



PILLAR CHURCH

Advent Celebration Guide

Introduction:

Every year during the Christmas season, someone in almost every church that I have ever participated in has stood up in front of the congregation and spoken about how we have forgotten the meaning of Christmas. They ring off the inevitable list of parties, presents, activities, and “meaningless” hustle and bustle in hopes of stirring their fellow Christians to not forget the “reason for the season.” Perhaps they are right; maybe as a society we have shrouded the simple beauty of Christmas with a busy season of activities, but in the midst of all the critiques I do not often hear of ways that people can establish rhythms and traditions that would help Christians to carve out the space in their lives to remember. A few years ago, my family began setting aside our Sunday evenings during the Advent season to remember Christ by lighting the candles of an Advent wreath in our home and having a short time of scripture reading and prayer that would prepare us to celebrate Christ’s birth. It has quickly become a treasured tradition for us and it is my desire to share it with you.

What is Advent?

Advent is the period of time covering the four Sundays leading up to the celebration of Christmas. It is a time set aside to prepare, celebrate, and remember all that took place for the entry of God’s son into the world. The word itself means “coming” and represents a great deal of what Christmas is about. First, we are looking back and celebrating the “coming” of Christ at the first Christmas. By doing so we are reminded of all that God did to prepare the time when the Savior Jesus Christ would enter into history. Second, we are looking at our current season and preparing our hearts to celebrate the day of remembrance that is “coming” upon us yet again. It is an opportunity to be sure that the celebration of the holiday does not come and go without us taking time to enter into the meaning of it. Third, we are looking at our own story and remembering the beautiful story of Christ “coming” into our own life. It is a time not only to celebrate God’s entrance into history, but His entrance by the Spirit of Christ into our own lives. For some it is a time to remember this and for others it may be a time to receive the news of His “coming” in their own hearts by faith. Lastly, we look forward to the future “coming” of our great King, Jesus

Christ. There is a day yet coming where he will rule every heart and every being in the universe will worship him and celebrate Him for the great God and Savior that He is. For us, Christmas is a glimpse of that day and we should celebrate it with all the joy that we will feel and know when His love has conquered all.

If you do a little research, you will quickly realize that people at different times and from different backgrounds within the church have celebrated the Sundays of Advent differently. When we began celebrating Advent on Sunday evenings we did not concern ourselves with discovering all the traditional underpinnings and origins of the practices, but were more concerned about creating a simple practice that could bring some structure to our time of remembrance and celebration as a family. We decided to use a traditional Advent wreath common in many churches and to light the candles each week in preparation for Christmas.

What is an Advent wreath?

An advent wreath is a traditional ornament of celebration made up of evergreen branches and five candles which has been used for centuries to celebrate Christmas. Wreaths have served as symbols of victory and remembrance in many cultures throughout history so it is a fitting ornament for the celebration of Christmas. Christmas is, after all, a celebration of God's victory over sin and a remembrance of how He has displayed his love through Jesus Christ. Evergreens are also fitting symbols that His victory is eternal and not subject to the effects of the different seasons of life. The five candles each have a different meaning, which we will discuss later. Generally speaking the candles point our minds and hearts to the beauty of light and remind us that Jesus is the great light of the world that has come to illuminate the darkness of our hearts and lead us into the presence of God.

To make your own wreath you can simply gather the necessary supplies and decorate it in preparation for the season. As you can see the wreath consists of four candles situated around a fifth central candle. The candles on the outside are made up of three purple candles (which represent a sense of waiting and expectation sometimes accompanied with fasting) and a fourth pink candle (which represents joy). In the center is a white candle (which represents Christ). During the holidays you should be able to find the candles, the candleholders, and a wreath in a local craft store, on Amazon, or at a Christian bookstore.

Getting Started

In the pages that follow you will find a guide that accompanies each of the four weeks of Advent as well as a fifth guide for use on Christmas Eve or Christmas day. Traditionally, the remembrances associated with each candle have been observed on the four Sundays immediately preceding Christmas day. If Sunday is not the best day of the week for you or your family to set aside a meaningful time, then consider finding a consistent evening that works and set that time aside. Before the first week arrives determine what time you will have the lighting of the candles each week. In my experience I have found it best to keep everything very simple. We set aside some time in the evening after dinner. Just before the time comes prepare some small snacks (baked goods, candy, or something festive) and drinks (tea, hot chocolate, eggnog). Once you are ready, gather around a table and turn all the lights off. Begin with lighting the candle and follow the guide for the week. When you are finished, enjoy the rest of your candle-lit dessert and sit and talk about your favorite Christmas memories or what you look forward to most about the holidays. It's that simple. Slow down and enjoy the moment.

In my experience, getting started is often the most important step. As you go, you will learn to adjust the tradition to your own situation and accomplish the true goal at the heart of it all. The real goal is to take time to slow down this year and turn your mind and heart toward Christ during this season of celebration. At different times you may have sensed what I have sometimes felt during the Christmas season: a real sense of longing for the reality that lies behind all of our activity. It is a longing for something deeper that we feel has been forgotten lying dormant beneath the thin veneer of tinsel and lights. Going through a ritual, lighting some candles, reading a passage of scripture, and praying will not fill this longing but maybe in the midst of that time you will be pointed to the reality of the One who can. One of the great joys of Christmas is the reminder that "God is with us," maybe this year you can use this little guide to help you prepare a place for Him to fill your Christmas with the joy of Christ's coming.

Sharing the Joy

As we live out our lives as Christians in the context of our communities and neighborhoods there are seasons of the year where the doors to spiritual conversations are wide open for us to demonstrate and share the love of Christ and the hope of the gospel. Christmas represents a unique season of the year when our friends and neighbors think about aspects of their lives that are often buried under the activity of the rest of the year. Consider for a second all the stories and heartwarming messages about family, love and meaning that parade across our screens, papers, and magazine during this time of year. They point to a

hunger in the soul that the gods of our culture have no ability to satisfy. Unfortunately – if the statistics are true – many non-Christians have few if any friendships with a committed Christian and will not initially consider attending your church. Through the simple practice of hospitality and the evening advent celebration in your home you have the opportunity to shine some light on the Christmas celebration happening in your neighborhood and take some practical steps toward encouraging people in your life to reflect on the meaning of Christmas.

Here are a few two simple ways that you could use the Advent celebrations in this booklet to take the first steps toward sharing the gospel with people in your neighborhood or connect with new families in your church.

1. Explain to your friends/neighbors that you are hosting a kickoff to the Christmas season by lighting a traditional Advent wreath in your home and want to invite them to join you as you light the wreath for the first time and share dessert with neighbors and friends. Set a convenient time, and when people have arrived gather them briefly to light the candle and use the reading in the booklet to share the meaning of the candle. From there just enjoy dessert and get to know one another. You may be surprised how this simple observance of a holiday tradition will prompt further conversation. At the end tell them that you will be lighting the candle in your home each Sunday evening leading up to Christmas and make it clear that they are welcome to join you. It is important to keep it simple, have a good dessert (which they could contribute to), and make sure people do not feel like they have to stay a long time.
2. Use the opportunity on the first night to plan to do some other simple activities on the other Advent evenings that everyone would enjoy. You could host a small Christmas cookie exchange in conjunction with another week, have a Christmas Carole sing-along, or plan to do a children's craft related to the theme of one of the candles. As people come up with a good idea, involve them in making it happen and you will be surprised with the level of participation. The possibilities are endless, but each time set aside a few minutes to turn down the lights, light the wreath and explain the next candle.
3. Invite a family from your church to join you for the evening. We have found that the advent celebrations are a great way to connect with another family in the church. We often look for a family who we have not had a good chance to connect with and use the four evenings to include some different people as we reach out to others in our neighborhood. Doing this accomplishes two important things that; it helps neighbors

who attend to have more than one person from our church to connect with and it models a heart for your neighborhood to other Christians in your church in a way that is reproducible.

When it comes to sharing Christ with others many people feel paralyzed by what they perceive to be the pressure of having to make a large, immediate impact in someone else's life. Because of the pressure we often settle for doing nothing at all. Here is an opportunity to pray for God to use you in your neighborhood, take some simple first steps to building bridges into the lives of other people, and wait and see where it will lead. Some of you may make an effort to invite some people into your home to join you and find yourself alone as a family in the living room the first evening. When this happens there is no reason to feel like the evening is bust. Help your family see that the time together is worthwhile no matter who joins you. Light the candles, share the scripture, and pray for God to graciously shine his light into the hearts of your friends and neighbors this Christmas. Then, enjoy your dessert with your family with thankful hearts as you remember the birth of the Lord and the beauty of Christmas.

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The First Week of Advent – The Prophets’ Candle

As you light the first candle explain, “The first candle we light is the prophet’s candle and it reminds us that the coming of Jesus was foretold hundreds of years before His birth.”

Consider: In many places in the Old Testament we read about a promised Savior, a promised King, or of God’s promise to send an Anointed leader to conquer sin. For hundreds of years His people looked forward to the day when this deliverer would come. For Adam and Eve, he was the conqueror who would crush Satan’s head. For Abraham, he was the descendant that would bless every nation. For King David, he was the descendant who would establish His throne for eternity. For Ezekiel, he was the True Shepherd that would care for His people. And for Isaiah, he was the virgin born child that would be Emmanuel “God with us.” Through all of these promises foretold, we get a picture that God had a plan to reconcile us to Him even though we had sinned and gone astray. One specific prophecy often read at Christmas time comes from Micah 5:2 and told the people where to expect the Christ to be born:

Read the Bible: *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old from ancient days. (Micah 5:2 ESV)*

Because of this, when the wise men came, the learned men knew where to tell them to look for the one who would be born King of the Jews.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” (Matthew 2:1-6 ESV)

Remember: History is God’s story. He has purposes and plans that He has set forth to accomplish in His time and according to His will. Just as He promised to send a Savior and fulfilled His promise according to His time, He also has plans and purposes He is

accomplishing in our time. Sometimes we may feel like life rolls on with little meaning in the day to day details, but the birth of Jesus reminds us that there is more to the story. God is not distant and unconcerned. He is present and active showing people that through Jesus they can have hope of life with Him. Take some time to reflect this week on how God may be at work in your life drawing near to you in the midst of the circumstances of your life.

Pray: God, we recognize that life belongs to you. When life does not make sense to us, help us remember that you are a God that is purposeful and keeps His promises. Help us to remember that you have promised to give Salvation to all those who hope in Christ and lead us to have grateful hearts that recognize you have provided for our greatest need. In Jesus name, Amen.

Experience the Joy: Each week you can take the opportunity to make your Christmas meaningful by doing something practical to share and experience the joy of Christmas. During this week, the project is called Not Forgotten

The holiday season can be one of the most difficult times of year for those who have recently lost loved ones. While everyone else is hurrying along through their holiday schedule they are often stung with grief to experience the holidays with the hole that has been left by their family member or friend.

During this week plan an act of kindness for them. Send them a card. Pay them a visit. Call them and pray for them. Invite them out for dinner. No matter what you do let them know that their loved one and their sorrow are Not Forgotten during your season of celebration. As you do God may just use you to remind them that He is always present and active, caring for their needs and giving them hope.

Daily Reading: Use the daily readings each week to guide you through scriptures related to Advent and the weekly theme.

Week 1 (Monday-Friday)

Monday - Isaiah 9:1-7

Tuesday - Isaiah 11:1-5

Wednesday - Isaiah 12:1-6

Thursday - Jeremiah 33:14-26

Friday - 1 Peter 1:3-12

The Second Week of Advent – The Bethlehem Candle

As you light the first candle explain, "The first candle we light is the Prophet's Candle and it reminds us that the coming of Jesus was foretold hundreds of years before His birth."

As you light the second candle explain, "The second candle we light is the Bethlehem candle and it reminds us that Jesus was born in a humble fashion as a servant."

Consider: Last week when we read about Bethlehem we learned that it was not a great city where we would expect someone as majestic as the Son of God to be born. It was a very small, humble place and it serves to remind us of the way in which Jesus entered the world. From his birth to His death Jesus turned our expectations upside-down concerning greatness and power by teaching us that the greatest was not the one who had the most servants, but the one who served the most. So, it is fitting that he was born in Bethlehem in the way that he was demonstrating that he came with humility to serve. Luke 2:1-7 tells the story of how Jesus ended up being born in Bethlehem.

Read the Bible: *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7 ESV)*

Remember: We often expect the greatest gifts to come in the largest packages and to be wrapped up in the most beautiful packaging. We are tempted to put our hope in the things that catch our eye and advertise all the ways that they can make us happy or fulfilled. In Christ we find something surprising, the most valuable gift sent to us without a lot of acclaim and without the appearances of wealth, power, and promise that we often expect in our world. It is interesting that when Jesus was born there was "no place for him" because the same has been true in the hearts of people ever since. We must take great care ourselves to not be distracted by the empty promises that are abundant in our world. If we

are not careful we will find that we have filled our lives with other things and shut out the great gift of God's grace sent to us in Jesus.

Pray: We invite you into our home and heart this Christmas to dwell with us. Thank you for the gracious gift of Jesus Christ who is our true treasure and true joy. Give us the ability to see what is truly valuable this Christmas and to remember to serve and love our neighbors and friends as Christ came to serve and love us.

Experience the Joy: Each week you can take the opportunity to make your Christmas meaningful by doing something practical to share and experience the joy of Christmas. During this week, the project is called Make Room

Many of the most surprising gifts in life are unwrapped by the simple act of hospitality. Our neighborhoods are often collections of disconnected people who happen to dwell on the same street but have never spent any time together. As Christians we serve a God who took on flesh in the person of Christ and dwelt among us. Because he involved himself in our lives we have been transformed. In the same way our neighborhoods should be a place where we seek to not just live and be left alone, but demonstrate the love and friendship of God to the people who dwell the closest to us.

Choose one of your neighbors and plan to have a meal or dessert with them some time in the next two weeks. Try to choose one of the neighbors close by that you have never spent time with or haven't seen in a while. Make a plan and go for it, you never know what gift God may have in store when you Make Room.

Daily Reading: Use the daily readings each week to guide you through scriptures related to Advent and the weekly theme.

Week 2: (Monday – Friday)

Monday - Micah 5:1-5a

Tuesday - Hebrews 1:1-14

Wednesday - John 1:1-14

Thursday - Colossians 1:15-20

Friday - Philippians 2:1-11

The Third Week of Advent – The Shepherds’ Candle

As you light the first candle explain, “The first candle we light is The Prophet’s Candle and it reminds us that the coming of Jesus was foretold hundreds of years before His birth.”

As you light the second candle explain, “The second candle we light is The Bethlehem Candle and it reminds us that Jesus was born in a humble fashion as a servant.”

As you light the third candle explain, “The third candle we light is The Shepherds’ Candle and it reminds us that the birth of Jesus was first announced to the humble shepherds.”

Consider: We should not miss the significance of class of people who received the first announcement of Jesus birth. It was to a lowly group of shepherds out watching their flocks. By this period shepherding had fallen from being the noble vocation of the Old Testament King David to the work of the poorest in the society. The shepherds were the unlikely recipients of the most important announcement in history; in the humble position of the shepherd we are reminded of the truth found throughout scripture that God comes to the humble and contrite. He comes to those without any special merit for His love, so that all may see the free riches of His grace, and the pattern found in the announcement of the birth of Jesus is no exception.

Read the Bible: *And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,*

“Glory to God in the highest,

and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:8-20 ESV)

Remember: There is nothing about us that makes us deserving to hear the same “good news” that the shepherds heard that night. Because through our sin we had turned our backs on God, we are un-deserving to hear the “good news” that a Savior was born who can reconcile us to God. We will not win God’s attention with our good works and righteousness. We will not win God’s attention with our success or social standing. We will not win God’s attention by making some big sacrifice to a cause we think He would like. The Bible says there is only one offering that matters to God and it is the cry of a heart that has been humbled by the sorrow of it’s own sin seeking the grace that can be found in Jesus our Savior. A Savior has been born and He is Christ the Lord whom we celebrate.

Pray: God we desire to be humble of heart and the type of people that would celebrate the birth of Jesus. We are grateful that you do not show your love to us based on our righteousness or merits as people, but instead freely as a gift of grace. We thank you that you have announced such a wondrous gift to undeserving people like us. Help us to treasure Christ for all that He is to us as Savior and Lord.

Experience the Joy: Each week you can take the opportunity to make your Christmas meaningful by doing something practical to share and experience the joy of Christmas. During this week, the project is called Share The Joy.

There are people in our lives who will never be recognized for the ways that they bring joy and meaning in the everyday events of life. It is even easy for us to become so entrenched in what we are doing and where we are going this holiday season that we pass by community servants, friends, neighbors, and co-workers that make our lives meaningful.

During this upcoming week, take notice of someone outside of your family that brings everyday joy to your life without usually being recognized; a bus driver that goes the extra mile, a mail carrier that delivers smiles, a cashier that overflows with encouragement, a neighbor you can always count on. Write them a Christmas Card and share a moment of genuine encouragement and thanksgiving for them.

Daily Reading: Use the daily readings each week to guide you through scriptures related to Advent and the weekly theme.

Week 3: (Monday – Friday)

Monday - 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Tuesday - Psalm 23

Wednesday - Ezekiel 34:7-13

Thursday - Luke 1:1-25

Friday - Luke 1:26-38

The Fourth Sunday of Advent – The Angels’ Candle

As you light the first candle explain, “The first candle we light is The Prophet’s Candle and it reminds us that the coming of Jesus was foretold hundreds of years before His birth.”

As you light the second candle explain, “The second candle we light is The Bethlehem Candle and it reminds us that Jesus was born in a humble fashion as a servant.”

As you light the third candle explain, “The third candle we light is The Shepherds’ Candle and it reminds us that the birth of Jesus was first announced to the humble shepherds.”

As you light the fourth candle explain, “The fourth candle we light is The Angels’ Candle and it reminds us that the birth of Jesus was good news of great joy for all people.”

Consider: The Greek word that we get our English word “angel” from means messenger. In the scripture angels often appear to make sure that people understand the point of some great work that God is about to do. In many regards they give a sort of insight and explanation into what God is doing through a particular situation. During the birth of Jesus we see angels helping Mary understand that she is going to have a child, helping Joseph understand that the child is from God and that the child in Mary’s womb is a miracle of the Holy Spirit, and announcing to the shepherds that Jesus birth had taken place in Bethlehem. In each case we see the angel telling us a little more about who this child really was. Let’s read together and listen for the explanation the angel gives about Jesus.

Read the Bible: *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. (Luke 1:26-35 ESV)

Here we see that the angel told Mary that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promise to King David of a kingdom that would never end, He is the Son of the Most High, the holy Son of God. But an angel also appears to Joseph.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:18-21 ESV)

Here we see that the angel told Joseph that the child being born would "save his people from their sins." Did you know that the name Jesus means Savior? Then on the night Jesus was born when the angels announced his birth to the shepherds, do you remember what they said?

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:10-12 ESV)

Remember: If you have ever found yourself in a situation where you really needed help but could not help yourself then you know how great it is for someone to sweep in and save the day. It is really good news when you hear that help has arrived. This is the way the angels talked about Jesus, the promise has been fulfilled, God has reached down to man in his sinfulness and through Jesus Christ is lifting them up to share in His joy. The message that Jesus came to save people who are helpless sinners is still good news today to all those who have recognized their need for a savior. What the angels proclaimed is true, there is great joy when you know that you put your hope in Christ and this joyful offer is proclaimed to all people, even you.

Pray: Thank you for reaching down to us through Christ and giving us hope in any situation that we find ourselves in. Help us to humble ourselves and see our need for you so that our hearts will be prepared to receive the offer of sharing in your joy.

Experience the Joy: Each week you can take the opportunity to make your Christmas meaningful by doing something practical to share and experience the joy of Christmas. During this week, the project is called Meet A Need.

Every year during the Christmas season there are people around us that are going through difficulties for all sorts of reasons. It can be easy for us to be overwhelmed and turn a blind eye to those around us that are in the same situation we are in this year. There are people going through major life transitions, financial difficulties, medical problems, and all sorts of other disappointments.

During this week think about someone around that may have significant needs in their life at this time and determine to do something to help. But here is the catch. Find a way to help them that will assure that you do not get any of the recognition. If you are having trouble coming up with something specific, reach out to one of your Pastors, a School Counselor in your community or someone else that may be in a position to see needs better than you do. Either way set aside some of your time and resources and celebrate the gift of Jesus and meet a need.

Daily Reading: Use the daily readings each week to guide you through scriptures related to Advent and the weekly theme.

Week 4: (Monday – Friday)

Monday - Luke 1:39-56

Tuesday - Luke 1:57-80

Wednesday - Luke 2:1-7

Thursday - Luke 2:8-21

Friday - Luke 2:22-38

Christmas (or Christmas Eve) – The Christ Candle

As you light the first candle explain, "The first candle we light is The Prophet's Candle and it reminds us that the coming of Jesus was foretold hundreds of years before His birth."

As you light the second candle explain, "The second candle we light is The Bethlehem Candle and it reminds us that Jesus was born in a humble fashion as a servant."

As you light the third candle explain, "The third candle we light is The Shepherds' Candle and it reminds us that the birth of Jesus was first announced to the humble shepherds."

As you light the fourth candle explain, "The fourth candle we light is The Angels' Candle and it reminds us that the birth of Jesus was good news of great joy for all people."

As you light The Christ Candle explain, "We light The Christ Candle as we celebrate the joy of Christ's birth and are reminded to celebrate him as our greatest gift."

Consider: There is only one response to such a great gift as Jesus and it is worship. If we were to receive nothing else today we would still have a great treasure to celebrate, and celebrate is exactly what our hearts should do when we remember the birth of Jesus. The story of the wise men that came after Jesus was born reminds us of what happens in the heart of someone who realizes who Jesus is, they rejoice and generously give their lives to worship him.

Read the Bible: *Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:*

"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship

him." After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:1-12 ESV)

Remember: In the passage that we just read we find two very different responses to the birth of Jesus that may help us to reflect on our own preparation to celebrate today. The first response is that of the wise men, who travel with gifts to celebrate the birth of the Savior. They welcome the coming of Christ with joy and worship. The second is that of King Herod. To Herod, this small baby appears as a threat to his own power and desires. Rather than recognize the significance of the moment, he plotted how he could protect his own crumbling kingdom in the face of the birth of the King of the universe. To realize how futile it is to respond like Herod, we only have to stop and think that today we are not celebrating Herod's holiday, but Christmas.

Pray: Give us hearts like the wise men to worship the Lord Jesus today. Help us to rejoice exceedingly with great joy at the very thought of him. As we share our gifts with one another help us to remember his great gift to us.