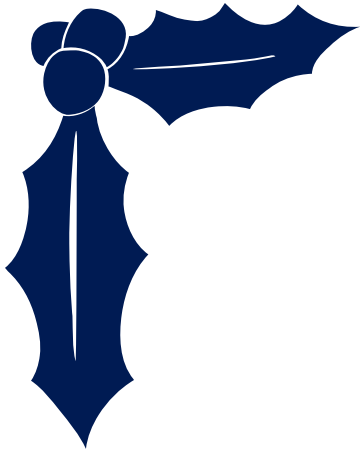




WONDER

A Family Advent Devotional



"Wonder"

A Family Advent Devotional - December 2019

Two Rivers Church

Illustrated and designed by Erin McGaha

Special thanks to TJ Ellis, Julia Kurschner, Julia Keyes, Sarah DeLotelle,
Richard and Courtney Gamble, and Priscilla Landry.

Introduction



won·der
/ 'wən-dər / noun

- a feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or inexplicable.

There's something about Christmas - the twinkling lights, the beautifully-wrapped presents, the flying reindeer pulling the red night goblin (you'll only get that if you've seen Merry Madagascar, which I highly recommend) - that awakens the child in all of us!

When the neighbors finally plug in their 27 foot tall inflatable penguin and your kids stare out the window in amazement, jaws open as if to say, "wooooooow!"

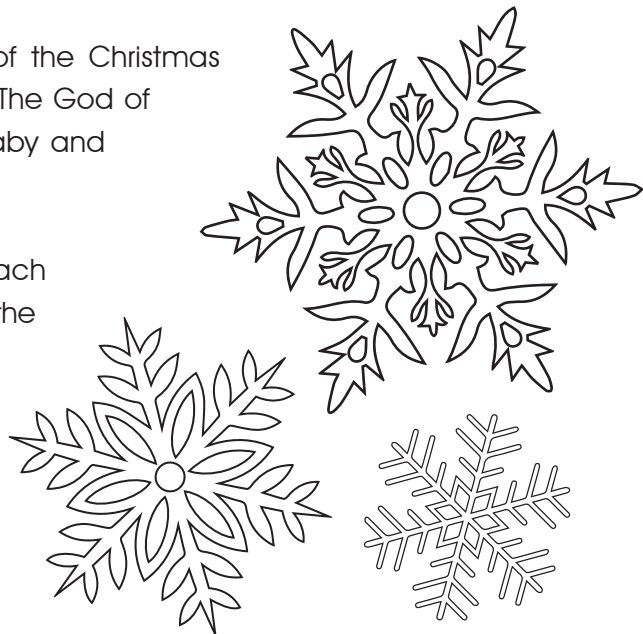
There is a wonder about Christmas.

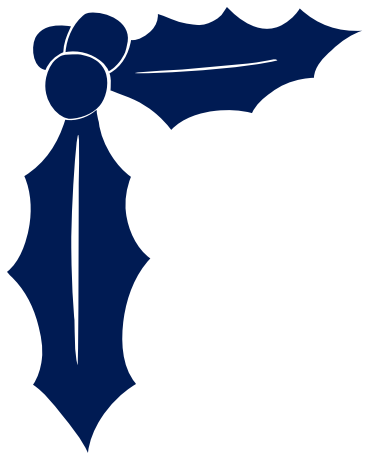
But we don't have to look through the Target ads, watch Hallmark movies or walk through Rock City to be struck with wonder.

If we open the Bible we will find some pretty amazing stories surrounding the very first Christmas. Unexpected babies, angelic choirs, royal visitors...and a God who came near.

This year we want to capture the wonder of the Christmas story. It's a story that connects to your story. The God of the universe stepped into the world as a baby and changed everything.

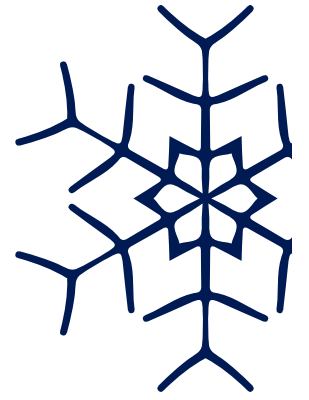
So gather your family or a few friends each week, and celebrate the wonder of Advent - the coming of Jesus Christ!





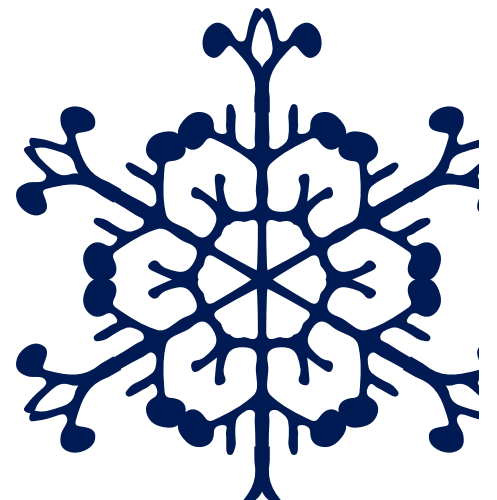
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Week **ONE**

Zechariah Spoke



THE WONDER IN WAITING

Two weeks before Christmas our beloved beagle Smokey, dug himself out of our backyard fence. We rode around for hours, trying to find our black and white fury friend, but there was no sign of him anywhere. My nine year old heart was broken. I asked God to bring Smokey home, and with the faith only a child could muster, I fully believed He would answer. However, as the days passed, I became doubtful that God was going to bring Smokey home. On Christmas Day, we were eating and noticed a dog come toward our house, and as if straight out of a Hallmark movie our eyes filled with disbelief and astonishment as we were being reunited with our beloved Smokey.

Scripture Luke 1:6-7

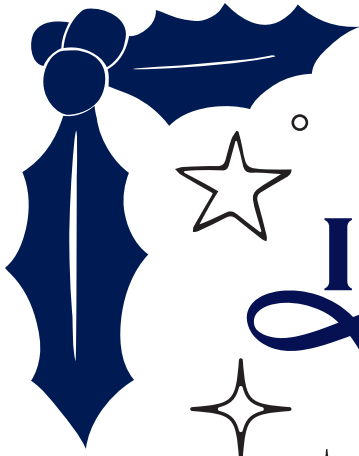
⁶ "And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Zechariah was a priest. He would have known the law and predicted prophecies. One day as Zechariah went to perform his work in God's temple, God sent an angel to share some big news with him. This devout man had long prayed for a son. Elisabeth his wife was barren, meaning she was unable to have children. In this time period, anyone unable to have children was considered an outcast in the community, and it was seen as punishment from God. Scripture tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth followed God faithfully. The angel told Zechariah, not to be afraid, because not only would they have a son his name would be John. He would proclaim the Messiah, pointing people to Jesus.



He would tell the people The Savior was coming! Zechariah’s response was filled with disbelief and doubt. He had waited for an answer a long time, and now the clock wasn’t just ticking it was dead. His dream of raising a son was impossible given their ages. “How can I know this will happen”? He asked. Zechariah instantly missed the wonder and majesty of the moment, because he didn’t believe God would accomplish what He had promised to him.

As a result of his disbelief He was unable to speak until his son was born. When many asked what his son’s name would be, Zechariah regained his ability to speak, and declared his name to be John which was declaration and evidence of his willingness to believe what God had promised. God was gracious to not allow a moment of disbelief and fear of disappointment to define Zechariah’s life and legacy. What are you waiting for? Are you waiting for that new job, a restored relationship, financial, provision, or those medical tests results? As we wait, let us marvel at our Faithful Savior. Can you believe it? God keeps his promises.



I WONDER WHAT YOU'RE SAYING



When Zechariah could not speak he had to use hand signals or write down what he wanted to say! Do you think he was ever misunderstood?

Game I Wonder What You're Saying

Instructions:

You're going to play a combination of the games "Win, Lose or Draw" and Charades. On slips of paper, write down these clues (feel free to add or adjust based on who is playing)

David and Goliath (Act It Out!)

Silent Night (Draw It!)

Rudolph the Rednosed Reindeer (Act It Out!)

Jonah and the Whale (Draw It!)

Daniel and the Lion's Den (Act It Out!)

Jack Frost (Draw It!)

Little Drummer Boy (Draw It!)

The Grinch (Act It Out!)

Jesus feeding the 5000 (Draw It!)

Peace On Earth (Draw It!)

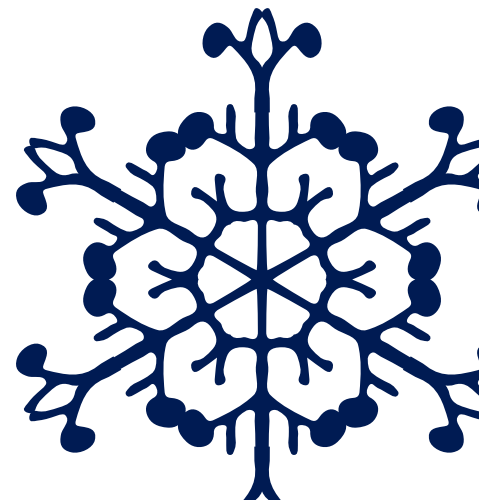
Manger (Draw It!)

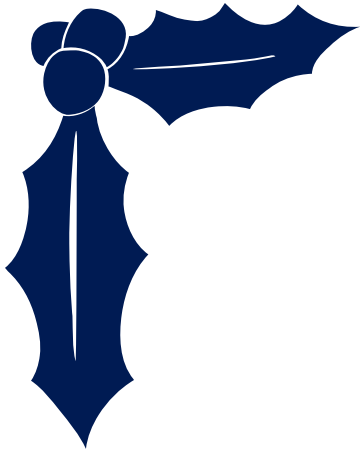
You can mix it up with Acting and Drawing, or just stick to one or the other. You'll need a chalkboard, white board or paper so everyone can see the drawing!



Week **TWO**

Mary Treasured





Week TWO

WONDER

Read Luke 1:26-38 & 46-55

Love.

Infallible, unconditional, sacrificial, all-consuming, never-ending love. That's the kind of love that is beautifully written through every part of the Christmas story. Love is why our Heavenly Father sent His Son to be born into poverty, experience the unique joys and sufferings of this world, and then willingly take on our sin and punishment on the cross.

Love is Christmas.

But the love that is so intricately woven through the gospels here in the beginning of Luke isn't just about God's perfect love for us; it's also about our response to Him.

"Let it be according to Your Word." Luke 1:38

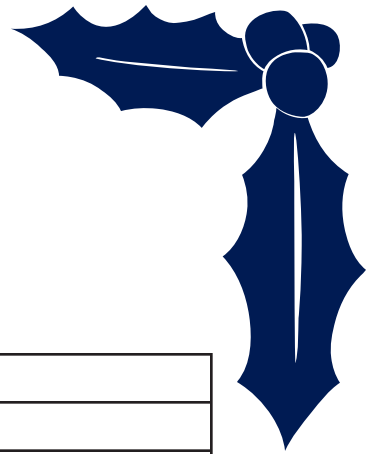
I don't know about you, but I've always marveled at Mary's response. It's easy to read her story through our lens now. She was favored and chosen by God to carry the Savior of the World! Has there ever been a greater calling than this? Make no mistake: when the angel of the Lord appeared to her, he presented her with some pretty scary things.

In the time of Christ, being pregnant and unmarried would have greatly harmed Mary's future. She could have lost her betrothed, her family, and her standing in society. Mary said "let it be so" knowing what was at stake – knowing she could have lost it all. But wait, her story gets even better.

Not only does she say yes to God, but she continues to respond to her circumstances with worship. "My soul magnifies the Lord...He who is mighty has done great things for me. Holy is His name!"

I have no doubt that by this point in her young life, Mary was already intimately acquainted with God's agape love. There is simply no other explanation for this type of faith. She walked in it, devoted herself to it, and had seen God's faithfulness in her own life and in the lives of others time and time again. Trusting the Lord to this magnitude was a learned response, like a fortified and well-exercised muscle. So, when God asked her to do something hard, something that didn't make sense, she unequivocally said yes. Why? Because of her complete and utter devotion to her God. Because of love.

Can you believe it? The greatest story ever told, begins with one woman's act of faith, obedience, and love.



Reflection

What about Mary's story resonates with you the most?

Why do you think Mary was favored by God?

How do you respond when faced with an uncertain or potentially difficult future?

What is something God is asking you to trust Him with right now?

Take a moment and share some ways you've experienced God's *agape love in your life.

*Unconditional



MAKE AN ANGEL ORNAMENT

What you will need:

- 1) Wired ribbon in your choice of color
- 2) Small bell or round ornament
- 3) String or twine
- 4) Hot glue gun
- 5) Stapler
- 6) Gems or beads (optional)

* For visual learners, there are easy YouTube tutorials on "How to Make A Christmas Angel Ornament out of Wired Ribbon."

How you will make it:

1

First, cut your wired ribbon into a 14" piece and a 10" piece for each angel ornament.

2

Next, fold each piece accordion style (I folded in approximately 1" increments). Staple the shorter pieces in the middle and fluff out each side to make wings. Staple the longer pieces at the top and fluff them out to make a skirt. Glue the wings to the skirt as shown with a glue gun.

3

Finally, embellish your angel ornaments by gluing a bell on top of their wings with a glue gun, threading some string through it for hanging, and gluing a gem or bead at the center of the wings.

Example





Messianic Jewish Traditions at Christmas

History + Holidays

The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah (Chanukah) falls near Christmas each year. It commemorates a miracle of light in Israel's history and is therefore also called the Festival of Light. Hanukkah holds rich symbolism for Messianic Jews, and many choose to celebrate Christmas (Chrimukkah) together. Most also observe the Advent season and view it as a period of reflection just as their ancestors waited for a coming Messiah and Redeemer.

Messianic Jews who choose to observe both Christmas and Hanukkah connect the two holidays through symbolism between Jesus and the Hanukkah lights and the name of the holiday itself.

The Hanukkah lights point to Jesus/Yeshua as the Light of the World. **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life."** (John 8:12)

The menorah and the shammos, the candle that is used to light all of the other candles, also holds great symbolism to Christ. Shammos literally means servant, and for Jewish believers Jesus is the greatest Shammos of all. **"...Who came not to be served but to serve."** (Matthew 20:28)

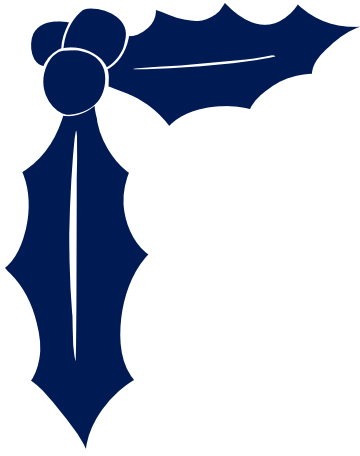
The name is translated to mean "Dedication," recalls a dark time in the history of our people and our miraculous deliverance from that darkness. We were once in darkness, and Jesus, the promised Messiah, came to deliver us from sin and darkness.

Traditions + Activities

Christmas (Chrimukkah) is typically celebrated in many of our traditional ways. The holiday is infused with the Jewish heritage, however, whether it be through the Star of David decorations on the tree, the traditional blue of Hanukkah instead of Christmas' signature red and green, or singing Christmas songs in Hebrew.

Equally common during the Christmas season is the performance of Nativity plays. The Nativity play is similar to the Purimspiel (usually a comic dramatization of the Book of Esther) and brings the Christmas story to life, sometimes leavening it with humor.

Families and children also play traditional Jewish games like dreidel, make traditional foods like latkes, and light the menorah – each activity infused with the story of Jesus.

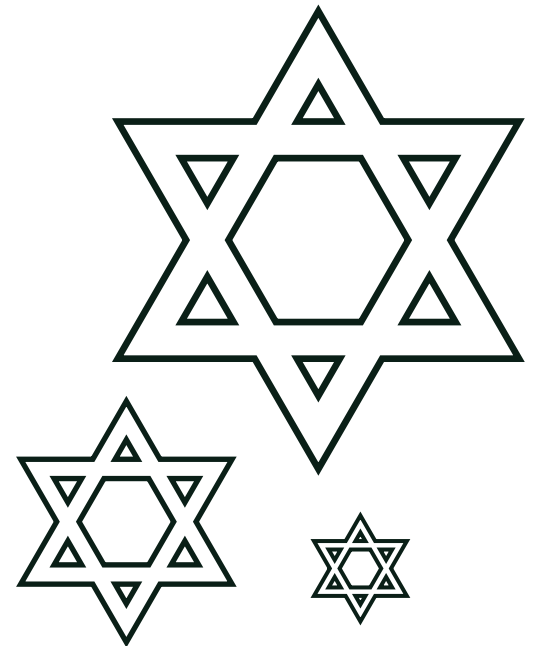


TRY THIS

Apple-Cinnamon Dessert Latkes

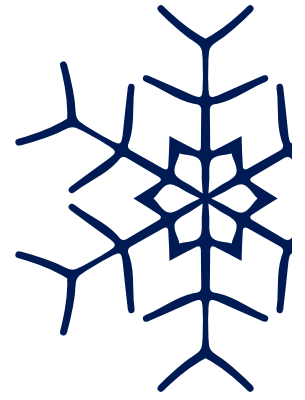
INGREDIENTS

- 5 apples, peeled, cored & grated or spiral cut
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- 1/2 cup all purpose flour
- 2 tbsp arrowroot flour (or another flour to absorb moisture from apples)
- 1 tbsp sugar
- 1 tbsp cinnamon
- vegetable or canola oil for frying
- confectioners sugar for dusting
- sour cream and apple sauce for serving on top



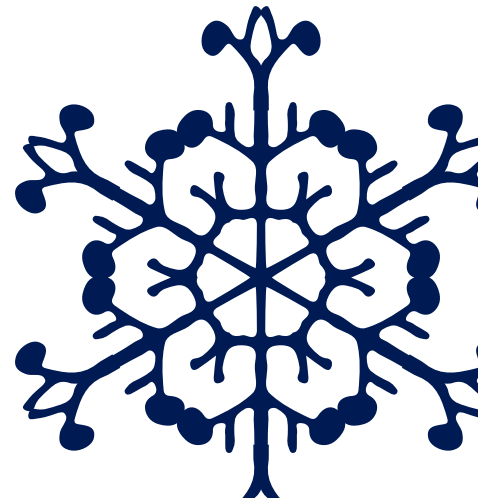
Instructions

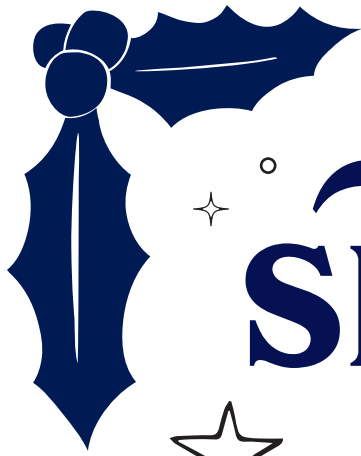
- 1) Peel and core apples. Process in food processor with a grating blade, grate by hand with box grater or make thin spirals with a spiralizer.
 - 2) In large mixing bowl, beat eggs and add all-purpose flour, arrowroot (or substitute) flour, sugar and cinnamon. Add more flour if mixture seems too wet. Stir in grated apples.
 - 3) Form 3" patties with your hands, squeezing out extra moisture.
 - 4) Heat 2-3 tbsp of oil on medium heat in sauté pan.
 - 5) Place patties down directly from your spatula carefully in hot oil and let cook for 3-4 minutes on one side until you can see a little brown peeking out from underneath. It might seem like they are not going to hold together but they will. You may need to just nudge them with your spatula a little.
 - 6) Carefully flip latkes away from your face and cook for another 3-4 minutes.
 - 7) Remove latkes from pan and place on paper towel-lined plate to remove excess oil. Keep warm in oven on lowest setting until all latkes cooked.
 - 8) Serve with sour cream and apple sauce. Sprinkle confectioners sugar on top.
-



Week **THREE**

Shepherds Told





SHEPHERDS

"If you wait a couple more minutes, you'll see a light display like you've never seen before." My Dad said as he looked out of the car window with a grin on his face. The reassurance did little to calm the fact that I was tired and disappointed that my container of McDonald fries was empty.

A loud boom shook the night sky as lights of bright stunning colors painted the darkness and reflected off the faces of those watching. Suddenly my 7-year-old self seemed small in comparison to the beauty before me.

The shepherds experienced a similar awestruck moment when an angel of the Lord interrupted their evening and appeared in the night sky. The sight must have been something to see because the shepherds were terrified. So much so that the angel's first words were "Do not be afraid..."

The unexpected visitor told the shepherds about the news of Jesus' birth. Something God could have picked anyone for, and yet God chose the shepherds. "I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."

Being shepherds, they weren't exactly celebrities or people of power, in fact they were considered the lowest of the low. And yet, God trusted them to spread the word of Christ's birth. "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."





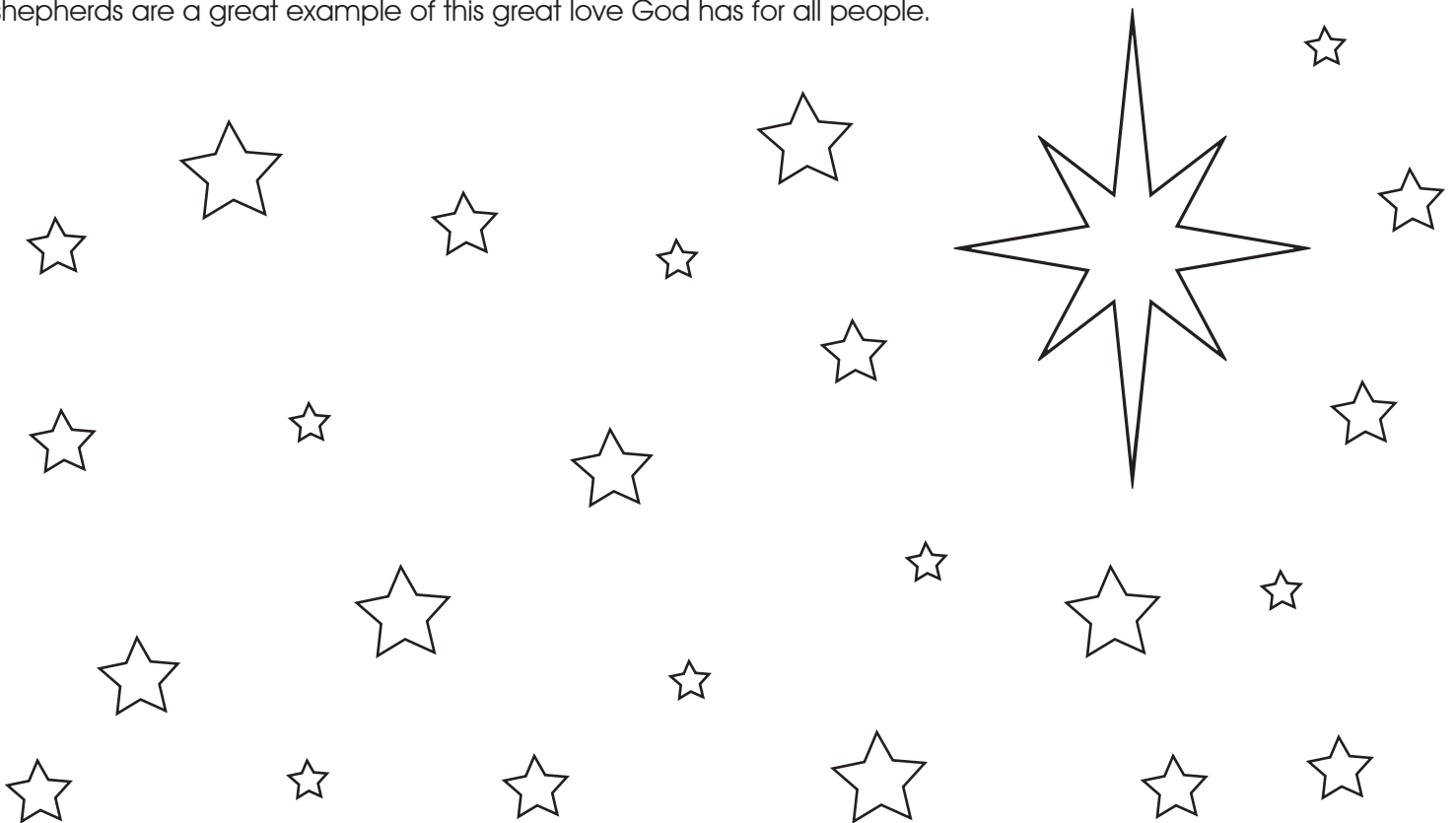
The news was delivered with an angelic chorus praising God. How special the shepherds must have felt, and amazed to know the Messiah had come. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

The shepherds found Jesus in the manger just as the angel said. Quickly they began telling others, not ashamed of the fact that they were shepherds telling the great news of the Messiah's birth. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Read Luke 2:6-20

Can you believe it?

God came for each and every one of us, no matter how we look or are seen by others. God chooses those that seem unimportant and gives them a voice and place in His kingdom. The shepherds are a great example of this great love God has for all people.





Recipe

The shepherds were the first to go and tell everyone about the birth of Jesus! Remember the old song, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*? Maybe you could listen to it while you make this sweet treat! Then you can deliver them to your neighbors and tell them you're celebrating Jesus is born!

Go Tell It On The Mountain

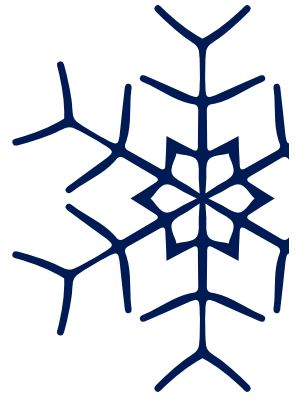
Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain,
That Jesus Christ is born.
While shepherds kept their watching
O'er silent flocks by night,
Behold, throughout the heavens
There shone a holy light.
The shepherds feared and trembled,
When lo! above the earth
Rang out the angel chorus
That hailed the Savior's birth.
Down in a lowly manger
The humble Christ was born,
And God sent us salvation
That blessed Christmas morn.

Peppermint Bark

2 pounds good white chocolate
¼ tsp. Peppermint extract
10 candy canes, crushed

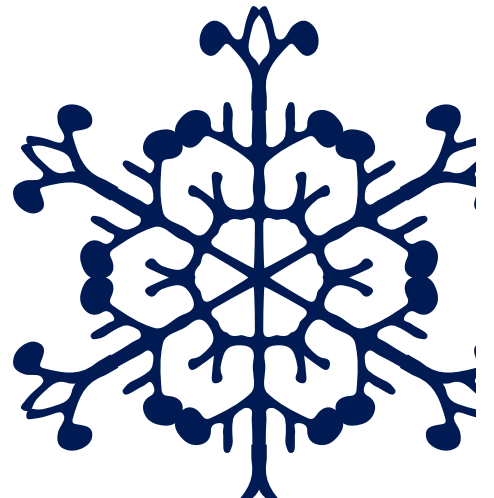
(Tip: Place candies in a plastic bag and smash with a rolling pin or hammer until evenly crushed.)

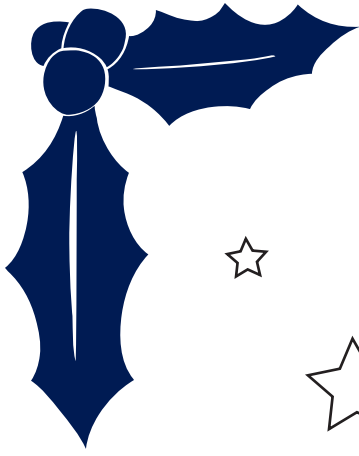
Line a baking sheet with waxed paper. Place chocolate into a microwave safe bowl. Melt chocolate in the microwave for 2-3 minutes, stirring halfway through to insure candy does not overcook. Stir crushed candy canes and peppermint extract immediately into melted chocolate and pour onto lined baking sheet. Chill for 1 hour and then break candy into pieces by hand or by slamming pan onto counter. Divide candy into cellophane bags tied with ribbon and give as gifts to your neighbors!



Week **FOUR**

Wise Men Gave





Week FOUR



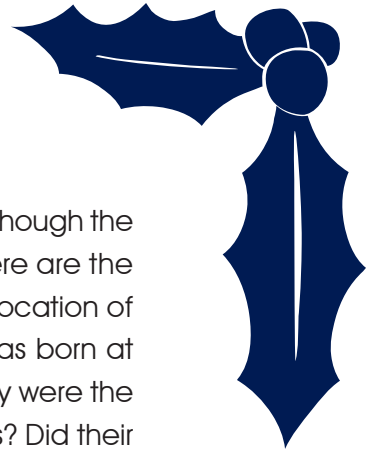
Read Matthew 2:1-12

My family used to live in Hawaii which meant we regularly met tourists from around the globe. Skilled surfers, canoeing honeymooners, and daring adventurers travel long distances to behold the wondrous gifts of the islands. Visitors flock to The Aloha State for it's gnarly waves, pristine shorelines, and colorful shaved ice, but nothing compares to it's sunsets. The first time you see one, it stops you in your tracks. Your heart echoes the Psalmist's words when he wrote

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim
the work of his hands." - Psalm 19:1

Although Hawaiian sunsets are glorious, as time passes and years slip by, you stop venturing out to your porch to watch them. Why? Because familiarity can cause even the most extraordinary gifts to feel ordinary. A Hawaiian sunset in all it's splendor can become just another sunset. Jesus' birth is much like a Hawaiian sunset. You probably know the story well. At this point, you've heard it from your parents, Sunday school teachers, and even a singing cucumber named Larry. Familiarity isn't bad, but if we're not careful, it can dull our awe and deafen our wonder. In its familiarity, the gift of Jesus, the greatest gift the world has ever known, can become just another gift.

In the nativity story, several characters travel a great distance in search of a wondrous gift. They weren't surfers, honeymooners, or adventurers - they were Magi: nobles from the East who possessed education, influence, and wealth. With only a star to guide them they left the luxury of their homes and set out on a rugged and costly search for the Savior. The mystery, significance, and wonder of the Christ Child fueled them on their quest.



When the Magi found Jesus at last, they fell on their faces and worshipped him. Although the scene is powerful, I can't help but notice that a group of people is missing. Where are the religious leaders - the chief priests and scribes who informed the Magi about the location of Jesus' birth (Matt 2:4-6)? If the prophecies were coming true and Emmanuel was born at last, then why didn't they make the six mile trek to Bethlehem to worship him? Why were the people most acquainted with scripture the least excited about the birth of Jesus? Did their familiarity with the things of God dull their wonder to the very presence of God?

Who do you identify with in this story? The Magi or the religious leaders? What is your heart's response to the birth of Jesus? Worship or indifference?

My sons will grow up as "church kids". They'll read the Christmas story from the Jesus Storybook Bible, followed by the Comic Book Bible, and finally the Teen Study Bible. I want my children to know the nativity story well, but in its familiarity, I pray that they will never lose their wonder over the gift of Jesus and his pursuit of them. My prayer for us is that our hearts will continually be stirred by Christ's life, death, and resurrection. May we forever recognize the matchless worth of Jesus, and like the Magi respond in worship.

God became man in pursuit of humanity. May we never lose our wonder!
Can you believe it?

Think

Has familiarity ever caused you to lose your wonder? Give an example.

Who were the Magi?

What motivated the magi to travel such a distance to see Jesus?

Why didn't the high priest and scribes travel to Bethlehem to worship Jesus?

Why is the Birth of Jesus extraordinary?

When the Magi beheld Jesus, they fell on their faces and worshiped him. In an act of worship, share one of the things you love most about Jesus.



Christmas Around the World

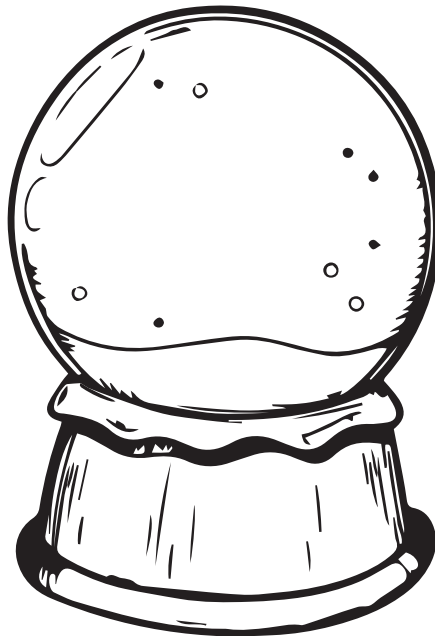
Australia – Have you ever gone boogie boarding on Christmas day? Countries like Australia, Paraguay, and Kenya are in the Southern Hemisphere, which means Christmas takes place during their summer.

Sweden – Swedish families celebrate St. Lucia Day on December 13th. St Lucia lived long ago and is known for smuggling food to the persecuted Christians in Rome. On the morning of December 13th, the eldest daughter wakes her family, wearing a crown of candles and carrying a tray of pastry.

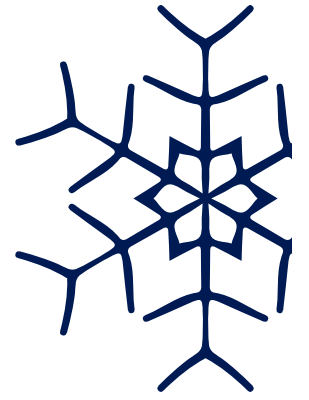
England – English children place their letters to Santa in the fireplace rather than the mailbox. The wind carries the letters up the chimney and delivers them to the North Pole.

Venezuela – In the capital city of Caracas, Venezuelan families roller skate to early morning Christmas mass (Dear Chris and Jon, can we please make this a 2RC tradition?!).

The Bahamas – Islanders know how to throw a party! People in the Bahamas celebrate a winter festival called Junkanoo on December 26th and January 1st. The days are filled with costumes, music, dancing, and parading through the streets.

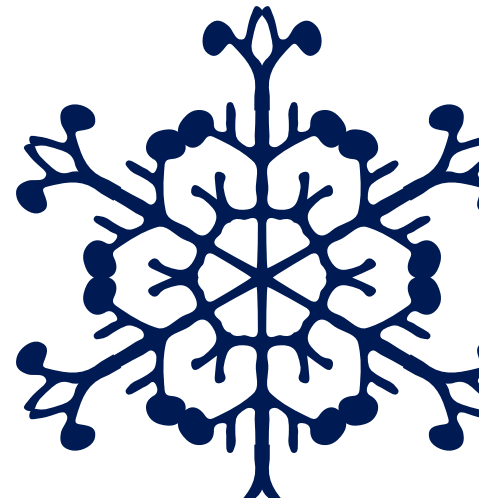


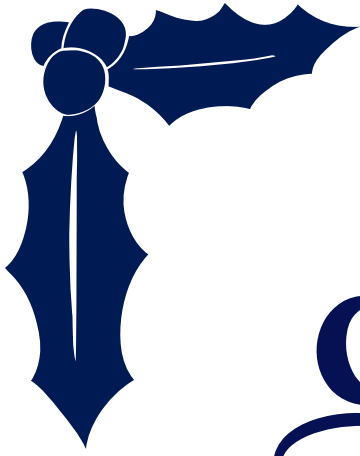
Draw your home in the snow globe.



Week **FIVE**

God Came Near





Week FIVE

GOD CAME NEAR

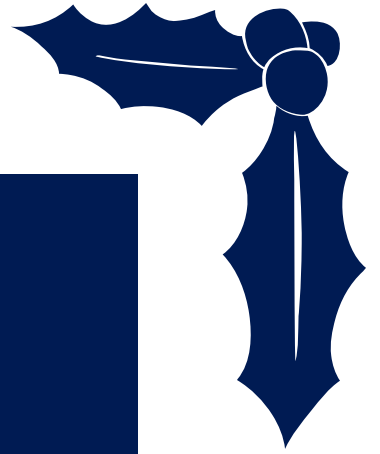
Read Matthew 1:23

Why is Christmas so special? Is it just another birthday to celebrate? Or, is there something deeper, more wondrous about it?

Let's see how the Christmas Carol 'Oh Holy Night' helps us out. Here is the first verse:

*O holy night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of our dear Saviour's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
'Til He appear'd and the soul felt its worth.
A THRILL OF HOPE THE WEARY WORLD REJOICES,
*For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.**

The song says that, before Christmas, the world was in bad shape. When God created the world and everything in it, he created them good. But, when sin entered the world, it separated us from God (Isaiah 59:2) and corrupted all of creation. Everything & everyone was now pining (suffering decline and decay) under sin's power. Just like the flower separated from its roots starts to wither and die, so did we; apart from God, in lonely despair. But that is not the end of the story! The song speaks of Jesus' birth as a thrill of hope for creation, but why?

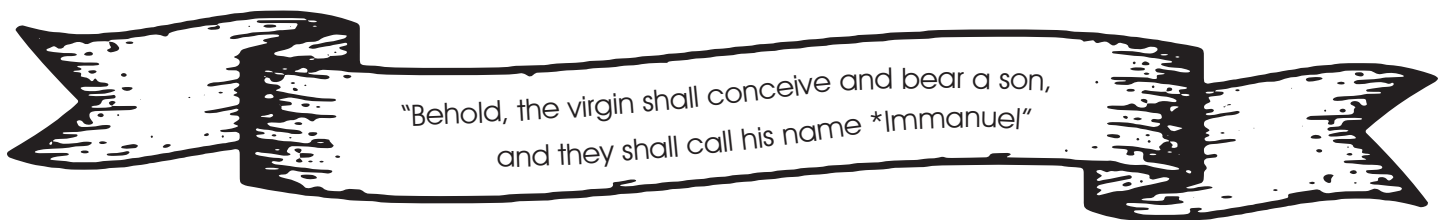


Check out the second, and often unsung, verse of the song:

*Led by the light of Faith serenely beaming,
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,
Here come the wise men from Orient land.
**THE KING OF KINGS LAY THUS IN LOWLY MANGER;
IN ALL OUR TRIALS BORN TO BE OUR FRIEND.***

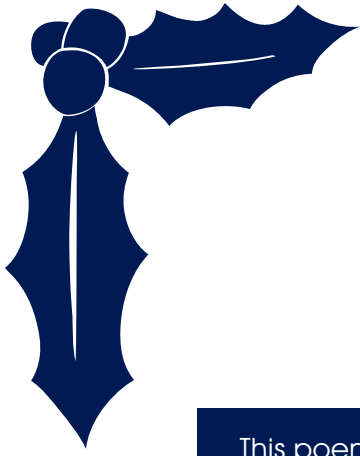
You see, the true wonder of Christmas is that the baby who lay in the manger that night was God himself, the Creator of everything (Colossians 1:16), the King of Kings (Revelation 17:14). For us, He humbly became a human being (Philippians 2:6-8) so that He could save us from our sins (Matthew 1:21).

Just as wondrous is that Jesus didn't come as a judge or as a dictator, or even only as a savior. He came as our friend! (John 15:15). Can you imagine the most powerful person in the world coming into your life to be your friend forever? The crazy thing is God did just that! The King of Kings was willing to be born in this sinful world, to share in our grief, our pain, and our trials all because He wanted to be near to us (Hebrews 2:17). Jesus would, eventually, lay down His life for us in the greatest act of friendship possible (John 15:13). This act took away our sins, demolishing the barrier that separated us from His friendship. Now, we could be close to God forever! Matthew 1:23 puts it this way:



The God of the universe came near to save you. He is with you, and He is your friend.
What a new and glorious morn!
Can you believe it?





This poem is spoken in the voice of the Father as if in a quiet moment of joy and blessing with His Son just after his birth. His heart loving the Son and looking forward to “reconciling the world to Himself” through him.

- Priscilla Landry

Child,

We can see Our breath in winter
silence, breaking gently on the dawn
where My Be still and Know meets the wonder in

Your eyes...

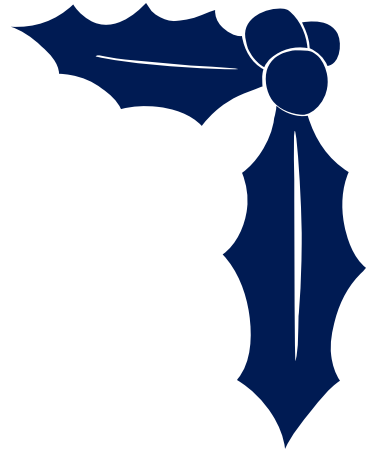
fixed on Mine, so holy,
Mine wholly fixed on You...

Your Daddy’s joy found no room either
but under thirsty desert skies where angels sang wild,
I colored outside the lines
with You, Child,

offending royalty with Our humility,
so dusty hands could hold You close and
you tight in their humanity.

Cry out! Baby, cry.
Break Our silence
till the wise in wonder follow Your star
and I tear cold religion to show them My heart,

And longing for home on a white Christmas morning
they’ll find their souls waking warm
like a child
held in Your Father’s embracing.



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TWO RIVERS
C H U R C H