

CHRISTMAS

AT NORTHCLIFFE

An Advent Devotional: Hope

Merry Christmas!

Christmas is a time of year that has a variety of cultural, relational, family, and religious traditions. Things that we look forward to every year. Christmas pageants and performances at our churches, Christmas lights in our neighborhoods (and hunting down the best light displays), family gatherings around meals and gifts, and the joy and hecticness of all things that apply to the Christmas season. Even as we rush around to enjoy everything that comes with Christmas, we can also make time to be still and remember the coming of Jesus.

If you are like many of us, Advent may have blown past you without you ever realizing there was a moment to pause and think about what Christmas really means for you. This year, we would love to invite you to take some time, as an individual or as a family, to pause and rest in the wonder, meaning, and importance of the coming of Jesus the Messiah.

This year, for Advent, we are excited to give you four installments of guided readings that align with the themes we will partake in each week in worship. In the readings below, you will find a focal passage for your daily reading, some thoughts to consider as you think about the passage, and some response questions for you to respond to personally and discuss with your family. If you miss a day during the devotional, don't feel like you have to catch up; pick up on the next date. We hope that this will be an encouragement to you and your family rather than another hoop to jump through in a busy Christmas season.

Let's dive in!

Hope

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 6:19-20

Sunday, November 30

The First Day of Advent. Hope That is Real.

Advent is the season in the Christian calendar that was designed to give Followers of Jesus time to prepare our hearts to focus on the coming of Jesus, which we celebrate at Christmas.

As we start the Advent season, we begin with the idea of *hope*. Hope is one of those ideas that we have a good feeling of what it means, but when we go to tell someone, it can get a little fuzzy. We talk about hoping our favorite sports team does well. We hope our friends or family members get better when they are sick. We hope our kids get into good schools and live successful lives. Or maybe we hope for that perfect gift on Christmas morning.

The hope we find at Christmas is very different. The hope we find at Christmas is wrapped up in a person and the promises of God that he brings. The hope we discover at Christmas shapes our lives and our futures when we trust in Jesus and his promises. Let's look together at the hope of Christmas, starting with a conversation between Mary and the angel we know as Gabriel.

[Read Luke 1:26-33](#)

Kid Questions: What do you think would be the coolest part of this story to see? What makes that moment such a cool moment? Do you think that there was anything that made Mary scared in that moment?

Student Questions: In this passage, Mary may very well be a teenager. How would you explain this moment to your family and friends if you were in Mary's position? How would you feel

knowing that an angel came from the Lord and told you that you had favor with God?

Adult Questions: Why is this moment hopeful for followers of Jesus? How would you explain this is a hope-filled moment to someone who doesn't understand what is happening? What differences are there between the fuzzy sort of hope that we usually talk about and the hope that we find in this passage?

This passage gives us a peek at the coming of Jesus and the hope he brings. A hope that is real, legitimate, and true. Not only because God said so, but because he was coming, really coming. He was going to walk alongside us. He was going to face the challenges we all faced. He was going to create a space, a kingdom, where we would find substantial hope for the future because his kingdom will not end.

Kid Questions: How does it feel when your mom or dad makes a promise to you? Do you believe they will keep their promise? How much more do you think God will keep his promises?

Student Questions: What might make it difficult to believe a promise that was made several thousand years ago? What would make you trust God's promises today, even though the promises were made so long ago?

Adult Questions: Looking at the passage, what about the promise to Mary do you think is designed to bring you comfort and hope this Christmas Season? We are all familiar with the phrase "Jesus is the reason for the season," but what about this promise makes that especially true?

The passage and the promise to Mary are laden with hopeful moments. One of the most hopeful realities is that Jesus is coming. Jesus will be the Son of the Most High, meaning Jesus will have the same character as the Most High, and that character will produce a Kingdom with no end. An eternal Kingdom secured, maintained, and ruled by the one who saves us from our sin. The hope of Christmas is found in Jesus.

Sample Prayer:

God, we are grateful that you have given us hope. Thank you for giving us hope when we need it most. Thank you that Jesus came and gave us a person to look to for our hope. We know that Jesus offers us the promise of a hope that lasts forever, not just for a moment. As we enjoy Christmas this year and celebrate Jesus's birth, help us remember that Jesus came to give us hope and eternal life in his forever kingdom. Amen.

Monday, December 1

When Hope Seems Far Away

Not every story of hope is happy all the time. A lot of what we find in the Christmas story is hard. Mary has to explain how she got pregnant even though she isn't married, Joseph has to explain why his fiancé is pregnant before they got married, Mary and Joseph have to trek across country to get to Bethlehem to register with an invasive government and have to crash in an unfinished stable, shortly after Jesus' birth an entire generation of young boys are killed. Hope often comes when we need it the most, in the middle of challenging circumstances and desperate lives. Hope often comes when we face challenges we can't tackle on our own.

Kid Questions: What are some things that make you feel sad, angry, or scared? What do you do when you feel sad, angry, or afraid? Who do you trust when you don't know what to do?

Student Questions: What are some of the things that make you feel overwhelmed in your life? What makes you really riled up, like you're just ready to snap? What do you typically do when you have to face circumstances that overwhelm you the most?

Adult Question: Looking at our world today and the challenges in your personal life, what makes you most concerned about the future? What areas will your trust in God need to increase in the year ahead of you?

How we answer these questions will help us get into the mindset of many of the people we meet in the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. Mary was an unmarried pregnant young woman in a culture of deep faith and moral conviction and tradition. Joseph

was a guy who wanted to do the right thing but didn't know how to marry a woman who seemed unfaithful and honor God at the same time. The shepherds who were in the fields watching sheep were just trying to get by culturally and financially. Right at the point where all of these people's most significant concerns built to a breaking point, hope came. Hope in the form of a baby born in Bethlehem.

Read Isaiah 9:1-7: As you read the passage, pick out the words, phrases, and ideas that would give you hope if you were hearing this prophecy for the first time.

This passage explores the idea that God is intentionally bringing light to those in darkness. For everyone who is suffering, God has an answer. For everyone who feels oppressed, frustrated, marginalized, or dismayed, there is a relationship that will bring comfort, security, justice, and hope. Just as the people we meet in Scripture at the time of Jesus's birth, we face challenges that seem overwhelming, problems we can't quite solve, and situations that are just plain unfair. But in these situations and circumstances, God gives us a savior, a person in whom we can take refuge, an opportunity for great joy, and real hope, not anchored in a fuzzy feeling but in a real person. God brings us this hope because of his great love for us.

Sample Prayer:

God, we know that your hope doesn't always seem like it is right in front of us. Sometimes the challenges, circumstances, and situations in our lives make us forget that our hope is in you. Thank you that you are not far away, that we can always trust in you, and for the hope you bring to us. God, thank you for meeting all of our needs and providing hope in Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday, December 2

The Danger of Misplaced Hope

We live in a very peculiar predicament. We are a people with an enormous capacity for love, trust, and hope. However, we are also people who are quickly distracted by the circumstances and (sometimes) the crises of the moment. In one way, this can be called the "problem of proximity." The problem of proximity is that the thing closest to us demands more of our attention than the thing most important to us.

In our conversation on hope, this can lead us to the real danger of misplaced hope. The world offers us many different things we can place our hope in. We think of these things as closer to us because we deal with them every day. We put our hope in our jobs or financial security. We can place our hope in our physical health and well-being. We can place our hope in our intelligence, accomplishments, or certifications. We can place our hope in relationships, whether current or potential.

Kid Questions: What is one thing you hope you always have? What makes that one thing so special?

Student Questions: You are being asked to make some significant decisions about your life right now. You may be ready to make those decisions; you may not, but how you make those decisions is hugely important. As you consider your future (and your present), what are you placing your hope in? Said another way, what is the one thing you know would make your life and future perfect?

Adult Questions: We have had opportunities to place our hope in many things in our lives. What are some things you thought we

secured hopes that may not have turned out the way you thought they would? Are you placing your hope in someone or something temporal or temporary, or are you placing your hope in someone eternal?

Read Isaiah 31:1-3

In this passage, God is reminding Israel that trusting in nations, arms for war, and the strength of the military will all ultimately fail the people of Israel. Instead, the people should trust in God and seek the Lord. The leadership in Israel had been so impressed with Egypt, the army, horsemen, and chariots that they forgot that God is the one who causes nations to rise and fall, kings to gain power or be deposed, and economies to skyrocket or fail. They forgot because Egypt was up close for them. They saw their wealth, their security, their independence, their armies, but they forgot that God was the one in charge.

As we look at our lives, culture, families, children, and grandchildren, it can be really tempting to trust in the work of our hands, political systems, educational systems, and even our community of faith. However, the one we really need to trust is God; nothing has ever existed that has not first been approved by him. Even if we lose all that once made us feel safe, secure, and comfortable, our hope should find its anchor in Jesus. Jesus came to give us true hope. The hope Jesus brings is the cure for all of our most significant issues. Remember, Jesus would be a healer for those who need healing physically, spiritually, or emotionally. He called those who were on the margins of society and made them prominent in the gospels. He would ultimately die on a cross so we could have a right relationship with God. Our hope, our real hope, is in Jesus.

Sample Prayer:

God, the world is big, beautiful, exciting, and full of wonderful things, but many of the things that are amazing about the world are also the things that distract us from putting our hope completely in you. While we know that every good thing is a gift from you, help us not to be distracted by the gifts and forget the one who gives them to us. Amen.

Wednesday, December 3

Pursuing the Hope of Jesus at Christmas.

One of the most interesting side plots to the birth of Jesus has to be the wise men or magi who came from the far east in search of Jesus. These men saw a star that they followed, potentially for months, to find Jesus. The interesting thing is that we have no indication whether these men were Jews or had any reason to be interested in a savior who would come from the house of David. But they saw his star, and they followed it. These men left their homes, comfortable surroundings, maybe their families, their circles of influence, all so they could come and find Jesus.

Read Matthew 2:1-12

Kid Questions: Would it be fun to go on a six-month camping trip? How would you like to ride on a camel every day, following just a star? Do you think your mom or dad would be able to follow a star for six months?

Student Questions: Why do you think the wise men went to find Jesus? What would you be willing to give up to really find hope?

Adult Questions: How does the hope of Jesus as our savior animate your decision-making process? Does the hope of Christ change what seems to be important to you? If you were to ask your kids, grandkids, siblings, spouse, or friends what you were pursuing with your life, what would they say?

When we discover the hope that Jesus brings to us at Christmas, it becomes the primary way we view the world. The wise men not only put their lives on hold, but they also came with gifts for Jesus.

These were costly gifts that would have been reserved as a gift for royalty. Indeed, the wise men came to find the baby born to be "King of the Jews."

These men weren't well-versed in the politics of the day in Bethlehem and Jerusalem. They came to find a child on whom the light of the star would rest. The wise men went to King Herod, who was the king in Jerusalem at the time, and asked where they would find the baby who would be the king of the Jews. It was normal to think that the king of the Jews would be in the capital city of the Jewish nation. However, Jesus came in an unexpected way and an unexpected place.

Despite the challenges of time spent away from home, unexpected detours, and the manipulative, hostile, despotic king, these wise men finally found Jesus still in Bethlehem. These men diligently, carefully, and consistently followed the star because they knew something eternally unique was happening there.

Often, we get trapped in the sense of the mundane or everyday life. We forget that each day, regardless of its challenges, disappointments, detours, or even its joys and celebrations, we have the opportunity to pursue the hope that comes only in Jesus. Like the wise men we find in Scripture, we can pursue the hope in Jesus by seeking and following him each day.

Kid Question: How can you learn more about God each day?

Student Question: What would you be willing to give up to pursue the hope of Jesus each day?

Adult Question: What is preventing you from pursuing the hope of Jesus each day? Can you make time each day to pursue the hope of Jesus?

Bonus Parent/Grandparent Question: What can you do to lead your kids and/or students in their pursuit of the hope of Jesus?

Sample Prayer:

God, we are so grateful that you keep showing yourself to us so that we can pursue and follow you. Sometimes it can be hard to follow you, but we know that you are still leading us forward to be more like Jesus each day. Thank you for the hope that comes from Jesus. Amen.

Thursday, December 4

The Message of Hope Sometimes Comes from Unlikely Places

Where do you look for hope?

If you have been a follower of Jesus or have attended church for some time, this may seem like an easy answer. We all immediately want to say, "God is our hope." That is a good and true answer, but let's challenge ourselves a little. As people, one way we can know where our hope lies is by understanding where we look for hope when we need it most.

Kid Question: Who is the first person you look for when you don't know what to do? Why do you look for that person?

Student Question: As students, you all have a lot going on, and it is really easy to get overwhelmed. What is one experience where you felt overwhelmed and received help from an unexpected person? What is your expectation for receiving help from others? What is your most significant source of hope, based on how you interact with others and how you use your time?

Adults Question: We live in a fairly divided culture these days. What are some ways you think hope might help the divisions in our culture? How can we be the kind of people who share hope rather than cause division? What would you say is your most significant source of hope, based on how you interact with others and how you use your time?

Read Luke 2:8-20

In this passage, we see angels making a grand announcement to some rather unlikely individuals. Shepherds weren't great leaders in society. They were often outcasts, looked down upon, could be rough characters, and were regularly treated as "second-class" citizens. These aren't the people you would expect God to give the greatest message of hope to share.

Kid Questions: What do you think it would be like to see a real angel? Have mom and dad help you find the first thing the angels said to the shepherds. What do you think you would do if you were with the shepherds that night?

Student Question: The shepherds came face to face with a pretty terrifying display of angels, but the angels had good news for them. What would you have done with the news that the angels had given to the shepherds? Have you told someone the good news God announces to us regarding Christmas or the gospel?

Adult Question: Why do you think God chose such an unlikely group of people to announce His message of hope in that little corner of the world? As followers of Jesus, how can we play the same role the shepherds did in this passage? What are some of the reasons we don't share the hope of Jesus the way the shepherds did that night?

The shepherds went out, telling anyone who would listen. Hope had changed their entire perspective. They went from sitting on lonely hills, isolated from the bulk of society, dismissed in cultural settings, and marginalized at every turn, to being some of the first people to witness the hope of Jesus and to become heralds of what they saw. These were the kind of people for whom everything was stacked against them, but they became

messengers of hope in a society that ignored them. The last place the world expected to hear a message of hope became a powerful display of hope.

Questions for everyone: How can we be like the shepherds and tell people about the hope we have in Jesus? Who is one person you would like to know about the hope we have as followers of Jesus this Christmas season?

As a part of your closing prayer today, pray for the person(s) you thought of when discussing who you would like to know Jesus. Also, pray that God would give you the opportunity to be the person who tells them about the gospel!

Sample Prayer:

God, thank you for the reality that hope can come from unexpected messengers. Thank you for bringing us hope through someone who shared the hope of Jesus. We pray that you will make us better messengers of your hope that comes with knowing Jesus. Amen.

Friday, December 5

When Hope Seems to Take so Long

Time is always a challenge for every stage of life. When we are kids, the days never seem long enough, years take forever to pass (because as kids, years are often measured by the distance between birthdays, Christmas presents, or summer breaks). As students and teenagers, we are looking for major milestones, like getting a driver's license and becoming an "adult" at age eighteen. As adults, we spend increasingly more time in retrospect considering things we would have done differently or how we can change for the future. Sometimes the passing of time escapes us because we are waiting or focused on a specific event.

The gospel of Luke tells us two stories of individuals who waited to see Jesus, who was the redemption and the consolation of the people of God. Their hope was in the coming Messiah, who was Jesus. They were waiting until the Spirit told them they had seen the child who would give life to their hope. So, they waited. They waited. They waited.

Read Luke 2:22-38

Kid Questions: What age do you think is old? How old do you think your mom and dad are? What is it like to have to wait a really long time?

Student Questions: What is a long time? Why do you think hope needs a genuinely long time before you can feel its full weight? What is something you are currently waiting for?

Adult Questions: As adults, we can be impatient and try to take matters into our own hands. How do Simeon and Anna help us see the bigger picture of waiting and setting our hope on what God is doing? What would be the most challenging part of living the way Simeon or Anna did?

In this passage, we are given two interesting ways of marking time. For Anna, we are told that she was married for seven years, then became a widow, and had been waiting ever since; now she was eighty-four years old. For Simeon, we are told that God said he would not die until he had seen the promised Messiah. Both Simeon's and Anna's lives revolved around waiting for Jesus. Their lives were oriented toward his coming, and their practices and habits were geared toward worshiping God as they waited for the hope of God, who was Jesus.

Kid Question: What do you do while you are waiting for something?

Student Questions: Do you think waiting is an active or a passive process? Why do you think Simeon and Anna were involved in worship as they waited to meet Jesus?

Adult Questions: Often, we think of waiting as a passive process. Simeon and Anna help us see that waiting can be more than just passively checking off time. This passage shows us at least two things that we can do while we wait on God to move. What are the ones that jump out at you? What are some ways we can actively wait in hope for Jesus' return?

When we think of the return of Jesus, it is easy to see it as a distant future we may not see in our lifetimes. However, as we wait, we can be active in our waiting through worship, prayer,

fasting, encouraging others, serving within our church family, and sharing all that God is doing in our lives. When the hope of Jesus seems so far off, we should actively wait for that hope to come to fruition by seeking the Lord, engaging in public and private worship, and serving our community of faith.

Sample Prayer:

God, we know it is easy to get distracted by everything in our lives, but we also know we are waiting for your return. Like Simeon and Anna, we want to be the kind of people who are actively pursuing you while we wait in hope of your promised return. Please encourage our hearts and minds to remember to worship you faithfully while we wait for your return. Amen.

Saturday, December 6

Hope's Final End

This week, we have thought a lot about hope. We have thought about what makes us hopeful: that real hope is only found in Jesus; that we can have hope in harsh and challenging times; that the message of hope can sometimes come from unlikely messengers; that we pursue hope by pursuing Jesus; and that hope can be a long time in coming. If you are like me, you have probably intentionally thought more about hope in the last couple of days than you have at any other point in your life.

We live in a time when hope is not only necessary but also proper and good because we are still looking forward to the day when Jesus will make all things right and all of the sad things will become untrue.

Revelation 21:1-7

Kid Questions: What is the most exciting thing about the passage we just read? What part of this future story would you like to see?

Student Questions: Thinking about the distant future can be challenging, especially when you are trying to sort out your immediate future. What part of this passage would make you hopeful? What makes you hopeful when you think about that? If nothing about this passage makes you hopeful, how does it make you feel?

Adult Questions: What part of this passage sparks awe or wonder in your heart and mind? What about this passage makes you hopeful?

This passage speaks of the time when there will be no separation between God and us, and we will see God face to face. The hope we have in Jesus will be finalized, and we will no longer live in hope, because all of our hope will be satisfied, and we will live in the reality of our unveiled relationship with God. The world will have been transformed, the effects of sin will no longer hold sway, sickness and death will no longer be a reality, and God will freely give to us all that we need without any distortion of sin or worldliness.

Jesus was born at Christmas so that he would one day die on the cross for our sins. Jesus died on the cross for our sins so that he could save, or redeem, people from their sins and make them a kingdom of people who would live in a perfect eternity with him. Jesus will return to make the promise of eternal life with him the reality in which we live. Until Jesus returns to keep that promise, we wait in hope.

Sample Prayer

God, thank you for giving us hope in Jesus, who came at Christmas. Thank you that our hope is coming to an end, because Jesus is coming again to set all things right and make a new place for us to live with you. Until Jesus comes again, we ask that you fill our hearts with hope, and we will eagerly look forward to the day when you will make all things right and good. Amen.

Thank You!

Thank you for joining us in the first installment of this year's Advent devotional! We hope this has been a tool to help you slow down and ponder the wonder, awe, and hope that come with Christmas. Most importantly, we pray that this has opened some doors for you to dive deeper into your relationship with Jesus.

Sunday, December 7th, look for the next installment of this year's Advent devotional as we think and pray through the peace that only Jesus can bring and that we celebrate at Christmas. We live in a world that can sometimes feel chaotic, both personally and culturally. Despite our feelings and the culture we live in today, God is still the source of true peace when we rely on him and rest in his presence.

During Advent, we celebrate the peace that only Jesus can bring. We are told that Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and we invite you to join us as we explore how Jesus brings us peace that is enduring, transformative, and real.

Join us as we explore the peace Jesus brings by grabbing your copy of the second installment of the Advent devotional in the Worship Center this coming Sunday!

Northcliffe

northcliffe.church

10515 Northcliffe Blvd, Spring Hill, FL 34608