



AN
UNEXPECTED
gift

ADVENT 2020
MIDDLETOWN CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Devotional Guide

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Introduction

WHAT IS ADVENT?

Advent is the first season of the Christian liturgical year. It is celebrated the four weeks before Christmas. Advent is a season of expectant waiting and hope for the birth of Christ, the Savior. In this season, we reflect on what it means to wait.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

Our Advent theme this year is *An Unexpected Gift*. For the next four weeks, we will explore the unexpected gifts of this season: hope, peace, love, joy, and the birth of Christ.

This year, we will celebrate Advent at home and worship together online. We hope this devotional will help you engage more deeply with the hope and joy of Christ during this season.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This is a four week devotional guide that corresponds with the weekly worship theme. Each week's devotion includes a pause to center your heart and mind, a scripture reading, a devotional thought, a prayer, and an invitation to put the week's lesson into action.

You can read through each devotional on your own, with a friend, or with your family.

Each week in worship, we will light a candle on the Advent wreath. We encourage you to light a candle with us. We've included suggestions for creating your own wreath at home at the end of this guide.

Sermons complementing this devotional will be available weekly at MiddletownChristian.org/sermons.

WEEK 1: Hope

PAUSE

by Miriam Georg

We've been through a lot this year! As a matter of fact, I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that for most of us, this has been the worst year of our lives. You know all the bad things that have happened, so I don't need to repeat them.

Can we still find hope amid all the challenges in our life?

Listen to the writer from the book of Psalm for a glimpse of the hope that only a faithful God can give.

LISTEN | PSALM 146:6-10 NIV

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.
The LORD reigns forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.

THINK

by Corey Miller

As we begin Advent, I cannot help but wonder, do you think the Hebrew people had hope? There was no social media campaign, no advertising, and no grassroots organizers around, so did they know they had something to be hopeful for? Sure, there were stories about a Savior that had been told for generations, but you can only hear a story so many times until it becomes just that--a story. In a time of oppression and violence, hope was not at the forefront of people's minds.

That is what makes the story of Jesus so unique and so new. It was unexpected. Like an unexpected raise or an unexpected opportunity, suddenly there is fresh hope for a new future. There is a break in what we thought was going to happen and a new hope for something that will happen.

When Jesus shows up, he brings new hope for the future. Just like all those years ago, Jesus is coming to us. As we prepare the way, let us set aside the things that weigh us down and instead allow the opportunity for an unexpected gift of hope to arrive today.

PRAY

I'm ready, Jesus. I'm ready for the gift of hope. I want it so much that I am willing to open my heart right now to receive the gift of hope. And with this newfound hope I will go out into the world and be a messenger of hope for your people. Let it be so. Amen.

GO

How can you be an unexpected gift of hope to someone this week?

Get creative, sit down with friends or family, and come up with a way that you can give hope to someone who needs it this week.

WEEK 2: Peace

PAUSE

by Miriam Georg

Before you start reading this devotional, find a quiet place and sit down. Take three deep breaths and let go of the tension in your body. Hand over to God the negative events of the day. Shake off the anxieties that cloud your mind. Give to God all those things that rob you of the gift of peace.

When you try to control everything in your life, you deprive God of the opportunity to show God's strength. And then you wonder where God is in your difficulties.

God's been waiting beside you all day long to bring you the gift of peace within the chaos. Listen to God's promises in Micah.

LISTEN | MICAH 5:4 NIV

He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.

THINK

by Corey Miller

One of my good friends, James, is from Liberia. Not Liberia, Kentucky—Liberia, Africa. He grew up during a civil war in Liberia, and every time he tells one of his stories, I give him my full attention as I learn about his life experience.

One story of his that I remember is about one day when his family was walking through an area that became a war zone. Someone came up to his family and ushered them into an abandoned house to protect them from the battle that was getting ready to happen.

James recounted how his mom hid in a bathtub and the kids hid in the most protected parts of the house they could find. They laid on the ground for days as stray bullets flew through the walls.

Can you imagine what that would have been like? In a moment of literal war, peace was far from anyone's mind. He concluded his story by saying as they lay there each day, he could hear his mother singing Amazing Grace over and over again from another room in the house. In the midst of terrible circumstances, James found the unexpected gift of peace in an old church hymn.

As Jesus entered a world of violence, he, too, gave an unexpected gift of peace to the world. He looked around and said, "There is a new way." A way that allows people to live not in fear but filled with the peace of having God as our Shepherd. As we continue to prepare the way for Jesus, know that we also get to find peace in the old familiar Christmas story.

PRAY

Come Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace. Prepare my heart to release all the things that keep me from seeing your presence. And let me breath in your everlasting peace every moment of the day. Amen.

GO

Think about a song, or even better, a Christmas song that gives you peace and talk about why. When you have one, call or facetime a family member or friend and sing that carol with them!

WEEK 3: Love

PAUSE

by Miriam Georg

There's a good reason why women's minds don't hold onto the violence of childbirth—when it is over, you hold a miracle in your arms. God's love pours out of your heart and surrounds your child like a soft, warm blanket. And you learn, firsthand, the unconditional love of God.

This is the week we contemplate the gift of love. It's a good time to reconnect with everyone you love, whether you gave birth to them or came to know them through adoption or friendship.

Cherish God's love this week. Love has the power to heal broken hearts.

LISTEN | ISAIAH 9:6-7 NIV

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.

THINK

by Corey Miller

There's a classic Saturday Night Live clip with Jim Carrey and Will Ferrell driving around New York City dancing and singing, "What is love? Baby don't hurt me, don't hurt me, no more." I have no evidence to support this, but love has to be one of the top three things that musicians write about. Why is that?

I think it is because love is something that relates to everyone. We all know what it feels like to be loved, what it feels like to not be loved, and what it feels like to long for love.

On Christmas we get to remember the greatest love story. The story of God, caring so much about us that God came down to walk and live among us and show us a new way to live and love. This new love story is one that we all are invited to be a part of. It's not a love story that needs the line, "don't hurt me, no more." Instead it's a love story where we realize there is no hurt in love, and we have a God who loves each of us, unconditionally in that way.

PRAY

Thank you, God, for the extravagant gift of your love. It fills me up with such joy and gratitude. My heart overflows as I share with the world what you have so selflessly shared with me. Amen.

GO

How can you love someone this week?

In a way where you see someone and care about someone in an unconditional way?

Maybe you could sign and give a thank you letter to your mail carrier, or clean out old closets or toy bins and donate them.

Whatever it looks like for you, remind someone this week that they are unconditionally loved.

WEEK 4: joy

PAUSE

by Miriam Georg

When do you recall experiencing great joy? Was it on the day you graduated from college? Or the day you got married? Maybe a big birthday bash? Or when your son or daughter moved out of the house?

Joyful memories often revolve around people that we love. Isaiah reminds us, “Just as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so does your God rejoice over you.”

No matter what is on your to do list today, pause and take a moment to reflect on what brings you the gift of joy. And then listen to the infectious joy of Mary and Elizabeth.

LISTEN | LUKE 1:41-45 NIV

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

THINK

by Corey Miller

I'm not sure anything beats the joy of Christmas morning as a kid, coming into the living room and being showered with gifts. I know Christmas morning brought me so much joy. Although the gifts were great, what brought me the most joy was going over to my Great Grandma's house. We had a large family with tons of kids, and it was absolute chaos for about three hours. We would play, joke, and eat, and when it was all over we would long for that joy again.

Families change, people pass, and now as an adult my Christmas looks a lot different than it did all those years ago. But anytime I get to reflect and think back on those times, I am still overcome with joy. It was never in the gifts, it was those traditions, those moments, that's where the joy came from.

Every Christmas we are reminded of the unexpected gift of joy that Christmas brings. One that goes far beyond gifts and is instead a joy that Christ has come. There is a reason to get together and celebrate!

PRAY

I thank you God for the joy of Christmas and the birth of Jesus. Fill my heart with joy during this season and help me to take time to look for joy on the days when joy is hard to find.

GO

Many of our traditions may change this year. Sit down as a family or call up a friend and reminisce on your favorite family tradition and what it meant to you. Come up with a new tradition if you feel so inclined!

Gather the family in a car and join us tonight (December 20) for a new tradition as we gather in the church parking lot and watch a movie together. Details at MiddletownChristian.org.

Christmas Eve

by Corey Miller

Tonight, for devotion, grab a jacket and go outside. Look up at the stars and think about how those stars are the same stars that were present at Jesus birth all those years ago.

Read the Christmas story in Luke 2, and try to envision what that night must have been like. Imagine yourself in the moment and think about what life must have been like. Because tomorrow, the world is going to change. Tomorrow, a Savior is born.

Join us tonight at 11:45 PM in the parking lot of the church as we sing the songs of Christmas and remember that unto us a Savior is born.

Advent Wreath

AT HOME GUIDE

During Advent, we light a different candle in the Advent wreath each Sunday leading up to Christmas. The Advent wreath is a physical symbol of our hopeful waiting for Christ's arrival and provides a glowing reminder of the light of Christ coming into the world.

In your envelope, we included five tea lights that you can use to make your own Advent wreath at home this year. We encourage you to light a candle each Sunday when we light a candle during our online worship service.

Here are some ideas for creating an Advent wreath. When you've finished your wreath, share it on social media with the hashtag #mcchomeadvent so we can see it!

DIY Advent Wreath:

- Use paint to decorate glass jars to use as your candle holders.
- Fill tea cups with sand, whole nuts or dried beans to hold candles in place. Set them in a circle on top of a placemat, a platter or a mirror.
- Remove the labels on empty tin cans. Fill them with sand and insert taper candles. Then top with preserved moss. You might create kraft paper or wrapping paper labels for each can with the words hope, peace, love and joy.
- Try the "99 Cent Advent Wreath" using birthday cake candles, a tealight and modeling clay.
<https://buildfaith.org/99-centadvent-wreath/>

Flameless/Kid-Friendly Advent Wreath:

- Put cardboard toilet paper rolls wrapped in colored construction paper as the "candle sticks" on a plate and add a paper "flame" with some tape each week. This is a favorite for families with young children.
- Use sheets of colored paper to create the candle base and paper flames and attach with tape to a window or refrigerator-- bonus points for doing this on a large window to share the Advent progression with your neighbors!

Ideas adapted from BRIM: An Unexpected Gift

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ADVENT & CHRISTMAS AT MIDDLETOWN

SUNDAY WORSHIP

Sundays at 11 AM
YouTube Live & Facebook Live

DRIVE-IN CHRISTMAS MOVIE NIGHT

Sunday, December 20 at 6 PM
Registration online required.
Churchwide event.

CHRISTMAS EVE

Online Worship Service at 5 PM

Sanctuary Walk-Through Experience at 6 PM-8 PM
(Registration required. Not a worship service.)

Drive-In Carols and Candlelight at 11:45 PM

All event dates and times are subject to change should COVID restrictions change.



500 N. Watterson Trail, Louisville, KY 40243
MiddletownChristian.org

Sunday Worship Online at 11 AM