ADVENT 2023 STUDY GUIDE

Let HOEAVEN and NATURE SING



Dear FPC Family and Visitors,

It's hard to believe that the Advent season is upon us! Advent is a time of anticipation, repentance, spiritual reflection, and celebration. These Bible studies follow Pastor Curtis' sermon series, *Let Heaven & Nature Sing*.

We hope these studies help you go beyond the sermon as you dig into the Scriptures and consider the impact on your relationship with God, your neighbors, and the world. This format is what we use for our small groups at FPC and can easily be adapted into a personal or family study. Consider grabbing a journal and jotting your answers down to the questions—whether that be all at one sitting or split between multiple days each week. Also, you could use this as a guide with your family or roommates over dinner—either all at one sitting or a section each night. However you use this Advent guide, we hope it lifts your gaze to our Loving Savior Jesus, whom we celebrate.

As we celebrate this season, please plan to join in some of the many Advent events and invite your friends and neighbors, too! May we all grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ during Advent.

In His love,

FPC Equipping & Sending

Jon Crantz, Jeanmarie Tade, Catie Smith, and Sara Buskirk



REJOICE IN THE PROMISE OF GOD

Read aloud the passages for this week:

LUKE 1:26-38

Head

OBSERVE THE TEXT AND THE AUTHOR'S MAIN POINTS.

- 1. Discuss the number of variables involved in the narrative found in vv. 26–27. What do these details tell us about the incarnation and how it is connected to God's promises to His people?
- 2. Where in this passage, and particularly in the words of Gabriel's announcement to Mary, do you see affirmation of Jesus' humanity? Where do you see the affirmation of His Divinity?
- 3. What emotions might Mary have experienced in this passage (vv. 29, 34, 38)? What does v. 38 show about her belief in God and what He can do?

Heart

ENVISION HOW THE TEXT—WHEN APPLIED—MIGHT TRANSFORM YOUR INNER LIFE IN TERMS OF YOUR THOUGHTS, ATTITUDES, AND BEHAVIORS.

- 1. Notice Gabriel's departing message for Mary in v. 37: "For nothing is impossible with God." Discuss whether you believe this is true. In times of doubt, ask Him for the faith that Mary shows in v. 38.
- 2. In what surprising or overwhelming circumstances have you experienced God's faithfulness and favor?
- 3. What gets in the way of you fully surrendering to God? How does that impact your use of time, talent, and resources?

Hands

APPLY THE TEXT BY MOVING FROM INWARD REFLECTION TO OUTWARD ACTION LOOKING FOR WAYS TO LIVE THE TEXT OUT IN OUR LIVES. THESE ARE SPECIFIC, CONCRETE EXAMPLES BUT THEY ARE NOT THE ONLY WAY—THEY ARE IDEA-STARTERS FOR HOW TO PUT THE WORD OF GOD INTO PRACTICE.

Reaching Upwards: Growing in Your Relationship with God

- It is easy to get caught up in the "busy-ness" of the Christmas season and neglect our own spiritual growth. Make some downtime for yourself and use it to dig into a spiritual question or subject that intersects with the Christmas story.¹
- Timothy Keller observed that much of our focus at Christmas is on what God has done for us, and not on what our response should be.² Keller believes that Luke writes so much about Mary because she is a model of what "a responsive Christian faith looks like." What does your "responsive Christian faith" look like? Where is the Holy Spirit nudging you to be available and surrender to Him like Mary did?
- Where has God been faithful in keeping His promises to you? Where do you struggle?

Reaching Outward: Investing in Your Neighbors

- Alpha: Fall Morning Alpha concludes soon. Pray that those who are attending are drawing closer to God and will continue to be involved in the post-Alpha community.
- During the holiday season, look for opportunities to build relationships with neighbors that can lead to spiritual conversations.

Reaching Beyond

- Support ministry partners in a fun way by making purchases at the 22nd Annual FPC Mission Market (December 3, 10, 17 from 8 AM–1 PM, Palm Court). To learn more or sign up as a volunteer for one of the Sundays, please email Mary-Floye Federer at mffederer@fpchouston.org.
- For holiday season volunteer opportunities at FPC local ministry partners, contact Madie Weir, Missions Coordinator at **mweir@fpchouston.org** for more information.



This story shows us a magnificent picture of parenthood-two sets of parents who come face to face with the reality that their child is not their own. God chose Elizabeth and Zechariah & Mary and Joseph to raise their sons in the wisdom and knowledge of God Himself. Though you may not have received a message from an angel about your own child, there is no doubt that God chose you to raise him or her. How can this truth—that your children are gifts from God—give you comfort and assurance as you raise them? Consider turning the angel Gabriel's message and Mary's responses into your own prayer this week: "For nothing is impossible with God" and "Behold, I am a servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your Word."

Example: Lord, nothing is impossible for you, even the _______ that my child is struggling with. Even the truth of Scripture (about me, my child, etc.) that I am struggling to believe. Do not remain silent; instead, turn Your ear to us as we declare once again...nothing is impossible for You. Take some time to list (out loud, in your mind, or with pen and paper) all the things in your kids' lives and your own that seem impossible and pray over these with the hope that NOTHING is impossible for God. Consider inviting your kids to join you in this prayer time.

Example: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you gifted me with such unique children. This Christmas, may I be reminded of Your love for them and me. And may I boldly accept Your promise of love and in turn share that with my children. May I joyously be Your servant and trust the Truth of Your Word. Amen.



REJOICE WITH THE COMMUNITY

Read aloud the passages for this week:

LUKE 1:39-45



LOOKING BACK TO LAST WEEK

Provide support, encouragement, and accountability to one another for putting the Word of God into practice. Together, find ways to live out the Scripture.

- What stuck with you from last week's study, and how were you able to put that into practice in your life? For example, did you consider whether you really believe that nothing is impossible with God?
- Did anything get in the way between you and living out the Word of God that you studied last week? If so, what? How can you intentionally plan to counteract that this week? What steps are you taking to avoid getting over busy during this holiday season? How are you keeping your eyes on Jesus?

Head

OBSERVE THE TEXT AND THE AUTHOR'S MAIN POINTS.

- 1. What motivated Mary to hurry to visit Elizabeth?
- 2. What happened to the baby that Elizabeth was carrying? Who was it?
- 3. Elizabeth gives three blessings to Mary (vv. 42 & 45). What are they?

Heart

ENVISION HOW THE TEXT—WHEN APPLIED—MIGHT TRANSFORM YOUR INNER LIFE IN TERMS OF YOUR THOUGHTS, ATTITUDES, AND BEHAVIORS.

- 1. When have you been able to sincerely be happy for someone who has received a blessing? How did that make you feel?
- 2. How important are the blessings we give to one another? What blessings do you wish someone would give to you today? What blessings can you give to someone today?
- 3. How can you make it a habit to give regular blessings to others?

Hands

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Reaching Upwards: Growing in Your Relationship with God

- How have you thanked God for the many blessings you have received?
- What is one thing God is saying to you through this passage? How will you respond?

Reaching Outward: Investing in Your Neighbors

- When have you shared the good news with others? What was their reaction? What would God have you do now?
- Pray that God would move through the Alpha community to spread confidence in His truth, goodness, and love. Fall Morning Alpha is coming to a close December 21. Pray that it is having a kingdom impact on the attendees, that they will continue to be involved in post-Alpha activities, and grow in their faith.

Reaching Beyond

- Support ministry partners in a fun way by making purchases at the 22nd Annual FPC Mission Market (December 10 & 17 from 8 AM-1 PM, Palm Court). To learn more or to sign up as a volunteer for one of the remaining Sundays, email Mary-Floye Federer at mffederer@fpchouston.org.
- For other volunteer opportunities with one of FPC's local ministry partners, visit **fpchouston.org/serve** or contact Madie Weir, Missions Coordinator at **mweir@fpchouston.org** for more information.
- · How else might God be stirring you to put this passage into practice this week?



GOSPEL-CENTERED PARENTING TAKE-AWAY

Blessings are something we see throughout Scripture—a habit and practice of our spiritual ancestors. Is blessing part of your family habits? Are there Scriptures that you can begin praying over your children to bless them? Consider choosing one of the blessings below and pray it over your children this week each night.

Blessing 1

Once your children are tucked into bed, rest your hand on their forehead or arm and pray:

"May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; And may the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

NUMBERS 6:24-26

Blessing 2:

Another blessing for the body of a child while lying in bed. As the prayer progresses, move your hands to touch each part of the body.

Jesus, bless their feet, may they bring good news.

Bless their legs, may they carry on in times of suffering.

Bless their backs, may they be strong enough to bear the burdens of others.

Bless their arms to hold the lonely, and their hands to do good work.

Bless their necks, may they turn their heads toward the poor.

Bless their ears to discern truth, their eyes to see beauty, and their mouths to speak encouragement.

Bless their minds, may they grow wise.

And finally, bless their hearts, may they grow to love You and all that You have made.

Amen.4



REJOICE FOR THE WORK OF JUSTICE

Read aloud the passages for this week:

LUKE 1:46-56



LOOKING BACK TO LAST WEEK

Provide support, encouragement, and accountability to one another for putting the Word of God into practice. Together, find ways to live out the Scripture.

- What do you remember from last week's study?
- What, if anything, got in the way of you living out the Word of God you studied last week? For example, how difficult did you find it to make a regular practice of blessing others?

Head

OBSERVE THE TEXT AND THE AUTHOR'S MAIN POINTS.

- 1. Notice the phrase, "he has" in these verses. What does Mary say God has done?
- 2. Who will and who will not receive God's mercy (vv. 50-53)?
- 3. Why would those in power fear the implications of Mary's song?
- 4. How does God's grace work contrary to the ways of the world?

Heart

ENVISION HOW THE TEXT—WHEN APPLIED—MIGHT TRANSFORM YOUR INNER LIFE IN TERMS OF YOUR THOUGHTS, ATTITUDES, AND BEHAVIORS.

- 1. In what ways have you used God's blessings in your life to magnify and bring glory to Him?
- 2. Where are you tempted to take God's blessings and glorify yourself? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you those instances and help you to repent of them.

Hands

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Reaching Upwards: Growing in Your Relationship with God

• Praise and thank God for the things He has done in your life to cause your spirit to rejoice and your mouth to proclaim His goodness.

· How does serving marginalized communities honor God and strengthen your relationship with Him?

Reaching Outward: Investing in Your Neighbors

- This week as Fall Alpha comes to a close, pray that God would use it to open hearts and minds to
 the gospel. Pray that each participant would see God more clearly and take a step closer to full
 dependence on Him.
- God is merciful to those who are helpless, hungry, and humble. How can you be an extension of God's
 mercy to the marginalized in your community? In what ways could you cultivate more availability or
 willingness to be used by God to help others?

Reaching Beyond

- Sunday, December 17 is your last opportunity to support ministry partners in a fun way by making purchases at the 22nd Annual FPC Mission Market, 8 AM-1 PM, Palm Court. To learn more, email Mary-Floye Federer at mffederer@fpchouston.org.
- To do Kingdom work with one of our local ministry partners, visit **fpchouston.org/serve**. Contact Madie Weir, Missions Coordinator at **mweir@fpchouston.org** for more information.
- · What other things is God showing you through this passage? How do you plan to respond?



GOSPEL-CENTERED PARENTING TAKE-AWAY

Even in the unknown, Mary chose to rejoice and praise God, declaring how she had seen Him work in her life and those of her forefathers. As Christmas approaches, it is easy to focus on what we want (gifts, gifts, and more gifts) and how we want the actual celebration to go (which family members we see when, the Christmas menu, etc.). As we enter into a season where there are unknowns (what will we get? whose house will we visit first, your parents or mine?), invite your children to make a habit every day of declaring what mighty things God has done. These praises could be as simple or as grandiose as you like. The point is that our focus, just like Mary's, remains on our King Jesus and the ways He comes through for us, no matter what our circumstances look like. Here are a few suggestions to get started:

- · My soul magnifies the Lord because He has given me delicious jelly toast this morning.
- My soul magnifies the Lord because I get to see my grandparents in two weeks.
- My soul magnifies the Lord because He loves me.
- My soul magnifies the Lord because He helped me be kind to my sibling even when I didn't want to show kindness.
- · My soul magnifies the Lord.



REJOICE IN THE BIRTH OF THE KING

Read aloud the passages for this week:

LUKE 2:1-20



LOOKING BACK TO LAST WEEK

Provide support, encouragement, and accountability to one another for putting the Word of God into practice. Together, find ways to live out the Scripture.

- · What did the Holy Spirit impress upon you from last week's study?
- What, if anything, got in the way of you living out the Word of God studied last week? For example, how difficult do you find it to be fully dependent on God? How willing are you to be used by God to help others?

Head

OBSERVE THE TEXT AND THE AUTHOR'S MAIN POINTS.

- 1. Discuss the implications of the "ordinariness" of Jesus' birth.
- 2. When the angel appeared to the shepherds, what was their reaction? How does this harmonize with artistic depictions of angels and nativity scenes with angels?
- 3. What were the two key elements of the angel's address to the shepherds?
- 4. Explore Mary's response in v. 19. What does this mean?⁵

Heart

ENVISION HOW THE TEXT—WHEN APPLIED—MIGHT TRANSFORM YOUR INNER LIFE IN TERMS OF YOUR THOUGHTS, ATTITUDES, AND BEHAVIORS.

- 1. The sermon series during Advent, *Let Heaven and Nature Sing*, is built around the notion of rejoicing, or joy. In v. 10 and following, shepherds take an emotional journey from fear to celebration and great joy, a theme throughout Luke's birth narrative. Pray that God will fill you with the same sense of wonder and joy as you contemplate during this season the miracle of Jesus' birth.
- 2. As you read God's Word and "ponder" its meaning, do you "treasure it up in your heart" and let it affect you deeply?

Hands

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Reaching Upwards: Growing in Your Relationship with God

- In v. 1 God uses the decree of a pagan monarch to orchestrate the fulfillment of His Word.
 Commentators point out several other details in this birth account that fulfill Old Testament
 Scripture.⁷ Discuss how this birth account fills you with a new appreciation of a God who is in charge of every detail of history.
- The first announcement of the Savior's birth is by an angel to shepherds. They were the first non-family members to see Jesus in person (v.16), and the first to spread the word about what they had seen (v.17). How is the shepherd's response to this news a model for our response to the grace of God? What is the Holy Spirit prompting you to do as a result?

Reaching Outward: Investing in Your Neighbors

- Be intentionally invitational. Invite your friends and neighbors to one (or more) of the many
 Advent events at FPC. This includes the multiple Christmas Eve worship services for all ages, family
 configurations, and worship style preferences.
- Pray that those who attend the FPC Christmas Eve Mixer will enjoy conversations with new people and feel a sense of warmth and welcome there. Pray that people who are alone for the holidays will find comfort and friendships. Pray for those who concluded Fall Alpha on December 21, that God will open their eyes to see the hope of Christ.

Reaching Beyond

- As you look to the New Year, calendar the January 25, 2024, (12–1 PM) opportunity to learn more about FPC local ministry partner, Prestige Learning Institute (PLI). This Institute offers accessible resources in the context of deep and trusting relationships so that refugee families can know true peace in Houston. Contact Madie Weir, Missions Coordinator at mweir@fpchouston.org to RSVP or for more information about this field trip.
- Volunteer opportunities with one of FPC's local ministry partners are updated regularly. Make it a 2024 habit to visit **fpchouston.org/serve** regularly and participate in opportunities to be the hands and feet of Jesus in Houston.



GOSPEL-CENTERED PARENTING TAKE-AWAY

What an ordinary way to be born! The Creator of the universe who holds all things together, born in a manger, wrapped in normal cloths? And the angels, declaring the Good News to dirty, tired, smelly shepherds, men going about their everyday, ordinary lives? Yes. This is the God we follow. One who meets us in the most ordinary moments of our days. And it is here that He says, "I AM." Do you believe God cares about your everyday, ordinary moments with your children? When is it hard to believe Jesus wants to be

LUKE 2:1-20

present? Why is that? How does this story help you reimagine where Jesus wants to be with you? This week, take time to talk to your kids about Jesus' desire to be with them in the most ordinary of tasks. Maybe begin the conversation asking them to share the most boring parts of their day, then to share the most exciting parts of their day. Next, ask if they think Jesus cares about any of these moments. See what responses you get from your kids as you talk about Jesus' desire to meet us where we are in our days. Notice what response you get from your own heart at the magnitude of this truth. Then spend time thanking God for His presence.



REJOICE IN GIVING OF OURSELVES

Read aloud the passages for this week:

MATTHEW 2:1-12



LOOKING BACK TO LAST WEEK

Provide support, encouragement, and accountability to one another for putting the Word of God into practice. Together, find ways to live out the Scripture.

- · What did the Holy Spirit impress upon you from last week's study?
- What, if anything, got in the way of you living out the Word of God studied last week? For example, how difficult was it for you to extend an invitation to neighbors and friends to attend services and Advent events this season? How will you follow up in the New Year?

Head

OBSERVE THE TEXT AND THE AUTHOR'S MAIN POINTS.

- 1. Of the persons or groups named in this narrative, how does each find out about a new King's arrival and how do they respond?
- 2. What do you know about King Herod? Why did he meet with the Magi secretly?
- 3. Why were those who knew Scripture best not the most eager to worship the new King? How is this a warning to those of us who are well-acquainted with Scripture?

Heart

ENVISION HOW THE TEXT—WHEN APPLIED—MIGHT TRANSFORM YOUR INNER LIFE IN TERMS OF YOUR THOUGHTS, ATTITUDES, AND BEHAVIORS.

- 1. As you reflect on the Magi story, who do you find yourself most like: Herod, the religious leaders, the Magi?
- 2. God's control of history and His sovereign care of the Magi is evident in this passage. How does this increase your confidence in God?
- 3. Mastering the Bible is not a guarantee of true worship. Ask the Holy Spirit to take your knowledge of Scripture and use it in your life for transformation into Christ-likeness leading to true worship of Him.

Hands

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Reaching Upwards: Growing in Your Relationship with God

- What steps are you willing to take to give up the comfort around you to follow God? To interrupt your plans like the Magi who had to return home a different way?
- God has given you all the time, talent, and resources you have. How willing are you to surrender those to Him?

Reaching Outward: Investing in Your Neighbors

- Pray for God's guidance for all the people who have attended Alpha or other outreach events this year. Ask that the seeds that have been planted will grow the life of God within each person.
- With the relationships you have nurtured over the holidays, who comes to mind as someone who would be interested in Alpha in 2024? Begin keeping a list and praying for those people.
- The Magi's plans changed, and they went home a different way. What are the needs of your nearest neighbors? What practical things can you do to help them? What plans are you willing to change, and comfort are you willing to give up to help a neighbor?

Reaching Beyond

- Make 2024 a year to get to know FPC local mission partners. Each one has a number of volunteer opportunities. Calendar the January 25, 2024, (12–1 PM) local Mission Field Trip to learn more about FPC local ministry partner, Prestige Learning Institute (PLI). The Institute offers accessible resources in the context of deep and trusting relationships so that refugee families can know true peace in Houston. Contact Madie Weir, Missions Coordinator at mweir@fpchouston.org to RSVP or for more information
- Volunteer opportunities with one of FPC's local ministry partners are updated regularly. Make it a 2024 practice to visit **fpchouston.org/serve** regularly and participate in opportunities to be the hands and feet of Jesus in Houston.
- In what other ways is God stirring you to action as a result of this Advent study? How will you respond?



GOSPEL-CENTERED PARENTING TAKE-AWAY

Jesus is born! The natural response of the wise men was to do whatever it took to meet King Jesus and worship Him. But those most acquainted with the Scriptures were not compelled to meet the King of whom they had read. This Christmas, you may have begun to implement some new spiritual practices in your home (praying blessings over your children, engaging your kids in conversations, leading your family in praise throughout the day). Yet, if all of this isn't because of our love for King Jesus, we are merely resounding gongs or clanging symbols (1 Corinthians 13:1). Take time this week, each day, to pray for a deep and abiding

MATTHEW 2:1-12

love for Jesus, the King who has come in the most ordinary moments to be with you. If physically kneeling on the ground helps to engage your heart and mind, then by all means, follow the example of the wise men and kneel. As you kneel (or sit or stand), you can begin praying Scripture from our passage... "Oh Lord, I fall down and worship you. Please use my life to be an offering of love to my children and those around me. And may my love increase more and more as I behold your glory with each passing day." (Taken from Matthew 2:11).

REFERENCES

- 1 Ask a pastor or church staff member to recommend a book for you to read during the Advent season such as Tim Keller's Hidden Christmas.
- ² Keller, Timothy. Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ. New York, Viking Press, 2016. P. 80.
- ³ *Ibid.* P. 81.
- ⁴ Earley, Justin W. Habits of the Household: Practicing the Story of God in Everyday Family Rhythms. Michigan, Avodah LLC, 2021. P. 206.
- ⁵ In his book *Hidden Christmas*, Timothy Keller calls particular attention to v. 19. To ponder something is normally a cognitive experience involving the head, but if you "treasure" something it is more an attitude of the heart. Keller says that involves "taking it inside of me and letting it affect me deeply." (Keller, Timothy. *Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ*. New York, Viking Press, 2016. P. 107.) Keller draws a parallel with Psalm 119:11, which says in part, "I have hidden your word in my heart."
- ⁶ See Mary's joy in Luke 1:46–55 (the Magnificat) and Zechariah's joy at the birth of his son (1:67–79).
- ⁷ God had promised that the Savior would be human, not an angel (Gen 3:15); a Jew, not a Gentile (Gen 12:1–3); from the Tribe of Judah (Gen 49:10); from the family of David (2 Sam 7:1–17, Isa 11:1); born of a virgin (Isa 7:14); in Bethlehem, the city of David (Mic 5:2).