

This is How We Welcome

Preparing your heart and home for the birth of Jesus



By *Environments of Grace*

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Before you begin...

Before Advent begins, read this introduction that helps you have what you need to get ready for these conversations.

This is How We Welcome is a collection of Advent thoughts and conversations, intended to help us engage a season of active waiting and preparing for the coming of Jesus. May they open our hearts and minds to new and genuine ways of celebrating Christmas and all it brings. It is possible to faithfully celebrate and welcome Jesus among the boughs of holly and brown paper packages tied up with string. May his grace cover us as we discover how.

Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas, with the length varying slightly each year. This year, the first day of Advent is Sunday, December 1, making it a 25 day season.

Sometimes we need reminders or visuals of the process we're trying to engage. Historically, those participating in Advent have embraced the lighting of candles and the inclusion of an Advent wreath. For this particular devotional, I invite you to create an Advent Altar, something to gather near as you lay down offerings of preparation. The altar will serve as a place to hang symbols of sacrifice and active waiting for Jesus. Below are two suggestions on how to create an Advent Altar. But here's the thing – the conversations are way more important than the visual! If you choose not to create the altar, the time together in conversation will be just as effective without it.

- ❖ A Tree -- Gather branches from outside or purchase curly willow from a store like Michaels and place in a vase. You will hang ornaments on the branches after each time you gather for an Advent thought.
- ❖ A Window – Staple 11 ribbons of different lengths on the top of the molding around one of your windows (If you staple them on the top ledge of the molding, the holes left behind won't be seen when you later remove the staples). Tie the ornaments to the ends of these ribbons each time you gather.
- ❖ With both the tree and window altar, you will need to collect 11 ornaments that represent each Advent thought. Below, I suggest images to choose from. You may already have several of the ornaments with your Christmas tree decorations. Or your children can simply color pictures of each image and you can cut them into ornaments and punch a hole to tie a string on each one. I pieced my collection from ornaments I already had, a few made from paper and a few purchased at Target and Hobby Lobby. Visit [Environments of Grace](#) to see our altar.

1. A cross
2. A gift box/present
3. A heart
4. A clock
5. Baby Jesus
6. Mary and/or Joseph

7. A manger
8. A star
9. A church, or picture of you/your family
10. A Nativity scene or Bible
11. An ornament with 2014 (next year) on it

How to use these words and thoughts as a way to engage Advent:

I have written 11 Advent thoughts to be read between December 1st and December 25th. You can pace yourself as you'd like, but 11 averages to three thoughts for the first three weeks of the month, and two thoughts for the last days before Christmas Day.

Week 1 is December 1st - December 7th

Week 3 is December 15th - December 21nd

Week 2 is December 8th - December 14th

Week 4 is December 22rd - December 25th

These Advent conversations can happen between two people, a family, a small group or simply between you and God. Each Advent thought has sections to be read out loud and sections intended to stimulate conversation. The sections preceded by this E are suggestions for discussion within your own heart or as a group. So when you see that symbol read it, stop and discuss, then move to the next one. I anticipate each conversation taking about 20-30 minutes, depending on how much you expand the thoughts. My hope is for these conversations to initiate active responses or other conversations for the days in between.

These Advent thoughts can be made appropriate for any age. If you have young children, you might do less conversing and simply read the thoughts. Some of the ideas and questions proposed are mature for little hearts, but it's good for children to hear these ideas from a young age. You can shape the ideas and conversations accordingly, and point out the concepts that make sense to them.

My prayer is that these words will initiate heart talks that deepen our understanding of what it means for Jesus to be born into this world, and into his people. For this is the very heart of Christmas.

Blessings during this holiday season,

Lori

Advent Thought #1

(For this discussion: a cross ornament)

God, You Are Welcome

Advent is a season of anticipating Christmas. Waiting, expecting, hoping, preparing as you discern how to welcome who is to come: **Jesus**. The one who brings Christmas, the one who *is* Christmas.

The birth of Jesus is the moment in God's redemptive story when he enters the world, and into the brokenness of man to bring about wholeness and restoration.

- ❖ Why and how is man broken? Discuss this especially if you're having this conversation with children. How does sin make us feel? How does it affect us?

There was a time after creation where everything was whole, the way God intended. Then sin entered the world, birthed through mankind's disobedience to God. This is the point in God's story where his creation became broken. Sin makes us incomplete because it separates us from God and others. Sin breaks relationships, it hurts us, it hinders life and it leads to death. And it is sin that creates the need for a savior, someone to heal and restore, someone to make us whole again. Jesus is the one God chose to enter our world to make all things right, to restore creation back to Him, to unite a people with their God for eternity.

How do we prepare our hearts and homes for such a birth as this?

We know how to prepare for the cultural celebration of Christmas.

- ❖ Stop and consider the way your particular family or household prepares for the cultural celebration of Christmas. What are your traditions? What do you do in your home and community to celebrate? Do things in the home get shifted around to make room for the tree? Do you string lights? Do you cook particular meals? What music do you play? Do you participate in activities at church or in your town?

During Christmas, we decorate our homes, we adorn trees, we shop for gifts that we wrap and give, we bake holiday goods and let carols ring. It's nearly magical, this time of year. The way all people participate. The way everything glitters. The way children grow eager. The way adults become children again. These traditions bring together communities in a special way, and they facilitate a mood for the holidays. They get us excited for what's to come. They set a tone for our hearts and home to welcome the moment.

But how do we prepare for the *real* celebration of Christmas? The moment in our history that changed everything, that made all things possible. *The moment we were given life through a baby*. You see, the cultural traditions don't ready our heart for the coming of Jesus. In fact, it's very often these well-intended and meaningful traditions *distract* us from engaging the real moment that gave reason to the holiday. They exhaust our resources and creativity, leaving little to sacrifice to the Lord. We don't have to abandon all of our traditions to welcome Christ. But it's good and faithful for us to discern how to be intentional during this time, and receive these days with grace as we engage both the fun and spirit of Christmas.

Let's begin this Advent season with prayer. For it is the language of our heart, the love language spoken between a Creator and those created in his image. Prayer invites the Spirit of God to enter into our conversations and thoughts with truth and revelation.

- ❖ Pause now to pray and welcome God into your conversations. Ask him to soften hearts and to bring a spirit of discernment to your Advent preparation. Ask God to help you know which traditions and activities will help facilitate a sense of welcome and embrace of Jesus during these days. Which ones are good for your family relationships? And which ones are okay to say no to this year?

You might have a time of silent prayer for individuals to make some personal commitment to this process. And community prayer to acknowledge that the body of Christ is called into this process of anticipation *together*.

Don't forget to hang your cross ornament on your altar to symbolize our need for a savior, the very reason for Jesus being born – the one who birthed Christmas.

Advent Thought #2

(For this discussion: Bible and an ornament of a present)

Getting Ready to Receive

'Tis the season of giving and receiving. The very heart of hospitality, the crux of welcome. And knowing how to do both with grace is a gift in and of itself.

All giving, even that which is wrapped in paper and tied with bows, ought to be from the heart. Simple gestures and graces that communicate *I know you. I care about you. I thought of you. I want to provide for you.*

And all receiving is a heart gift as well. **Welcoming into your life what others offer you – with genuine gratitude, authentic appreciation.**

This time of year, with all its *what should I get you* and *here's what I want*, exposes just how broken our welcome is. We struggle to receive Christ, and we struggle to receive one another.

When did we start expecting instead of receiving, and buying instead of giving?

- ❖ Read Genesis 2:8-9 & 2:15-25. What is God offering to Adam and Eve?
- ❖ Read Genesis 3:1-7. How do Adam and Eve respond to God? Do they receive what He is offering them?
- ❖ Read Genesis 3:8-21. What happens as a result of Adam and Eve's actions?

God offered Adam and Eve life. A place to live that was alive and pleasing to their eye. He offered them living food and a life-giving relationship with Him and each other, knowing it was not good for man to be alone. Adam and Eve rejected God's offer of life by choosing something that was against his will. And in doing so they welcomed death as their new reality.

So, I ask the question again: When did we start expecting instead of receiving, and buying instead of giving? **With the first bit of sin.** That's the moment. That's when we started wanting what we want, instead of what someone else wanted for us. *Our will* verses *God's*. *Our desires* instead of *His*. We chose sin out of the hunger of our flesh, rather than the *good and perfect gifts from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.*

The moment we welcomed death, we began to struggle to know how to be givers and receivers of life.

But then came Christmas! Jesus, born into our sin, who leads the way in the generosity of grace.

Generosity isn't about what we give. It's about how we give.

And receiving isn't about what we're getting. It's about how we welcome.

Christmas has always been about the giving and receiving of gifts. God giving his son. Jesus giving his life. A world receiving their Christ. A Savior receiving his broken people, and those people giving their life back to him.

Giving and receiving. These gifts of the heart, they are really **one**. Two inseparable gifts connected to the very heart of Christmas: Jesus, the Giver and Receiver of all things.

And to faithfully learn one, you must also learn the other. **For giving begins with receiving. And receiving begins with giving.** To be a people who graciously and generously give to others, we must understand what it means to receive from God. And to humbly receive from others, we must understand what it means to give ourselves to a Savior.

Grace, wrapped in swaddling and tied with humble love – *this* is the gift offered to us all; the gift that teaches us how to give and receive among one another.

So whatever it is we're giving, let us offer in love. And whatever it is we're receiving, let us welcome with humility.

- ❖ Recall the best gift you remember receiving. What was it, who was it from and what was it for? What was so special about it? Share your stories with each other.
- ❖ Now remember a gift you really enjoyed giving. Why was it special or fun to give this gift? Share your stories together.

If you shared these stories last year, discuss changes you may have done to your giving of gifts last year and what you liked about it (or didn't like). What will you do different this year? Or just skip to the following fruitful conversation that is new each year.

- ❖ Identify one thing you believe God wants to give you. Affirmation? A softer heart? A new relationship? Hope? You may need others to help you discern what this might be.
- ❖ Identify one thing you would like to give to God this Christmas? Some of your selfishness? Prayer? Insecurity? A special relationship? What do you need to give him? Or what do you think he would like to receive from you?
- ❖ You could also discuss together new ways of giving gifts during Christmas. How can you make it more centered on generosity and love, rather than the possession of new things?
- ❖ End with prayer, and ask God to pour his grace over the giving and receiving of Christmas.

Don't forget to hang the ornament of a gift box on your altar to remind you to be loving givers and humble receivers.

Advent Thought #3

(For this discussion: Bible and a heart ornament)

We Have Room for You

We don't want to be like the inn and *not* have room for Jesus to be born. We want to be available and open to his presence coming. Like the stable, we are the humble human dwelling where Jesus is born. Are you ready? Are you available? Do you have room for him to be born in you?

If not, then Christmas needs to begin with making room. In your heart. In your home. In your family. In your church. In your community. Welcome Jesus to your broken world by showing him you have the capacity to receive him — physically, emotionally and spiritually. The next two Advent thoughts will focus on making room for more Jesus by considering ways we can actively welcome the coming Christ by clearing the crowded spaces of our life. Just like the innkeeper, who carved out space despite his crowded inn.

We have crowded spaces everywhere! The corners of our home, the corners of our mind, the corners of our heart. We are collectors of the unimportant, the temporary, the things we "can't take with us." December is a great time to clear out the untidy, messy areas of our life. *All for making room for baby Jesus.*

- ❖ Read Exodus 16:4-21. A little background. God had just delivered the Israelites from Egypt where they had lived in slavery for many generations. Through the leadership of Moses, he led the entire community into the desert. It didn't take long for the people to begin complaining. Sure, they were free...but now they were hungry! Read the passage before answering the following questions.
- ❖ What was God's provision for hungry Israel? And what were his instructions?
- ❖ Why did God want Israel to only gather enough food for one day? When was it okay for them to store up? And why?

God wants his people to trust him. Not just for today, but for tomorrow. And not just with our hunger, but with *all* of our needs. If we are storing up treasures in our home and bank or storing up fear in our minds or storing up bitterness in our hearts, we are not trusting our Creator with the most basic needs of our life. There are times to save and make preparations, and these will be most fruitful when they are in response to God's leading. But if we spend so much time, energy and money storing up and working toward the future, we will struggle to receive Him {and all he is calling us to} *now*, right here, in these moments. Blessing and abundance comes, not in what we are saving, but in the Savior himself. So let us continually surrender our needs and hunger to the Father, let us make room for Him and his provisions. Let us clear out anything that hinders his life from being born in our heart and home.

Here are some suggestions:

Make room in your mind to hear God coming. God tells us to **be clear minded so that we can pray**, so that we can seek him (1 Peter 4:7). This month is busier than usual, and often times we feel more scatter brained and anxious because we have a long list of things to get done. Keep your lists on paper of the things you need to do and buy, so you can crumple the mental list, allowing more room for the Word to enter. Meditate on his truth, not your tasks, for it is truth that births new life.

- ❖ What things do you think about the most? Responsibilities? Work? Complaints? Insecurities? How can you clear these thoughts that distract you from hearing God?
- ❖ Suggest some mind clearing activities you can do individually or as a family. Walking, praying, quiet time, music....

Things like TV, radio, and Facebook clog our thoughts with unnecessary information, even silly frustrations or insecurities. You might try limiting these sources of thoughts this month.

Donate and give. Commit to blessing others with what has been given to you. Go through closets and toy boxes, storage and supplies – finding items that might be used and appreciated by those who may not be receiving new things this year. This will open some spaces in your home and allow room for receiving what people offer you this Christmas.

- ❖ Choose at least one area of the house to focus on, and pick a day this week to do some clearing. Have the children participate in their own rooms or play rooms. Gather clothing and toys and household items that you don't use often enough to justify clogging your space! Take these to a donation center. Talk together about which space(s) you'll focus on.

Confess. Even our heart gets cluttered with guilt or shame, fear or passion, expectations or disappointments, sorrow or pain. Speak the troubles of your heart. Surrender them to the Lord to make room for his grace to cover you. When we trust the Lord with our heart, he will help us cleanse the impurities and distractions that keep us from seeking and receiving more of Jesus. Confession is vulnerable. You're showing to God and others a weak or sinful side of you. But vulnerability leads to growth, and it's an important part of receiving the Christ.

- ❖ If it feels safe, have each person confess one thing that is dominating their heart at this time. Have you been anxious about something? Or maybe you hurt someone and you need to apologize to free up that part of your heart?

Fast. Make room for God to fill you. Spend time satisfying the hunger of your spirit, rather than the cravings of your flesh. December is a terrible month to fast, considering all the decorated cookies, parties with yummy treats, and feasts of savory goodness. So this may not be something you will engage during the holidays. But if you feel a prompting, don't ignore it. Simply take one day this month and deny the things that falsely satisfy – food, chocolate, wine, shopping, TV. And ask the Lord to fill your Spirit in ways that will endure you through these holly jolly days. When we deny our flesh, our Spirit becomes more alive to receive Christ into our life. Fasting is a wonderful time of discernment, of hearing God's voice.

Remember, these are just suggestions. You may have ideas that are more appropriate for your family. There's no right and wrong way to make room. The idea is simply to be people who are available for him to accomplish life-bearing works in and through us. When we make room for Christmas, we will discover the miracle of God's life that is ever being born in us!

- ❖ Pray now that God will show you the ways you, your family and your household can make room for him to be born this year.

Don't forget to hang your heart ornament on your altar to remind you to keep your heart available and open for God to be born.

Advent Thought #4

(For this discussion: Bible, your calendar, the clock ornament)

We Have Time for You

Today, we're going to focus on making room with our time. Time is something that passes so quickly! And often our days are filled with the practical little tasks and chores we need to accomplish in order to smoothly and responsibly go about our daily life. But this month should look a little different than other months. With the increase of family and fellowship, and the holiday activities and to-do lists, we need to be creative with our time, and consider how to make room for both the fun and spirit of Christmas.

- ❖ Read Luke 10:38-42. What do you hear when you read this story about this home and these sisters? Martha welcomed Jesus into her home, and prepared for him a wonderful meal. Are these good things to do? What did Martha struggle with in her welcome? What was missing in her hospitality?

Sometimes we take the initial step of carving out time for Jesus, but we focus on the details in making that happen. Like buying the right book, or finding just the right time to make it happen, or creating expectations that turn into a task, rather than a relationship. Sometimes when we focus too much on the details, we struggle to actually surrender to the moment. To just be with him. To listen to him. To feel and know his presence. Or sometimes we take the first step in welcoming a community or person or even our own family, but we get caught up in all the details of the moment or event and we don't actually take the time to enjoy who we're welcoming. Martha's broken welcome teaches us to see the one thing that truly matters: *being present*. With your children, with your community, with your neighbors, with Jesus.

This is often our struggle during the Christmas days. There is a way to prepare for Christmas that overwhelms, distracts and steals joy {just like it did for Martha}. And there is a way to prepare that allows you to focus, sit, enjoy, read, fellowship and celebrate.

Here are some suggestions:

Make room in your schedule. Don't fill your days so full that you don't have room for the Spirit to guide you to someone or something that isn't part of your routine.

- ❖ What normal schedule items could you remove for this month? Discuss as a family which activities are most important to you. Which calendar events are a definite yes? And which ones can you do without in order to make some room for more Jesus? You might not be able to come to conclusions right now during this conversation. But these questions are intended to spur your heart and mind toward continual discernment as you walk these Advent days.

Open your doors. Invite people into your life and home this holiday season. God makes himself known through the fellowship of his people and their encounters with the world. And don't just open your doors to your family and friends. Seek out people who might *need* to be welcomed by you. For when we welcome people such as these, we are welcoming Christ.

- ❖ Stop now and consider one person or family who needs more Jesus during this season. Someone to invite over, to serve a meal, to encourage with love and fellowship. When we offer Jesus to other people, we receive more of him in our life too. Take the time in the next few days to call or email the person or family you chose.

Say yes. When you feel compelled to share or give or invite or welcome, be obedient to those callings. Listen to the promptings of the Spirit, and say yes to the places and people God puts before you.

- ❖ In order to say yes to new traditions, and yes to people God is putting in front of you this month, you usually have to say **no** to something else. Consider what you might have to say no to **this month** in order to say yes to life-bearing activities that bless others. Could it be TV? Working out? Extra sleep? Or what about house cleaning or normal chores? Or maybe you need to say no to excessive gifts so there's less shopping and wrapping time? Or you might need to say no to a few social outings with friends in order to be available to someone in need.

Saying no to things you enjoy can be hard. Especially during an exhausting season where we turn to these things for fulfillment. But trust that the Lord will sustain you when you're participating in his redemptive life-bearing works. I challenge you to commit to saying no to at least one "old" thing this month. And yes to at least two "new" things. Over the next few days help each other consider what your no and yeses will be.

Carve out space in your evenings to gather as a family. Or to have a quiet moment alone with God. To read his word, the stories surrounding his coming, the message that his birth brings. If you are reading these words right now, then you are doing this very thing. Keep it up! The closer we get to his birth, it gets harder to actually make the time for Him.

Don't forget to hang your clock ornament on your altar to remind you to offer your time to the Lord. Close in prayer asking God for discernment as you consider your schedule this month.

Advent Thought #5

(For this discussion: An ornament of baby Jesus, a Bible, pictures or video of someone's birth you've experienced or witnessed)

The Story That Births Life

Today, we are coming together to remember. To look back on the nativity story and recall the actual birth of Jesus. Everything in Scripture prior to this moment in the story was pointing to his coming. It's a special moment in God's story, witnessed and experienced by intentional characters.

- ❖ Read Luke 2:1-21, the story of the birth of Jesus. Who was present? What were the unusual circumstances? Consider details that you may have overlooked before.
- ❖ Children are great at envisioning moments with mere words they hear. Have them participate in the remembering of this story. Let them creatively consider what this moment was like – the physical, emotional and spiritual experiences of those present. Ask questions like: *How do you think Mary felt? Do you think Joseph was afraid? Do you think the animals were noisy? Do you think Mary and Joseph felt safe?*
- ❖ Now, remember a story of a birth **you** have experienced. Maybe it's one of your children, a niece or nephew, a grandchild, or a sibling. Recall who was present. Consider the emotions and excitement and fears that were being felt. Did the birth happen as planned? Or did it happen different than expected? Share these stories...
- ❖ If you have pictures or video of a birth, it would be fun to watch it together.
- ❖ How is the birth you've witnessed or experienced different from the details we know about the birth of Jesus? Consider, where, when, how and who as you compare the stories. Contrast the hospital (or home) environment to the stable. And the presence of doctors and nurses to the reality that Mary and Joseph didn't have a lot of help.

I want to acknowledge that not every birth on this earth is a story we enjoy telling. Some are painful and full of grief. And to those who have experienced one like that, my heart swells for you. It's harder to compare a painful story with the one that took place in Jerusalem. For on this side of the story, we tell it with great confidence and celebration. And yet, those who witnessed it may have experienced it and told it differently. The mama instinct within Mary may have felt the weight of her baby's life from the moment he breathed. The daddy may have felt fear in the role of protecting this infant who was already sought after. May the mysteries of this story, the human emotions that surely overwhelmed, bring comfort to the hurting hearts of those with painful stories...or no story at all.

These tangible and present stories of birth help us step into the moment that happened long ago. The birth of a baby is something that's been happening since the beginning of creation. Yet, it remains rather miraculous still today. And the birth of Jesus is the most miraculous of all. It's a unique way for a god to enter this world. Through a human, as a human. No other god has come to his people in this way. *We must surely be loved!* And it is for this reason that it's exciting to anticipate his arrival, and to ready ourselves for his coming.

When babies are born on this earth, it's likely that the parents make preparations. In their heart, in their homes. They carve out spaces, they anticipate, they ready themselves for new life to enter. This is what we're doing with Advent. In our heart and home, we're preparing ourselves for new life.

Don't forget to hang your baby Jesus ornament on your altar to remind us of the one we're anticipating, the real reason for celebration this season.

Advent Thought #6

(For this discussion: an ornament of Mary and Joseph)

They Teach Us How to Welcome

Do you feel him moving? Stirring inside of you? Stretching, pushing against you? His life growing larger and stronger, more complete...*ready to be born*? These are the days we are expecting. Waiting for Jesus who *has come, is here, and will come again*. This ever present, ever coming God is continually conceiving life in his people, expanding them, and delivering redemption in this world.

How do we welcome the birth of Jesus? How do we receive a Savior being born into our life?

Let's look to the days and years surrounding the nativity story for discernment – the people, places and actions authored by God, the first moments when this world welcomed the baby that would live and die as the Christ.

Consider the ways Mary and Joseph prepared themselves for this God child. Mary became a womb for holy life to grow. *The kind of life that gives life to others*. Joseph entered a covenant that opposed the expectations of his time and place. Together, with Mary, he lived rebellious to culture, and faithful to God. And then Mary and Joseph traveled. Pregnant with life, they journeyed to the place God set before them.

Consider in this divine story how the plans of society don't always contradict, but often provide a way for God to bring about *his plans*. The Roman census welcomed baby Jesus by sending Mary and Joseph to the place God intended.

Consider the Innkeeper, who made room. Who received the laboring Mary, and provided a place for God to birth new life. And the stable he provided, it held the moment and received the Christ with humility.

Even the animals welcomed this baby with their witness. And the swaddling cloth, it embraced him.

Consider how creation can't help but participate in the welcoming of its Creator. The star, it shined bright and pointed others to Jesus, showing them *The Way*. And these Magi, who followed the light, welcomed the child with offerings.

This is how we welcome the birth of Jesus. These images — the swelling Mary, the faithful husband, the humble stable — they come into focus and we're able to see how this story that we've heard our whole life leads the way for us.

Let's talk about how they teach us.

Like Mary, we can become a womb. A safe place. A family and home that stretches and expands for God's life to grow. And when this life is born in us, we can give it to others.

- ❖ When a baby grows inside a womb, what happens to the woman's body?
- ❖ Like a woman's body during pregnancy, how can you expand for Jesus to grow in you? How can your family stretch to make room for new life? When God's life grows inside of you, it will change you. Are you okay with that? Are you willing to shift and move away the things we think are important in order to make room for him? Talk about how this is challenging but necessary in the life of a disciple.

- ❖ A womb is a perfect place for a baby to grow. The only function of the womb is to hold and grow babies inside their mothers. How can you be a womb for Christ's life? Is your home a safe place and nourishing environment for life to grow? Is it full of judgment or grace? Critique or encouragement? Not every environment will produce life. Consider ways your home already produces life. Then consider how you might create a safer place for life to grow?

What we learn from Joseph is life changing! Our social structures and expectations deeply shape our responses to God. But like Joseph, we can live counter to this place and time, obedient to the plans God lays before us. Even when it seems irresponsible. Even when it's embarrassing, or shameful among society. When we are faithful to God, we welcome his miracles to conceive in us.

- ❖ Remind children how Mary's miraculous conception put Joseph in a socially troubling position. It made it look like he had sinned, or that he was crazy to marry a woman who had sinned with another man. But he stayed committed and faithful to both God and his wife. According to society, he could have and should have left Mary. But he didn't.
- ❖ Have you ever done anything that looked foolish or irresponsible? But you did it out of obedience to God? Maybe it was a decision you made, a job you took or a job you left? Or maybe it was being kind to someone that wasn't kind to you? How did you feel? Did you have to defend your behavior? And did God conceive something within you as a result of your obedience? Did he birth new understanding? Fresh perspective? A new place to live? A new community? A restored relationship?

Like Joseph and Mary, we can believe and trust that God will conceive new life in us when we trust him. And like this man and wife, we can welcome Jesus with our feet. With the life God has given us, we can journey to the places he intends.

Don't forget to hang your Mary and Joseph ornament on your altar. Let it serve as a reminder of how to trust God. Our availability invites his new and perfect ways into our life. We need only to be willing. He will make us able...even when it's laborious.

Advent Thought #7

(For this discussion: a stable ornament)

An Environment of Grace

When we ask the question *How do we welcome Jesus?* it's helpful to look at those who first welcomed him. We already looked to Mary and Joseph and their example of receiving new life through availability, obedience and faith. Let's look at the other characters. *For all the divine pieces create this magnificent story.*

Like the innkeeper, we can welcome by making room. In our hearts and home, we can make room for Jesus to be born. We already discussed how this is us opening ourselves to a savior. Us, being willing to receive life. Us, finding room in our already full lives for *new life – God's life.*

And we already mentioned how the inn missed out on being the place where Jesus was born. It didn't have room for him. This was a hindrance overcome by the innkeeper, who provided another place.

- ❖ What is in the way of God birthing new life in **you**? Children might understand the question worded this way: What is in the way of God changing you to be more like him? Is it fear? Sin? Disobedience? Success? Pride? And what does it take to remove or overcome these hindrances from your life?
- ❖ What about your home as a whole? Are there things about the way life happens inside its walls that hinder growth and new life? Is it rigid and too structured? Or maybe not structured enough so things never seem to get done? Or maybe the space is filled with criticism or anger, selfishness or too much independence? It's good to be able to identify and name the things that hinder life in your home and family.

Like the stable, we can be a humble environment for God's life to birth in and through us. A simple place, genuine in character for God to make himself known. And when he does, we can embrace this life, wrapping ourselves around it like swaddling cloth, protecting and holding the valuable grace given to us.

- ❖ Help children understand humility.
- ❖ What are the characteristics of a humble person? A humble house? And how does humility create the kind of environment for life to be born?
- ❖ Which of these characteristics of humility do you already live into as a person, a family, a household? Which ones would you like to improve on?
- ❖ End now with prayer. Pray for God to create in you a humble spirit that shapes an environment of grace within you and your home, the kind of environment that receives new life. Ask God to reveal to you how and where you can make room for the Christ child....this month and all the days that follow.

Don't forget to hang your stable ornament on your altar to remind you that God desires humble places to bring forth life.

Advent Thought #8

(For this discussion: star ornament)

We Will be a Witness

It's interesting that God chose an audience of animals to witness his incarnation, his taking on flesh.

- ❖ Why the stable? Why the animals? Discuss this and see what fun answers children come up with!

I wonder if God chose animals as the witness to this royal birth because they are creatures of his artistic hand. And they are lowly in nature, contributing to the humility present at God's first breath on the earth; his first cries in a manger; his first appearance among people.

These **animals** teach us. When God bears life in our friend or children or spouse or neighbor, we can be a witness. Like the animals, we can be a created presence that welcomes new life in others. And in our witness let us testify of God's glory and goodness, so *others may hear and know*.

- ❖ Have you ever witnessed God changing another person? What was it like to watch this person grow closer to God?
- ❖ Why is witnessing God's life in others important to our own story?
- ❖ Has God ever provided for you a witness to **your** new life? Someone to watch and discover God working in you? Who was this person and how did their presence bless you?

Each creation plays a special part in this story. Oh to be like the **star**! To shine and point people to this life that will change theirs. May our life, and the light we reflect, be a guide for others to find the Christ. This is another way we become a witness in this world. For our light should shine bright for all to see the God who makes us who we are.

- ❖ How can our lives point others to Christ? How can we shine in this dark world?
- ❖ How can God's people be a light during these Christmas days? How can our homes reflect Christ during the holidays?

We are the light of the world! But we also must be followers of light. Like the **wise men**, who followed that star, we should recognize God's light in others and follow it. Light and truth will always lead us to Christ. *Just like for these magi*.

When we see God's Spirit living and active in the lives of others around us, it's good and faithful for us to use those as examples of how to shine brighter in our own life.

- ❖ Can you think of a time when you saw God's light shining in someone, and you discovered more of Christ from witnessing it? When we see God evident in the lives of others it can motivate us toward living more brightly ourselves!

Let us be thankful for the way this story of the birth of Jesus in Scripture teaches us. For the way it shows us how to receive the Christ. Their examples of love and obedience and trust give a testimony for us to live by. These are the ways to welcome the birth of Jesus. This Christmas. *And all the days that follow*.

Don't forget to hang your star ornament on your altar to remind you that your life should be a light that points people to Christ.

Advent Thought #9

(For this discussion: an ornament of a church or a picture of your family)

We Are the Place Where You're Born

The very first Christmas was Jesus being born unto the world. Every Christmas after, is Jesus being born *in us*.

As we anticipate and wait in these Advent days, we are preparing for his birth – not only in a manger, but in hearts and homes. Jesus being born into our sin. Jesus being born into our brokenness. Jesus being born into our relationships. Jesus being born into the work of our hands, the words of our mouth.

This is no ordinary birth. It's not the kind that marks first breath. It's the kind that brings forth *new life*.

What does it look like for God's life to be born in us?

It's vulnerable, humbling. And it's only done through grace. But to welcome Christmas, to prepare for the coming of Jesus, you must receive him into your life. Particularly, your sin. Sin was the reason for his coming; the broken reality that caused need for a savior. It's the part of Christmas we're less likely to talk about. *It's easier to celebrate the birth of a baby than it is to recognize the sin he came to redeem.*

But *this* is Christmas: **Welcoming God into your broken world.**

Suddenly the shopping seems pointless. The Christmas decorations, unnecessary. The man in a red suit, confusing. Gifts that we open, sort of silly. What do they have to do with Christmas other than years of cultural tradition and consumer hype?

But our family still participates. With less excitement and commitment than prior years, we will purchase gifts, decorate our tree and hang stockings to be filled by the jolly soul. We really love this holiday and embrace this season with so much joy.

But we refuse to let these activities distract us from the real moment of Christmas. We reject the enemy's successful attempt to make a smoke screen out of the Christmas consumer culture, masking the divine moment that deserves our *entire* attention.

And so we find our hearts turning. Turning from what our flesh desires, and looking to what our Lord is giving us; an opportunity to celebrate his miraculous dwelling in man. The God who formed mankind, entered this world through mankind.

And he continues to be born in us. What does this mean to you? What does it mean for Jesus to be born into **your** life?

- ❖ Consider this important thought because it's the entire foundation for Christmas. If God's life is born into your life, how does it change you? What is the transformation that comes with his life? What does it do to your sin? Your choices? The way you relate to people? How does it change the hard realities you face?

There's a way to have this conversation "generally" and there's a way to have it specific to your present reality. What does it mean for Jesus to be born into your **current** brokenness? Right now, this year, with the things you are struggling with. Have you wrestled with a particular sin? Have you experienced distance in a relationship? Did a situation not turn out how you had hoped?

Did you lose your job? Have you been weakened by illness? What does it look like to invite God into these hardships?

Or what about your successes? How can you welcome Jesus into the things you are doing well? Into your accomplishments? Into your healthy relationships? When Jesus is born into your victories, what does it look like?

Help your children discover what it is they need to be welcoming God into right now in their young life. How does God make them more whole? Do they struggle with insecurity? Do they have a temper? Do they struggle with disobedience, disrespect or selfishness? Are they fearful of the night or anxious about school? Do they struggle to connect with friends? Jesus wants to be born into these struggles to help redeem them.

Being able to recognize how the birth of Jesus enters into these broken realities is crucial for experiencing Christmas **new** every year. And when you have this conversation next December, what you're welcoming God into will be somewhat the same, and somewhat different.

God delivering himself among and *in* his created people is something worthy of praise. Sacrifice. Commitment. Celebration. And it doesn't begin with tinsel and lights.

Christmas (God being born in you) begins with **openness**. An honest dialogue between you and God. *Prayer*.

Christmas (God being born in you) begins with **confession**. Identifying the sin that hinders his conception of life in you.

Christmas (God being born in you) begins with **repentance**. Recognizing and grieving how your sin has prevented you from faithfully engaging God and your community. Then turning away from this sin to embrace more of Him, less of you.

Christmas (God being born in you) begins with **humility**. Submission to the ways of God. A laying down of your life, so his can be born in you.

Christmas (God being born in you) begins with **receiving**. A heart willing to welcome Jesus and his redemptive reality. His light that pierces your darkness. His truth that gives you hope.

Christmas (God being born in you) begins with **giving**. The giving of your resources to participate in God's redemptive work. For in this kind of giving, God's life is born in others through you.

Christmas (God being born in you) begins with **sacrifice**. Denying the things that feed your flesh during this season, in order that your spirit might awaken to the moment when eternity became its hope.

Through these divine opportunities, true celebration will emerge. God's life will conceive in you. Authentic Christmas will be born.

- ❖ Pray for God to help you discern what it is you need to welcome Jesus into this Christmas. Pray that as a family or community, you help each other work through your brokenness, free of judgment, full of grace.

Don't forget to hang the ornament of a church or home or the picture of you/your family on your altar to remind you that the church is the place where Jesus is born. Your home is the place Jesus is born. YOU are the place where Jesus is born.

Advent Thought #10

(For this discussion: an ornament of the Bible)

Living into the Story

The Christmas story is like no other.

A broken World. *A created people separated from their God through sin.*

The prophets recalling and anticipating divine acts. *God, unfolding his story.*

A covenant with Abram. *God's promise of love and grace to all he created.*

Set apart {holy} Israel, unfaithful to their calling. *People in need of a Savior.*

A miraculous conception. *A Creator like no other.*

A baby in a manger. *God born in humility.*

Mary and Joseph welcoming their son. *Mankind receiving their Messiah.*

A stable to labor and deliver. *Environments of grace are where God births life.*

King Herod seeking the life of this child. *The world rejecting God.*

A star in the east. *The Light who leads those who follow to life.*

Magi who didn't report to the King. *Faithful followers who seek Jesus, not earthly rulers.*

Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. *Human offerings of praise and welcome.*

God in the flesh. *A redemptive reality witnessed by the world.*

During these Christmas days, may we live strong in this story, and may it live strong in us.

- ❖ Today let's simply dwell on this story. Read those words, and read them again. Because it's *our* story. The one we were born into, the one continually born into us. Have a few people read the words above, so you are able to listen to it two or three times. Be silent and let the story speak to your heart.
- ❖ Don't forget to hang the ornament of the Bible or nativity on your altar to remind you of the story that should shape the way you live.

Advent Thought #11

(For this discussion: an ornament with 2014 written on it)

Christmas Demands a Response

Jesus can't be born in you and you stay the same. **He changes everything.** Your life must respond to his presence. He no longer only dwells within you – growing and expanding your life – rather, when he's *born* in you, he delivers unto you a life to give to others. This is you living differently. This is you thinking of others before you think of yourself. This is you compassionate about the people God loves. This is you concerned for injustice. This is you loving through grace-filled eyes. This is you hopeful for redemption. This is you taking love risks. You, open for the giving and receiving of life.

The life of Jesus was never for his family. Never for his earthly parents. Never for the selfish church. Never for those who would hold him and never share. For unto us a child was born. Jesus was born unto the **world**. He was born unto the poor and the wealthy. He was born unto the sinner and the righteous. He was born unto those who believe and those who don't. He was born unto the undeveloped lands and prosperous nations. And He existed for a purpose greater than human eyes could fathom. As you experience Christmas in your home this week – as you witness God being born into you and your family this year, commit to the transformation process that follows. The shaping from within, the grieving of what was, the hoping for what will be. And the challenge of your life existing for the purpose of others. Proclaim to the heavens your readiness for Christ to deliver his goodness through you!

This is how Christmas is celebrated throughout the year: People giving to others the life that was given to them.

- ❖ Consider ways you and your family can offer God's life to others in your day-to-day life - in the way you speak, act and relate - simple gestures of love and grace that reflect who God is.
- ❖ Pray that God will show you how to give his life to others. Ask for him to reveal who you could offer life to this year – someone to focus on with greater intention. Maybe a neighbor? Someone at work? Someone at school? Someone who is hurting? One of your children? Sometimes it's overwhelming to consider all the people and situations that could use your love. So simply choose **one** person! Pray for them this year, reach out to them. You may not discern who this is right away, so commit to being prayerful about it.
- ❖ Don't forget to hang the 2014 ornament to remind you that His life changes ALL our days....and Christmas gives us life to celebrate all year long.

Merry Christmas, friends! Let's open doors and hearts, let's laugh out loud, let's greet with love and respond with grace. Let's share good food and fellowship sweet, let's give thanks and commune in faith. Let's sing praises with our lips and let's worship with our life.

For **this is how we welcome**....each other...and Emmanuel, God with us.