

**I will live with them
and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they will be my people.**

2 Corinthians 6:16



Advent Devotional

2023

This devotional contains a Scripture reading and “Food for Thought” questions for each Sunday in Advent. There are additional short readings for each day of the week. Also included are memory verse pages to print, color, and hang in your home each week. These are a great way to involve children, and discuss Scripture together. Feel free to adapt the schedule to suit your needs.

The name Emmanuel means God with us. The birth of Christ is the moment in history that changes everything. The birth of every child changes the world, but the birth of Christ brings the promise of salvation through God’s incarnate presence with us. God is with us in Jesus, and through the Holy Spirit. God will be with us forever when Christ returns. He will be our God and we will be his people. This is the story of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation.

Advent is a season of waiting for the “first fruits” of God’s presence with us through Jesus, but it also reminds us of our continued waiting for God’s eternal presence with us when his Kingdom shall be on earth, and he shall reign forevermore. During this season of Advent we will look to the Scriptures and consider ways that God has been with his people throughout history, and will be with us into eternity.

**O Come Desire of Nations bind
All people with one heart and mind
Bid all our sad divisions cease
And be yourself our King of Peace**

WEEK 1

SUNDAY, December 3

God's Unseen Presence

At Vacation Bible School in the summer we often ask kids to be on the lookout for “God sightings.” We ask them to pay attention to ways they see God working throughout the day. Often the children see God working through other people, in acts of kindness, or in moments of joy. Every single day God is working in our lives, but we often don’t notice. Sometimes we chalk it up to coincidence, or we give credit to ourselves or someone else. Esther is the only book in the Bible where God is never mentioned. It takes place in a foreign land under foreign rule. What might this be telling us about God’s presence? Be on the lookout for “God sightings” this week!

Esther is a challenging story to read with children. You may choose to read the story variation below with children, rather than the biblical text. Like a children’s Bible, the story variation keeps to the message of the text, but presents it at a more age appropriate level.

Read:

Esther 2:5-11, 3:3-6, 7:3, 8:7-8

Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

When the king’s order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king’s palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king’s palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem.

Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.

[Esther was chosen to become queen. One of the king's officials named Haman was honored and the king commanded that everyone should kneel and pay honor to Haman, but Mordecai refused.]

Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew.

When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.

Then Queen Esther [approached the king and said], "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request.

King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have impaled him on the pole he set up. Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring—for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked."

Story Variation:

A long long time ago in the land of Persia, there was a king named Xerxes (Zerk-sees). Xerxes had sent his queen, Vashti, away because she refused to do what he commanded, and he was looking for a new queen. There was a man named Mordecai living in Persia. Mordecai was Jewish, and his relatives had been taken captive many years earlier. This is how they ended up living in the land of Xerxes. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah who he had raised like a daughter. Hadassah was also called Esther, and she was very beautiful. When the king was looking for a new queen, he had all the young women of the land brought to the palace. Esther was taken to the palace with the other women. The king was very fond of Esther, so he gave her special food and special servants. But the king did not know that Esther was a Jew, and her uncle Mordecai forbade her from telling the king. So she kept it a secret. And every day, Mordecai would walk near the palace to find out what was happening with Esther. Eventually Esther was chosen to be queen.

The king had a wicked official named Haman who wanted everyone to honor him, but Mordecai refused. When Haman learned that Mordecai was Jewish, he decided that all the Jewish people in the land should be killed, and convinced the king to make a decree saying this would happen. Mordecai went to Esther for help. Esther approached the king and told him what evil things Haman had done, and that she was Jewish. She asked the king to please spare her and her people. The king was angry at the evil that Haman had done, and Haman was put to death. Then the king made a new law protecting the Jewish people and allowing them to protect themselves against their enemies. The Jewish people in Persia were safe, and many people became Jewish because they were amazed.

Food for Thought:

- In the opening chapters of Esther we see the king demand that his first queen, Vashti, entertain his guests. It is her refusal and subsequent banishment that makes room for Esther to become queen. What do you think of her refusal to follow the king's command?
- Of all the young women in the kingdom who could have replaced Vashti, the king chose Esther. Do you think God was involved in this? Why or why not?
- Esther is the only book in the Bible where God is not mentioned. How is God "unseen" in Esther?
- How can we tell when God is involved in "regular" events?
- Esther had no parents and was being raised by her uncle in a foreign land when she became queen. She was a woman, an orphan, and a foreigner. She was a vulnerable person in several ways. What does God tell us about his care for the vulnerable?
- How is the story of Esther a reflection of God's care for vulnerable people?
- The story of Israel is a story of God repeatedly delivering his people from oppression. It is a picture of God's work through Jesus to deliver all people from the oppression of sin and evil. How do you see those truths reflected in the story of Esther?

Week 1 Readings:

MONDAY - Psalm 82:2-4

How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

- Do you think God defends the unjust? Why might it feel that way to those who are struggling like the psalmist? What does it look like for God to deliver the needy from the hand of the wicked?

TUESDAY - Job 42:2-3

I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.

- When you don't see God's presence or God's work in your life, how might you "obscure God's plans without knowledge?" How can you grow in knowledge of God?

WEDNESDAY - Psalm 146:6-9

He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—he remains faithful forever.

He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous.

The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

- Are you confident that God remains faithful forever? How do you feel about God frustrating the ways of the wicked?

THURSDAY - Psalm 68:4-6

Sing to God, sing in praise of his name, extol him who rides on the clouds; rejoice before him—his name is the LORD.

A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.

God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.

- Do you think of holiness as defending the fatherless and the widow? What is the difference between the prisoners and the rebellious in this passage?

FRIDAY - Psalm 42:2-4

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?

My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"

These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.

- When you can't see God's presence, what times or events can you remember to bring you assurance that God is with you?

SATURDAY - Psalm 139:7-10

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

- Is it possible to be away from God's presence? Do you ever feel like you are away from God's presence?

WEEK 2

SUNDAY December 10

God's Visible Presence

In the book of 2 Kings we read a story about the prophet Elisha. The king of Aram was at war with the king of Israel at that time, and was sending soldiers to raid the land of Israel. As the Arameans would set up camp in preparation for a raid, the prophet Elisha would warn the king of Israel to avoid that area, telling him the Arameans were camping there. It seems that God was giving Elisha supernatural knowledge of the king of Aram's plans. This happened many times, so the king of Israel was always on his guard, and the Arameans were never able to make any progress against Israel. The king of Aram became angry, assuming there was a spy in his camp who was passing information on to the king of Israel. But one of the officers told the king of Aram that the prophet Elisha knew the king's secret plans and was telling them to the king of Israel. So the king of Aram sent soldiers with horses and chariots to capture Elisha.

The prophet Elisha experienced God's presence in a unique way. He regularly received knowledge from God, but also was aware of God's presence in a way that most of us aren't, including his own servant. Read the story from 2 Kings below for a glimpse at God's presence as it was visible to Elisha!

Read:

2 Kings 6:15-23

When the servant of the man of God [the servant of the prophet Elisha] got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?" the servant asked. "Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And Elisha prayed, "Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, "Strike this army with blindness." So he struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked. Elisha told them, "This is not the road and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will lead you to the man you are looking for." And he led them to Samaria. After they entered the city, Elisha said, "LORD, open the eyes of these men so they can see." Then the LORD opened their eyes and they looked, and there they were, inside Samaria. When the king of Israel saw them, he asked Elisha, "Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?"

“Do not kill them,” he answered. “Would you kill those you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master.” So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master. So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel’s territory.

Food for Thought:

- How was God protecting his people against the Arameans?
- How does this story compare to Esther? Does God feel more active in this story? Is God more active in this story?
- How did Elisha’s servant react to the Aramean army? How did Elisha react?
- Do you think Elisha could see the “angel army” (chariots and horses of fire) the whole time?
- Why does Elisha pray for the enemy army to be struck with blindness? How does this compare to his prayer for the servant’s eyes to be opened?
- In what ways are we blind like the servant before Elisha’s prayer?
- Have you prayed for your eyes to be open to God’s presence with you?
- Do you believe that “angel armies” are with you in your battles?
- After Elisha led the blinded enemy into Israel, he had a feast set before them. Why?
- What do you think the Arameans learned from their experience? How did they respond?

Week 2 Readings:

MONDAY - 2 Kings 2:6-7

Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.”

And he replied, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them walked on.

Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.

- Elijah and Elisha continually experience God’s presence with them in visible ways. What is one time you were absolutely certain that God’s presence was with you? If you can’t think of one, ask God to show you his presence.

TUESDAY - 2 Kings 2:9-11

“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied.

“You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not.”

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

- Why do you think Elisha’s “double portion” was dependent upon him “seeing” Elijah being taken by the chariots and horses of fire?

WEDNESDAY - Exodus 13:21-22

By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.

Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

- When Israel left Egypt the Lord went with them in a visible pillar of cloud and fire. Why do you think God chose to be visible to the people during this time period?

THURSDAY - Exodus 3:2-5

There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

“Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”

- Moses experiences God’s presence in the fire that does not consume the bush. His reaction is confusion and interest. How is God’s presence confusing and interesting to you? Do you want to “go over and see this strange sight?”

FRIDAY - Luke 24:30-31

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.

- After Jesus rose from the dead he appeared to two of his disciples who did not recognize him until their eyes were opened. Do you think you would recognize Jesus? Ask God to open your eyes to Jesus walking with you this week.

SATURDAY - Acts 9:3-8

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.

- Saul had been persecuting followers of Jesus until Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. Those with him could hear Jesus but not see him, and Saul himself became temporarily blind after the encounter. Why do you think Saul became blind? Do you think it is easier to see or to hear God? Does it matter?

WEEK 3

SUNDAY December 17

God's Presence Realized

Sometimes God is with us in quiet ways that we can't see, and sometimes God's presence is very obvious. These are both shadows of the ultimate reality that God intended for us and our world - what was, and what is to come. The opening chapters of Genesis are an ancient narrative about a God who was intimately involved with the creation of the world and the lives of people. These chapters explain God's relationship to us, and show us that we live in a world colored by sin, but worship a God who is making all things right. We see the culmination of this in the book of Revelation, a glimpse into eternity, when we return to the garden. The Bible opens and closes with stories of God's presence with his people in the garden. Every book in between contains echoes and signposts pointing back (and forward!) to the garden. The tabernacle and the temple of the Old Testament are full of garden imagery, and are the place where God's presence dwells on earth. Then God's presence comes in the person of Jesus. In the gospel of John, Mary Magdalene meets Jesus in the garden after the resurrection and thinks he is the gardener! She couldn't see who he was, even standing right in front of him. Then he speaks her name, "Mary!" and her eyes are opened to the presence of the Lord. When we finally reach the redemption of all things, we will walk in the cool of the garden with God forever.

In the opening chapters of Genesis we see how the world should be, and also how it is. Because of the existence of sin, we experience the presence of God differently in the world than we someday will. But in the passage below, notice that, even though the people had sinned, God was still walking among the trees of the garden and calling to them.

Read:

Genesis 3:6-10

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

Food for Thought:

- What was it about the fruit that was tempting to the woman? Was there anything good about the fruit?
- The fruit was in the garden, and was good for several things, but God had told the people not to eat it. Do you sometimes wonder why God might want you NOT to do something that seems like a good plan?
- What happened after the man and woman both ate?
- In the other texts we've looked at during Advent, having one's eyes opened was a positive thing. What is happening in this text? Is it good or bad?
- What have their eyes been opened to?
- How do the man and woman respond to God after their eyes have been opened?
- What causes them to hide from God?
- What causes you to hide from God?
- Do you believe that God is still walking near you and calling to you?

Week 3 Readings:

MONDAY - Isaiah 6:5-7

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

- Isaiah found himself caught up in a vision and standing before the throne of God. He was overcome with a sense of his uncleanness, but then the angels cleaned him and took that away. How do you think you would feel before the throne of God? Do you believe God has taken away your uncleanness?

TUESDAY - Isaiah 5:8-9

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

- Isaiah received atonement from the Lord. What was his response? What is your response to God cleansing you?

WEDNESDAY - Luke 1:5-6, 11-12

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

- Zechariah followed all of God's decrees blamelessly and was righteous in the sight of God, yet was still gripped with fear when he saw the angel of the Lord. How are you alike and different from Zechariah? Would you be startled to encounter the Lord?

THURSDAY - Luke 19:1-9

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

- Zacchaeus was a thief and a traitor, working with the occupying government and stealing from his fellow Jews. How did Zacchaeus respond to a simple look from Jesus? How did Jesus respond to Zacchaeus? How do you think Jesus responds to you?

FRIDAY - John 13:5-8

After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize how that I am doing, but later you will understand."

"No" said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

- Peter did not want Jesus to lower himself to wash Peter's feet. But Jesus' mission is to wash us, and we have no part with him if he doesn't. How do pride and good intentions keep you from experiencing what Jesus has to offer?

SATURDAY - Psalm 100

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.

Worship the LORD with gladness;

come before him with joyful songs.

Know that the LORD is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;

we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving

and his courts with praise;

give thanks to him and praise his name.

For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;

his faithfulness continues through all generations.

- How does Psalm 100 tell us to approach God? The Psalmist writes, “Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his.” Do you know that God made you and you are his?

WEEK 4

SUNDAY December 24

God's Presence Forever

Today is Christmas Eve. Tomorrow we celebrate the fact that God came to earth, not as a glowing heavenly being, not as a warrior on a mighty horse, not with thunder and trumpets, but in the exact same way that everyone one of us came into the world - as a newborn baby. Jesus lived the most human experiences including experiences of vulnerability and helplessness like birth and death. He was with God in the beginning, and holds all things together in existence, yet he was held in his mother's arms, taking comfort from the warmth of her skin. Because of the incarnation we know that Jesus knows what it is to be human. Because of the incarnation we know that God will go to any length to restore us to him. Because of the incarnation we know that God is our God, and we are his people.

Read:

Revelation 22:1-5

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

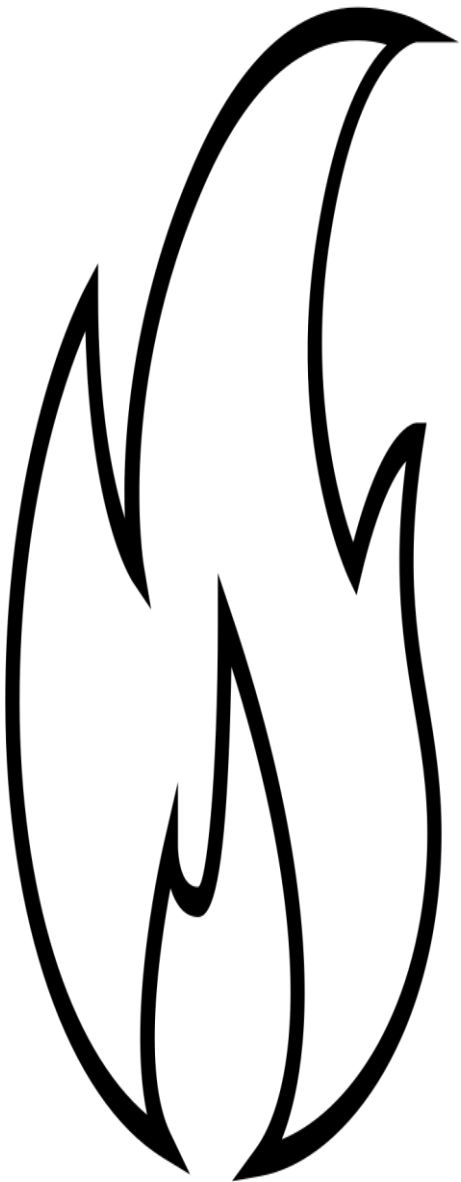
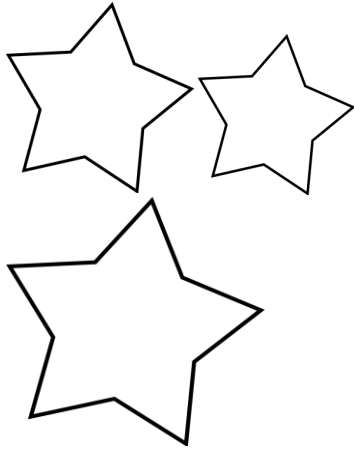
Food for Thought:

- Because Jesus came into the world, because he lived and died and rose again, because he is coming back to restore all things, we get to live in the presence of the Lord forever. The editors of the NIV translation titled this section of Revelation, "Eden Restored." How do you feel about the idea of living in Eden? What do you think it would be like to walk with God down the great street of the city? How will you seek to be more aware of God's presence this week?

*If I rise on the wings of
the dawn, if I settle on
the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will
guide me, your right hand
will hold me fast.*

Psalm 139





By day the
LORD
went ahead of
them in a pillar
of cloud to
guide them
on their
way and by
night in a pillar
of fire to give
them light,
so that they
could travel by
day or night.

Exodus 13

Then I heard the
voice of the Lord


saying, "Whom shall I send?
And who will go for us?"

And I said,

"Here am I.

Send me!"

Isaiah 5



**I will live with them
and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they will be my
people.**

2 Corinthians 6