On the Way to Bethlehem



A Daily Journal for Advent

This journal is an accompaniment to the
Worship Design Studio Advent series,
"On the Way to Bethlehem."
https://worshipdesignstudio.com/ontheway

The themes of this series are inspired by the small group
book study of the same name by Rev. Rob Fuquay:
https://www.abingdonpress.com/product/9781791033286

This journal can be used independently
from the worship series or any church gathering.
It can be used privately or shared with a friend
or in a small group setting.

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Introduction

Advent itself is a journey to Christmas. This devotional journal guide invites you to slow down that journey and take your time along the way. Making time each day to pause, to sit and journal for a few minutes, to contemplate and notice meaning in the mile-markers of our lives is a way to deepen our experience of the journey in the midst of what sometimes feels like a pretty "ramped up" pace.

Rob Fuquay's Advent study about the places in the story "On the Way to Bethlehem" invites us to know more about the places of significance in the faith story (Rome, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Bethlehem, Persia) so that we can also apply the same kind of reflecting about our own significant stops along life's journey. This is one way our spiritual journeys take us deeper and closer to the Holy Presence of hope, peace, joy, and love born yet again among us and within us. As we approach the manger once more, we come with more wonder, appreciation, and awe at the fact that we are never alone–whatever the journey holds.

May you be inspired to savor the journey you find yourself on during this season and take time to really notice the people, places, and discoveries you encounter along the way.

Peace & Passion,
Dr. Marcia McFee, Creator & Visionary
Worship Design Studio

Advent One
Rome: A Place of Longing (Hope)



We begin our Advent journey toward Bethlehem and the manger with a decree from Rome. Needing more money to build the Roman Empire, Caesar Augustus demands a census so that all who lived under his reign could "contribute" to his expansion of power. Whether we are a fan of those in power or not, our lives and stories are often shaped by that which is out of our immediate control. This was true in the moment of the Roman decree that would turn into the story of hope for the world. On this first week of Advent, we ask ourselves whether we are placing our hope in the empires of the world, or in the liberating through-line of God's presence. What are we longing for this Advent, and how does it call us to act with hope?

We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved.
— from Romans 8: 18-25 NRSVUE

What I'm longing for, deep in my spirit:

A Prayer for the Week Ahead

Holy and Living God, we pray for the renewal of our world.
Too often, we let fear or complacency prevent us from
calling out the injustices of our time.
Give us courage for action, even in the midst of our longing.
Call us to a "census of hope."
Call us to our senses
so that we may see, hear, know,
the power of your presence with us, Emmanuel.
We pray this in the name of your Son,
Jesus, the Christ, the Hope of Our Lives. **Amen.**

Click this link or scan the QR code below
to go to a short video of the scripture
and visualization of our journey.
(https://youtu.be/V5itLioUr1U)

Monday: Our Modern Empire

Read Luke 2: 1-3. The Advent story begins with an aerial shot of Rome, where Caesar has enacted new legislation that impacts everyone living under his rule. What does it look like to hold onto hope in our present-day power structures, when it can feel like we have so little power over the situations of our lives?

Tuesday: A Brief Census

Take stock of where you are now on your own journey through life. How does your body feel? How are you spending your free time? What was the last difficult conversation you had? Spend a few moments reflecting on where you've been, where you are, and where you hope to be at the end of this season.

Wednesday: Roman Roads

Ancient Roman roads are fascinating to read about: they were carefully engineered for longevity and stability. Some of them, like the Appian Way, are still in use today! What time-honored traditions are most important to you this time of year? What practices or values do you hope to preserve for the future?

Thursday: Waiting for the World to Change

Read Romans 8: 18-25. What hopeful promise keeps you going when the "sufferings of our present time" seem insurmountable? Rather than one big supernatural event, what small but beautiful moments along the way could you name as a "revelation of God's glory?" Rather than big systemic change, can you see God's glory in the kindness of neighbors or strangers?

Friday: Courage vs. Complacency

When we find ourselves "stuck" in a time of waiting for change, we can be tempted to believe that what we do as individuals doesn't matter. What does it look like to actively work towards justice and healing for the world despite being aware of limitations and realities beyond our control?

Saturday: Looking to Jerusalem

We have looked through a wide-angle lens this week at power and the structures that shape our world. We have considered how to hold onto hope in the midst of suffering. How is hope related to or different from peace? Are "hope" and "peace" just feelings we experience if we're lucky, or does it take effort?

Advent Two
Jerusalem: A Place of Waiting (Peace)



On the way to Bethlehem, we travel to Jerusalem. The Temple is the site of the dramatic high point of Zechariah and Elizabeth's story of waiting so long for prayer to be answered. As Zechariah carries out priestly duties and Elizabeth waits outside with others, the usual and customary becomes anything but ordinary. An angelic messenger reveals a divine plan that leaves Zechariah literally speechless. This week we ask "what are we waiting for?" and we learn that what happens within us while we wait is as important as the outcome. Can we be at peace–work for peace–"live peaceably"–even while waiting?

Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
— from Romans 12: 9-18 NRSVUE

The last time I held onto my patience (even if I didn't want to) was...

A Prayer for the Week Ahead

Holy and Living God, we pray to you in the midst of unanswered questions.
Often we are anxious and impatient as we desperately
want to know outcomes and chart our life's path with certainty.
Give us patience, God.
Call us to pause in peaceful surrender,
even and especially when the pieces of our lives
seem to be falling apart rather than getting put together.
Open our hearts to know your enduring presence
in this very moment, in this waiting.
We pray this in the name of your Son,
Jesus, the Christ, the Prince of Peace. **Amen.**

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(https://youtu.be/J-SGFCH5vnU)

Monday: Ordinary People

Read Luke 1: 5-17. Scripture doesn't tell us much about Elizabeth and Zechariah before their lives were altered forever by the news that they would conceive and give birth to a son in their old age. Where have you witnessed something remarkable take shape from seemingly ordinary origins?

Tuesday: Changes

Describe a moment when you experienced radical change in your own life. Was the change expected, or were you caught by surprise? Perhaps describe one change that made you feel fearful, and one that made you feel peaceful. How did each of those moments of transformation play out in the end?

Wednesday: Milestones

The Romans used milestones to signal the distance between landmarks and destinations. What milestones have you observed in your own life this year? Are you waiting for or preparing to pass a significant one soon?

Thursday: Community Guidelines

Read Romans 12: 9-18. To what extent do Paul's instructions for living together in community align with your own moral code? In what ways does our modern society uphold or deviate from these ancient guidelines?

Friday: Acceptance vs. Anxiety

Waiting can be so hard – especially when we just want to know the answers to an uncertain outcome. Think back to the last time you had no choice but to wait – for test results, for a decision, for news, for an arrival. What did you do to deal with the uncertainty in the interim? How do you practice acceptance in the midst of anxiety or uncertainty?

Saturday: Looking to Nazareth

Not every waiting period has a happy ending. Waiting periods can be all the more painful when they finally conclude in the form of a denied dream or opportunity, loss of health or a relationship, or bad news we were praying not to hear. How does God's promise to be present with us help you hold on to joy and perhaps keep a sense of perspective even on the worst days?

Advent Three
Nazareth: A Place of Simplicity (Joy)



We move north to the tiny village of Nazareth. Although not so tiny anymore, in those days, Nazareth was a place where "everyone knows your name" since it could only support a limited amount of people from one small well of water. Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel with news that she would bear a son. Mary's joy was not limited by the improbability that such a thing could happen in Nazareth. It is this simple tight-knit community of limited resources where survival required interdependence that Jesus would be raised and grow into the teacher he became. This week we wonder: what joy can we glean from the simplest of moments, the simplest of gifts, allowing ourselves to savor this season, pregnant with possibilities?

Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the gentiles; in him the gentiles shall hope." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
— Romans 15: 12-13 NRSVUE

Here are some simple things in life that bring me deep joy:

A Prayer for the Week Ahead

Holy and Living God, we pray for the refocusing
of our lives on what really matters.
Too often, we allow the complexity of modern life to take over,
and we fail to sense your presence in our everyday lives.
Call us to a simplified joy.
Call us to simply pause in the midst of our scheduled mania
and breathe in the possibility that you are asking for our attention.
We pray this in the name of your Son,
Jesus, the Christ, the Joy of Our Lives. **Amen.**

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(https://youtu.be/HqjQYYob2zk)

Monday: Responding with Joy

Read Luke 1: 26-38. The scripture passage does not say that Mary was immediately full of gladness at the angel's news of a surprise pregnancy... and yet, we often tell this story during the "joy" week and celebrate Mary's speedy acceptance of God's calling. What other emotions do you imagine Mary might have felt during her own journey to acceptance?

Tuesday: Time to Simplify?

What practices do you turn to for simplifying routines or cutting down on clutter when your life begins to feel too busy? How can you give yourself space and time to slow down during this Advent and Christmas season?

Wednesday: Let's Walk Together a While

The Romans specified a "mile" as a unit of measurement equating to 1000 paces, calculating 5 feet as the average span for most men in military units. We use the phrase "walking a mile in someone else's shoes" as a metaphor for showing empathy for others. When is the last time you consciously channeled empathy for someone in your life? How does empathy make us better traveling companions on the shared road of life?

Thursday: Family Trees

Read Romans 15: 12-13. What kinds of legacies – positive or negative – are part of your family tree? Which have you sought to grow away from or to grow into? To what extent do you believe that our family histories influence our individual experiences of life?

Friday: Joy vs. Apathy

We often consider joy as the opposite of despair, or the antithesis to feeling "blue." What if joy is always present like an elemental force? Write about an ordinary moment from your day today and notice as many opportunities for gratitude as you can. How much joy can you squeeze from the everyday stuff of life so that you can truly be present and appreciate it?

Saturday: Looking to Bethlehem

This week, we have explored how joy is an active practice we can cultivate, not just a happy emotion we get to feel when everything is going great. Love is the same way. In what ways do you cultivate the practice of loving others?

Advent Four
Bethlehem: A Place of Humility (Love)



It is time we got to Bethlehem. A decree set by Rome, a declaration of birth for an elderly couple in Jerusalem, and a girl surprised by news of pregnancy in Nazareth, now culminates in travels to Bethlehem. It is the ancestral home of mighty King David as well as his humble and faithful descendant–Joseph, the carpenter. Bethlehem was called "little" by the prophet Micah who recognized that something of great worth would come from a humble place. As a champion of the "least of these," Jesus' ministry would shine light on the worth of humble people and places. Let us ask, how will we show this kind of humble love to others?

Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.
— Romans 13: 8-11 NRSVUE

A small seed I planted that grew into something amazing this year:

A Prayer for the Week Ahead

Holy and Living God, we pray for hearts and minds
to open wide to merciful acts in your name.
Too often, we clench our fists in fear that what we have
will not be enough for us.
Give us the humility to make more room.
Call us to a "generosity of grace."
Call us to be generous–not to a fault–but to a future
where all have a place and a home where they are deeply loved.
We pray this in the name of your Son,
Jesus, the Christ, your Love Incarnate. **Amen.**

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to go to a short video of the scripture
and visualization of our journey.
(https://youtu.be/WeWsYtWfsPY)

Monday: Signs

Read Luke 2: 1-14. "This will be a sign for you," the angels told the shepherds. Have you ever witnessed a "sign" in your life that made a significant impact for you on a spiritual level? What happened?

Tuesday: Love Notes

How have you felt loved during this Advent season? What efforts have you made to show love to others?

Wednesday: The House of Bread

'Bethlehem' translates in Hebrew and Aramaic to "the house of bread." Jesus later said, "I am the bread of life." In what ways do you see the communities or church you are a part of as a container for nurturing love and life?

Thursday: Love Your Neighbor

Read Romans 13: 8-11. It's easy to love our neighbors when we get along, but sometimes we share space (or a planet) with people whom we find difficult to get along with. How do you show love to others whose values, world views, or choices differ from your own?

Friday: Generosity vs. Greed

Have you ever struggled with the worry that making room for someone else at the table will threaten your own stability and security? How do you personally view the tension between "earning" resources that are necessary for survival and ensuring equity for all people?

Saturday: Looking to the Manger

What has been most meaningful for you during this Advent season? How did focusing on the journey to the manger rather than the final destination impact your reflections and experience of the story?

Christmas Eve
The Manger: A Place of Care



We've traveled to Bethlehem, but our journey is not over. We must look more closely. We must seek out the place inside, or at the back of a house, where the animals were sleeping. "Were" sleeping... until... the labor sounds of a mother, the encouragement of a father, and finally the cry of a baby. And in that messy, unassuming place, the promise of hope, peace, joy, and love combine in one tightly-swaddled infant. This baby needs everything in that moment, just as Jesus calls for our care of each other, of this world, in our moment. Let us ask ourselves this holy night, will we open our arms to God?

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.
— from Luke 2: 1-20 NRSVUE

Places, people, and moments of care in my life:

A Prayer for Christmas Eve

Holy and Living God, we pray for more hope, peace, joy, and love in our world.
Too often we throw up our hands in frustration, thinking there is little we can do.
Show us that much can be done in the most unlikely of places,
including a small town like Bethlehem.
Call us to offer stability in times that feel difficult.
Call us to be "stables of care"
so that we can show others
that you are present with us, Emmanuel.
We pray this in the name of your Son,
Jesus, the Christ, the Center of Our Lives. **Amen.**

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THE SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS
Persia: A Place of Return



Our journey to Bethlehem was all about the places "on the way." In this week after Christmas, we may feel like "whew... we did it, we've arrived." But our life journey continues. As we approach the beginning of a new year, we often take stock of our lives and spend time in contemplation and discernment. This continuing story of the birth of Christ also involves inquiry. Three wise "seekers" came to visit the newborn Christ, guided by a new star they had noticed. In the last week of this journey, we ask ourselves, what are we seeking? Where is our attention focused? What new stars may be calling to us? Will we just go back into routines of life or will we take this moment to understand more deeply how we can "return anew?"

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.
— from Matthew 2: 1-12 NRSVUE

My hopes and plans for the new year are...

A Prayer for the Week Ahead

Holy and Living God, we pray for all who seek.
Too often, we we are seeking things that do not satisfy.
Give us wisdom to pursue what really matters as this new year approaches.
Call us to a "turning"–following your Star of Wonder.
Call us to "re-turn" toward your purposes for us.
Remind us that our longing and our waiting are wrapped in your care.
Draw us to a more simple and humble existence in which
our treasures are defined by the hope, peace, joy, and love
we feel and also give away.
We pray this in the name of your Son,
Jesus, the Christ, the Savior of Our Lives. **Amen.**

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(https://youtu.be/HIuOziH2Otg)

Monday: King Herod's Fear

Read Matthew 2: 1-12. King Herod felt extremely threatened by the birth of Jesus. Why do you think a powerful ruler was so worried about a little baby? Think about the political situations of our own day. How have you seen gentleness and compassion win out against fear-mongering and cruelty? For what do you pray?

Tuesday: What Gift Will You Bring?

If you had been one of the Wise Ones visiting baby Jesus in Bethlehem, what gift would you bring? If not gold bars or fragrant perfume, perhaps something more practical like diapers, toys, or a gift certificate to Red Lobster for Mary and Joseph. What gift can you offer with your life here and now in honor of Jesus' message of hope, peace, joy, love, and care for a troubled world?

Wednesday: All Roads Lead to...

The Roman roads that expanded Caesar's empire paved the way for more rapid information sharing and reliable communication systems. Later in life, Jesus was able to grow his ministry in large part because the roads afforded safe and efficient travel. In what ways do you benefit from systems and structures that can also be instruments of oppression?

Thursday: Another Road

Our scripture passage for this week (Matthew 2: 1-12) says that the Magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, but to go home by another road. What are you determined not to go back to in this new year? Is there any habit or mindset that you are ready to leave behind in exchange for a fresh start?

Friday: Guiding Light

What values guide your path in life the most? What is your "North Star"? Where do you look to when you have lost your sense of direction and are unsure of how to proceed?

Saturday: The Return Journey

The Via Frangicena is an ancient pilgrimage route that leads from Canterbury, UK all the way to Rome. It was first documented by Archbishop Sigeric in 990 CE. Interestingly, he only noted the places he visited along the return journey. How does having only a partial map inform the way we approach life's journeys?


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