

# INCARNATION

*An Advent Devotional*



CHURCH OF THE  
SAVIOR

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## INTRODUCTION

In his gospel, John begins with these breathtaking words: “In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone . . . the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness” (John 1:1, 4, 14, NLT). The Word of God – who is God, who brought forth creation, whose power is unimaginably vast – became a human being. Not just a human, but an infant, born into an unimportant family living in a region that had been conquered and occupied by the current world superpower. But why would God do this? Why would God become human, and more than that, a human born into suffering, without the advantages of wealth and power?

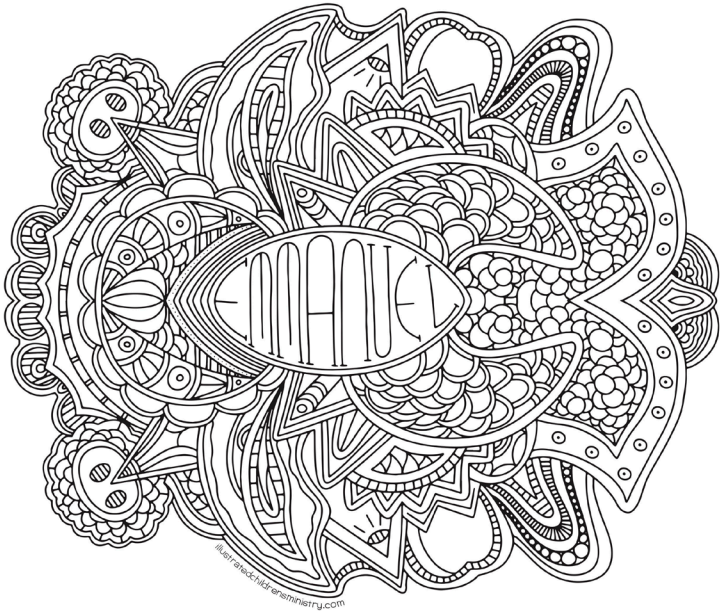
John tells us that God did this because God is full of unfailing love and faithfulness. We may not be able to fully understand why, but God’s plan to rescue creation from the ravages of sin, evil, and death required God to become a human being, for Jesus to be the new Adam, the faithful Israel, whose submission to human suffering and humiliating death is, paradoxically, the very thing that defeats death and overturns the evils of this world. It’s as if evil can only be defeated from the inside by one who can enter into it but also remain untainted by it – and the only person who can do that is the God-Human, the Word of God made incarnate in human flesh.

This is the mystery of the Incarnation: that God loves us enough to fully enter into creation, to experience human life in all its joys and sufferings, and even to die, all in order to save us from the bondage of sin, death, and evil. But the Incarnation affects more than just our future rescue: it also deeply impacts what it means to live as embodied human beings right now. God’s willingness to enter into creation points us to the value of creation; in the pithy phrase, the Incarnation tells us that *matter matters*. Jesus models for us care for both the physical and the spiritual as he heals bodies, feeds hungry bellies, forgives sins, and teaches us to pray. If God valued our created human flesh enough to enter into it, so we should value our own bodies and those of others, caring for them as God cares for them.

And so this devotional has two aspects: an invitation to prayer and meditation focused on the Incarnation, and an invitation to act on the conviction that our bodies matter. For each week of Advent, you’ll find a reading from scripture, a suggested way to pray, and two actions to take to care for ourselves and for others. My prayer for you as you go through this season of Advent is that God will draw you into the wonder of the Incarnation and send you out bearing the love of God into your life and the lives of those you encounter.

—Sarah Lindsay

# First Week of Advent



## READ

*As you read this passage, pay attention to how Jesus experiences life as a human being and how Jesus notices and responds to the needs of those around him. Talk to God about what you notice and about the needs that you have.*

### MARK 6:30-56 (NLT)

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<sup>30</sup> The apostles returned to Jesus from their ministry tour and told him all they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup> Then Jesus said, “Let’s go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile.” He said this because there were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles didn’t even have time to eat.

<sup>32</sup> So they left by boat for a quiet place, where they could be alone. <sup>33</sup> But many people recognized them and saw them leaving, and people from many towns ran ahead along the shore and got there ahead of them.

<sup>34</sup> Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

<sup>35</sup> Late in the afternoon his disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. <sup>36</sup> Send the crowds away so they can go to the nearby farms and villages and buy something to eat.”

<sup>37</sup> But Jesus said, “You feed them.”

“With what?” they asked. “We’d have to work for months to earn enough money to buy food for all these people!”

<sup>38</sup> “How much bread do you have?” he asked. “Go and find out.”

They came back and reported, “We have five loaves of bread and two fish.”

<sup>39</sup> Then Jesus told the disciples to have the people sit down in groups on the green grass. <sup>40</sup> So they sat down in groups of fifty or a hundred.

<sup>41</sup> Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he kept giving the bread to the disciples so they could distribute it to the people. He also divided the fish for everyone to share. <sup>42</sup> They all ate as much as they wanted, <sup>43</sup> and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftover bread and fish. <sup>44</sup> A total of 5,000 men and their families were fed.

<sup>45</sup> Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and head across the lake to Bethsaida, while he sent the people home. <sup>46</sup> After telling everyone good-bye, he went up into the hills by himself to pray.

<sup>47</sup> Late that night, the disciples were in their boat in the middle of the lake, and Jesus was alone on land. <sup>48</sup> He saw that they were in serious trouble, rowing hard and struggling against the wind and waves. About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. He intended to go past them, <sup>49</sup> but when they saw him walking on the water, they cried out in terror, thinking he was a ghost. <sup>50</sup> They were all terrified when they saw him.

But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage! I am here!" <sup>51</sup> Then he climbed into the boat, and the wind stopped. They were totally amazed, <sup>52</sup> for they still didn't understand the significance of the miracle of the loaves. Their hearts were too hard to take it in.

<sup>53</sup> After they had crossed the lake, they landed at Gennesaret. They brought the boat to shore <sup>54</sup> and climbed out. The people recognized Jesus at once, <sup>55</sup> and they ran throughout the whole area, carrying sick people on mats to wherever they heard he was. <sup>56</sup> Wherever he went—in villages, cities, or the countryside—they brought the sick out to the marketplaces. They begged him to let the sick touch at least the fringe of his robe, and all who touched him were healed.

## PRAY

Spend time in prayers of thanksgiving today. You might:

- Thank Jesus for becoming a human being and experiencing human life in all its fullness: as we see just in Mark's narrative above, Jesus experienced the weariness and hunger, the sensation of walking through a storm, the joys of companionship and of retreat.
- Thank Jesus for understanding what it is like to live as an embodied being.
- List needs you have had that Jesus has met, and give thanks for his provision.

# ACT

## NOURISH YOURSELF

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In the story we read in Mark, Jesus cares for the physical needs of his disciples and of the crowds, providing them with what they need. Take some time this week to give yourself nourishment. You might:

- Make yourself a meal that you particularly enjoy – or take the time to try a new recipe.
- Spend a few minutes savoring a cup of coffee or an afternoon snack without distractions, noticing the nourishment you are receiving.
- Take time for an activity that nourishes your body and soul.

## GIVE TO OTHERS

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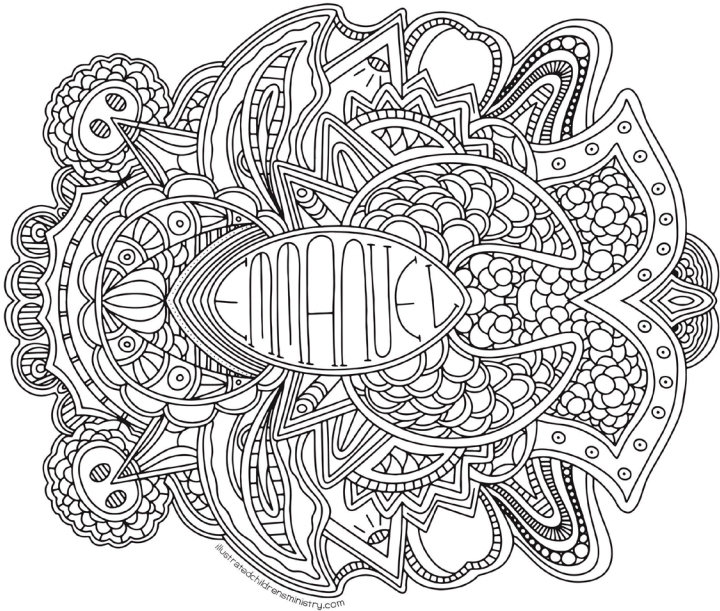
Mark, in the narrative above, tells us that Jesus and the disciples gave bread and fish to those who were hungry. This week, choose a way to give to someone. You might:

- Donate a gift to the Outreach Christmas Store.
- Find a food or winter clothing drive and make a donation.
- Write a check to a charity that meets the needs of people in your community.





# Second Week of Advent



## READ

*After you have read each passage, choose one and practice lectio divina; you'll find the steps for this ancient meditative practice below the passages.*

### PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 (NIV)

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<sup>5</sup> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

- <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to  
his own advantage;
- <sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.
- <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!
- <sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,
- <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
- <sup>11</sup> and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

<sup>10</sup> In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. <sup>11</sup> Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.

<sup>12</sup> He says,

“I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;  
in the assembly I will sing your praises.”

13 And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again he says,

“Here am I, and the children God has given me.”

<sup>14</sup> Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— <sup>15</sup> and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. <sup>16</sup> For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. <sup>17</sup> For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. <sup>18</sup> Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

## LECTIO DIVINA

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*Lectio divina* invites us to slow down, pay careful attention, and talk to God about what we notice and experience. Use these traditional steps of *lectio divina* as you read and reflect on one of the passages above:

- *Silencio*: quiet your mind and heart and enter into God's presence.
- *Lectio*: read the passage slowly, paying attention to the words or images that capture your mind. Hear what God is saying to you.
- *Meditatio*: read the passage again, listening to God's invitation to you and pondering the words in your heart.
- *Oratio*: respond to God, talking to God about the thoughts and feelings that have arisen in your reading.
- *Contemplatio*: wait in the presence of God, allowing the words of the scripture to sink into your soul.

## **PRAY**

Today, you'll be praying a prayer of petition, asking God for what you need. In the Philippians passage above, Paul encourages us to become like Christ; in Hebrews, the author reminds us that because Jesus became a human being he is able to help us in our lives. Spend time asking God for what you need, whether that is the grace to become more Christ-like or the help of the one who endured the suffering that comes with human life.

# ACT

## ENGAGE YOUR SENSES

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This week, take some time to notice what it feels like to be embodied in this world and be encouraged by knowing that Jesus also experienced life with his senses. You might:

- Take a walk, noticing what it feels like to move your body.
- Make something with your hands, engaging with the created world and paying attention to how the material you're using feels to your senses.
- Spend 5 minutes engaging your senses, wherever you are: what do you see? Hear? Smell or taste? Feel?

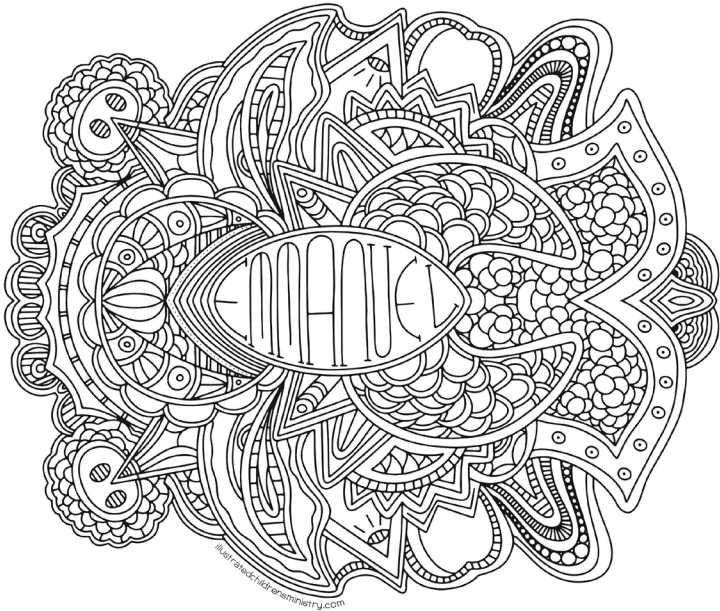
## ENCOURAGE OTHERS

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In the scripture passages for this week, both Paul and the writer of Hebrews use the Incarnation to encourage us. Set a goal to encourage three people this week (and think of encouragement broadly – it could be as simple as a compliment or a reminder that you care about someone). You might:

- Speak a kind word to a cashier or server.
- Write an encouraging letter to a friend.
- Send a text message to someone who is on your mind who could use a word of encouragement.

# Third Week of Advent





## READ

*After you have read each passage, choose one and engage in imaginative prayer; you'll find the steps for this meditative practice below the passages.*

### MARK 2:1-12

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<sup>1</sup> A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. <sup>2</sup> They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. <sup>3</sup> Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. <sup>4</sup> Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. <sup>5</sup> When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

<sup>6</sup> Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, <sup>7</sup> “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

<sup>8</sup> Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things? <sup>9</sup> Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk?’ <sup>10</sup> But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the man, <sup>11</sup> “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” <sup>12</sup> He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

## MATTHEW 25:31-40

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<sup>31</sup> “But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

<sup>34</sup> “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. <sup>36</sup> I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.’

<sup>37</sup> “Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? <sup>39</sup> When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

<sup>40</sup> “And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’

## IMAGINATIVE PRAYER

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Imaginative prayer is part of the Ignatian spiritual practice of contemplation. In this practice, begin by imagining what you would see, hear, or feel if you were there with Jesus in either of these passages. As you enter the scene through your imagination, notice how God may be speaking to you and how you might speak to God through the story.

## PRAY

Today, pray for the needs of others, interceding with God to meet those needs. Pray, too, that you might see how you can meet the needs of others.

## ACT

### REST

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At this point in December, you are likely feeling the weariness of busy holiday schedules – and even as we are looking for ways to care for others, we must also care for our own bodies. So this week, take time to rest. You might:

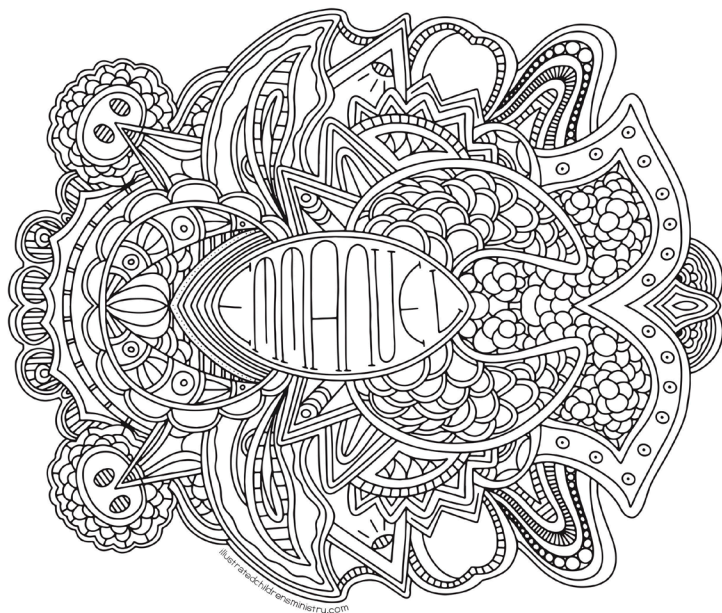
- Take a nap or go to bed earlier than normal.
- Do something that you find refreshing and restful – like reading a novel, watching a Christmas movie, or listening to carols while you drink hot cocoa.
- Say no to an activity or request (or perhaps instead to an internal expectation).

### LOOK

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The Matthew passage we read this week is both sobering and encouraging: we are serving Jesus when we serve others. Ask God to help you see who in your life needs food, drink, clothing, welcome, care – who can you serve? If the needs around you feel overwhelming or your own ability to care for others is depleted, pay attention to the small ways that you can care for the needs of those around you.

# Fourth Week of Advent



## READ

*Luke and John both begin their Gospels with the Incarnation – but with very different approaches. Read the passages below and wonder: what do both tell us about who Jesus is? About what the Incarnation means? How does the Incarnation, the arrival of Jesus, affect those around him?*

### **LUKE 1:26-45, 2:1-21**

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<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

<sup>34</sup> “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail.”

<sup>38</sup> “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

<sup>39</sup> At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country

of Judea, <sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

<sup>1</sup> In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup> (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup> And everyone went to their own town to register.

<sup>4</sup> So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup> He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup> and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

<sup>15</sup> 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.”

<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

<sup>21</sup> On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

## **JOHN 1:1-18**

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<sup>1</sup> In the beginning the Word already existed.

The Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.

<sup>2</sup> He existed in the beginning with God.

<sup>3</sup> God created everything through him,  
and nothing was created except through him.

<sup>4</sup> The Word gave life to everything that was created,  
and his life brought light to everyone.

<sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness can never extinguish it.

<sup>6</sup> God sent a man, John the Baptist, <sup>7</sup> to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. <sup>8</sup> John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. <sup>9</sup> The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

<sup>10</sup> He came into the very world he created, but the world didn’t recognize him. <sup>11</sup> He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become

children of God. <sup>13</sup> They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

<sup>14</sup> So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

<sup>15</sup> John testified about him when he shouted to the crowds, "This is the one I was talking about when I said, 'Someone is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.'"

<sup>16</sup> From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another. <sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us.



## PRAY

Today, you'll pray by practicing *visio divina* – like *lectio divina*, this form of prayer invites us to slow down, pay careful attention, and talk to God about what we notice and experience. Focusing on the image of Jesus and Mary on the cover of this devotional, use these steps to pray:

- Take a moment to quiet your heart and mind. Set aside distractions and sit comfortably; you might light a candle to remind you of the presence of God. Invite the Holy Spirit to be with you.
- Look at the piece of art, taking your time. Can you see this scene as God sees it? What do you most notice in the image? What feelings does it evoke?
- Talk to God about what the image stirs in you, what you see and experience as you contemplate this work of art.

## **ACT**

This week, the action you will take is one that cares both for you and for others! Schedule a time to connect with another person (lunch, coffee, a phone call, a walk). We know that time with others nourishes our minds and our souls, but significant research also tells us that loneliness takes a physical toll on our bodies. We care for our whole embodied selves – and others’ whole embodied selves! – when we take time to build and nourish relationships.

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