

Christmas Advent Devotional

Day 1

You know what my favorite part of a new project is? The beginning. When you have the paper and the crayons—or markers or pencils—and the clay and the building blocks and you set them in front of you and you imagine. You dream about what those pencils and these crayons can make. Will you draw an ocean or a mountain? Will you build a tower or a mold a ball? Anything is possible!

I bet that's a little what God felt like way back in the beginning. In fact, those are the very first words of the whole Bible. *In the beginning*. And do you what comes next? It says, *In the beginning... God made*.

Sometimes I wonder if God looked at the universe and all the space He could fill with whatever He could imagine and felt the same way we do when we start to create something. I wonder if He felt excited or nervous about what was about to happen.

Today is the very beginning of the last month of the year, leading up to one of the most special days on the Calendar. Christmas! But before we get to Christmas, we need to start at the beginning. With what God made.

A great big world. And in that great big world? He put you! And me and everyone else. He made this world and He made us with a part of Himself in us and the world, and made everything full of...potential. Which is just a fancy word that means *possibility*. Possibility like before you start a drawing or a build a Lego invention. It's the feeling that *anything can happen*. It's the feeling of expectation and wonder and anticipation. It's a feeling that must have been exactly what God felt way back in the beginning, and a feeling that fits perfectly for this time of year. Because Christmas is full of expectation and wonder and anticipation too. And also hope. And nothing beats hope.

So the next time you feel hope and excitement over what could happen, what might happen, what's going to happen, remember, God made you that way. And you are like Him when you feel it. You and God have that in common. *In the beginning*, anything can happen! And there is no better time to feel it than right now, leading up to the day Jesus was born.

Day 2

Genesis 2:15-17; Genesis 3

A lot has changed from when you parents were your age. But nothing has changed more than technology. My favorite thing about technology *now* is the rewind button for television. I LOVE that if you miss something all you have to do is push a button, and it's like MAGIC! You can watch it happen all over again! The touchdown you walked out of the room and missed, the funny part of the movie you love so much, ANYTHING AT ALL.

There's only one problem. The rewind button only works on television. And not in real life. And I don't know about you, but I could really use a rewind button every now and again.

Like when I take a bite of pizza straight out of the oven and it burns my tongue.
Or when I pour sugar on my French fries instead of salt.
Or when I lose my patience with someone I love.
Or when I say something I know is funny, but will also hurt the feelings of a friend.

That's when a life rewind button would be GREAT.

Remember yesterday we started talking about *in the beginning*, and possibility, and how great it is to imagine what *could* happen before anything *does* happen? Well, the thing about possibility is, just like there is a possibility for things to be AMAZING, there's also a possibility for things to go terribly wrong.

And way back in the beginning, that's what happened.

God made Adam and Eve and He told them about everything they could do and all the freedom they had, except for this one rule. God loved them so much, He wanted their lives to be the best they could be, and He knew that it would be best if they did as He said. But they didn't.

(Maybe you know what that's like. Have you ever been told not do something by a teacher or a parent—and it sounded like a strange rule, or silly, or you didn't understand it, so you did it anyway, and then immediately wish you hadn't? Like you wanted to rewind?)

That's what happened with Adam and Eve. **God gave them this one rule because He knew their lives in this beautiful world He made would be BEST if they obeyed it. But they didn't.** And that's when things started to fall apart. When they broke the rule, they started to understand how much power they had to make things go wrong.

You're a kid and this may seem impossible to imagine. But you have a lot of power too. You can say and do things that really hurt others, and hurt yourself. We all have that same amount of power to do really good, or really bad, and unfortunately, we often choose the bad. That's sin. And the things is, **sin hurts.**

Sin hurts us. It hurts others. It hurts how we see the world. Sin, makes us believe the wrong things about ourselves, others and God. **And sin uses the lies we believe to separate us from one another and from God.**

Sin is like a crack in a mirror. Nothing looks like how it really is because of it.

Adam and Eve had to leave the beautiful Garden God had made for them after they sinned. There was no rewind button for what they did. But that wasn't the end of their story. Or the bigger story God was writing. See, God knew sin had messed up the picture, but He also knew that **the bad news and the sad news never writes the end of the story.** God gave Adam and Eve

hope, that the story would go on. That He wasn't giving up on them. And they shouldn't give up on Him. **"Just wait and see!" He seemed to say, the best was yet to come.**

Day 3

Genesis 15; Genesis 21

Two days of the year are the absolute worst. The day after your birthday and the day after Christmas. Why? Because next Christmas and your next birthday are never as far away as they are on the day after you celebrate it. Then they are 364 days away and that feels like FOREVER.

Waiting for something you're SO EXCITED for is almost impossible. There was a guy who shows up in our Bible who knew EXACTLY what it felt like to wait for something that seemed like it would never arrive.

His name was Abraham.

Abraham, at the part of the story we're going to look at, was 99 years old. And he was married to Sarah who was pretty old herself. Which wouldn't be that big of a deal except...God told them they were going to have a baby—and they were old enough to be great grandparents! But God promised not just any baby, he promised this baby would go on to be a great nation—all coming from one very.old.man.

When Abraham heard this he was...not so sure. Sarah? She wasn't either. This promise from God seemed crazy! Not only that, it seemed years and years away. How was he possibly going to wait that long for something to happen when he was 99 years old! **But God made a promise. And Abraham? Well, Abraham believed him.** As crazy as it seemed. As unbelievable as it sounded. As ridiculous as he looked because of it. **He heard what God said, and he put his hope in God.**

He waited much longer than we have to wait for Christmas or a birthday. He waited years. Lots of years. Why? Because he trusted God. He put his hope in someone worth putting hope in. But that doesn't mean the waiting wasn't hard. Or that he didn't get impatient at times. Or that there weren't some nights when he went to sleep wondering if maybe he had misheard God.

Eventually Abraham had the son God promised. But Abraham didn't live long enough to see the great nation God told him he would start. It happened...just later than Abraham thought.

Hope doesn't mean *not hard*. Hope means you keep hoping, you keep trusting, even when it doesn't make sense—not because of what you're hoping for, but because of WHO you are putting your hope in. Abraham knew, when the promise didn't make sense, it wasn't about the promise, but the one who *made* the promise. *God*.

You will never regret putting your hope in God, trusting He is good and that He's looking out for you. **Hope is hard. But hope in God is always a good idea.**

What's something you hope for? What's the hardest thing about hope? What about God makes Him someone we can out or hope in? (Ex: He's loving, He takes care of us, etc.)

Tell about a time when you hoped in God and He did what He said?

Day 4

Kings of Israel

1 Samuel 8:1-9

I want to skip ahead in the story a little bit. Remember Abraham from yesterday? And how God told him how a great nation would come from his family? It did eventually come true, much, much later, and this small family got so big it became a country, called Israel, and needed a king!

Well, actually, God didn't really want them to have a king. He wanted to be the king. He was worried. He thought, if Israel had a king they would forget who was really responsible for them, who was leading them, who was looking out for them, who wouldn't let them down. In other words God knew, that if they had a king they could see, they would be more likely to trust him more than a God they couldn't see.

And...that's exactly what happened.

The people of Israel became so focused on what they didn't have (a king) that they missed what they did have (GOD!) So they started to think, "If only we had a king! Than we would be like all the other nations around us! We would be happy!"

Have you ever thought that? Maybe not about having a king, but about having, well, *anything*. Maybe you look around and you see friends with phones, ipads, fitbits, apple watches, video game systems, ANYTHING, and think, "If I only had that! Than I would be happy!" And I bet, even if you would never admit it to your parents, there have been times when you got what you wanted and it was PERFECT and EVERYTHING you hoped it would be! Until...it wasn't. There was nothing wrong with it, it just didn't do what you thought it would. And it was disappointing.

If you've felt that way, you know what the people of Israel felt like. **At some point we've all put our trust somewhere it didn't belong.** We expected too much from something and it didn't do what we thought.

Hope is a tricky thing. When we are counting on something to do something for us it wasn't meant to—like an ipad to make us happy—we are going to end up disappointed.

And that's what happened to Israel. They got their king. But they also got a whole bunch of trouble with them.

As we get closer to Christmas and we are so tempted to believe if we just get that one present we want so badly, then we'll be happy and we won't ask for anything else for as long as we live, it would be a good idea to think of Israel. And their kings. To remember **hope in anything that's not God is going to disappoint in some way. Maybe not immediately, but eventually.** And if we learn this before we open presents on Christmas morning, we will have a much better day than we might have otherwise.

What's something you thought would make you happy, but didn't? What does God give that we can't get in any present?

Day 5

Job 1:13-20; Job 38-39

The Bible isn't like a normal book. More than one person wrote it, and it doesn't move in a straight line. Meaning, the parts written first, aren't always the parts that come first. Actually, a lot of people think the oldest part of the Bible is found closer to the middle, in a book called Job.

There's a lot of hard to understand stuff that happens in this book, but the most important thing you need to know about this book is that some really sad things happen to Job. Job loses the things he cares about most—his home, his business, even his health. Not only that, he even loses a lot of his family. It's pretty terrible.

And Job has some really big questions for God when this happens. But the biggest question was "why?" **Why did all of these sad things happen?** Job was a good man, but when everything started to fall apart, it was easy to think maybe he did something wrong to deserve it. (I don't know about you, but I wonder that too sometimes. If something sad happens, I wonder, "Is it because I did something wrong? Or because I didn't pray hard enough?") It's normal to ask those questions. But when we do, chances are, we won't hear anything said back to us.

But that's not what happened with Job!

God actually talked back. And do you know what God said? He didn't answer Job's questions directly. But He did tell Job all God had done. God talked about the details He is in charge of when it comes to the world and how it works—where the snow is stored, who oversees the baby animals being born, who keeps the oceans in place and controls the light and the dark.

God didn't answer all the questions Job asked, but God reminded Job of who He was and how powerful God was, even when it felt like Job's world was falling apart. Trying to have hope when life is hard isn't easy. And we don't always know why things happen the way they do. But when we don't hear back from God when we want to, Job's story reminds us how big God is.

God is big but also close enough to know exactly what we're going through. Which makes hope in Him easier to have.

Maybe Christmas is as happy a time for you. Maybe this time of year makes you sad for a bunch of reasons. Either way, whether Christmas is an easy time or a hard time, **when you hope in God, your hope is in a good place.** Your happiness or your sadness is not over looked, it's noticed by the same God who hung the stars in the sky, and whose birth we celebrate in just a few weeks. **He's a big God. He's a powerful God. And He's a God who pays attention. You can count on it.**

What makes you sad about this time of year? What makes you happy? What is one question you wish God could answer?

Day 6

Joseph

(faith in story bigger than what he could see)

Have you ever been in an airplane before? When it takes off, heading straight up into the clear blue sky the world beneath you gets smaller and smaller, allowing you to see more and more from up high. It's a lot different when you're on the ground because on land you can only see so far—up until the next stop light, or next turn in the road, or the next hill you climb. You see what's right in front of you and what's behind you, but not much else.

There's a word for what happens when you're in a plane in the middle of the sky. It's called *perspective*. Perspective is when you see things differently because of your view. You get one perspective from walking around on your two feet—and a different one when you stand on your head. One from the top of a mountain—a different from a boat in the middle of a lake. **Where you are determines what you see.**

There's a guy whose story is in the book of Genesis, not long after Abraham's actually, who lived through some really tough things, but had a perspective that helped him. His name was Joseph.

Joseph was one of twelve brothers, and he was his dad's favorite kid, getting extra special presents that the other brothers wouldn't get. And eventually the brothers got so jealous of Joseph and the way he bragged about how much their dad loved him the most that the brothers did something very mean to him. They sold him to some men heading to a far away country, Egypt, hoping they would never have to deal with him again.

While there, things went from bad to worse for Joseph. People told lies about Joseph and he was put in jail! People in jail promised to help him when they got out, but then forgot! One thing after another went wrong. **Joseph could have given up on God. But he didn't. He kept praying, he kept trusting, he kept doing the next right thing, because even though he couldn't see how the story was going to go, his faith gave him perspective.** It made him see a bigger picture, like from an airplane, helping him believe all the choices to do the right thing would eventually pay off.

And they did. Years later, Joseph becomes the second most powerful man in all of Egypt, and when the land around them runs out of food and people come to Egypt to see if they have any extra, Joseph's brothers come to ask for help. There they stood, in front of the brother they had hurt and lied about and treated really badly. When they realized this Egyptian leader was their little brother they were really scared. Of course Joseph would be mad and want to get revenge. But he didn't. Actually, he did the opposite. He forgave his brothers.

Faith gives us perspective. Faith is like getting in an airplane high above everything else that's happening and getting a picture for how big God is and how perfect his plan is and how we can trust where He is going, even if we can't see it yet. Choosing to obey God because of our faith helps us do the impossible. Like forgive when someone hurts us. Like love even when it's hard. Like be kind, even when we don't want to. Without faith, and without the view faith gives us, it would be impossible to do any of those things. **But with faith? Anything is possible.**

Day 7

Exodus 20

Does your family have rules? Maybe you have a rule about not wearing shoes on the couch, or saying "yes mam or no mam", or finishing dinner before eating dessert. Rules are important, even if they don't always seem like it. Because **rules tell us what matters to the person who gives them.** If you have to eat vegetables before cake, it means your parents care about you becoming a healthy kid. If you have to say, "yes sir" it's because your parents care about showing respect to the people around you. **The rules in your family tell people a lot about your family.**

God's family works the same way. A long time ago, before Israel had kings, or even their own land, God gave their leader Moses some rules that Moses was supposed to pass on to the rest of the people he was leading—the Hebrew people. We call these rules the 10 Commandments.

The Hebrew people Moses led had just been freed from slavery in Egypt and they had never been in charge of themselves before. Someone else had always had control, not them. And so when they had all of this freedom, they weren't sure what to do. **So God gave them rules. Not because God wanted to take away their fun, but because He wanted them to live in the best way possible, and the rules helped them do that.** But also, because God wanted them to know just what He was like, and the rules showed them.

Out of these 10 big rules, six of them have to do with how they treated each other as people. (Kind of like the rules in your family or classroom—like, no hitting, no yelling, no making fun of others.) See, **more than anything else, God cared more about how these men and women and boys and girls acted towards one another.** God knew for the Hebrew people to live the best lives in their new freedom, it would involve following rules that made them different from everyone around them. Rules that may have seemed more strict than other people's. Rules that didn't always seem to make sense. Rules that sometimes seemed annoying for how much they asked of them and their relationships with one another. The rules that were best for them didn't make them easy to follow.

At some point you are going to hear a rule for home or for school and think, "That's silly. That doesn't make sense. Why does that rule matter?" **But a rule we may not understand is a chance to learn about the person who gave the rule. To ask, "what does this rule tell me is important to my mom, my dad, my teacher, my coach, to God?"** And the more we figure out what they are the like, the easier it is to have faith that they are looking out for us, even if we don't understand.

We don't have rules to make life less fun. We have rules because it helps us understand what the person giving them is like. And **rules like the 10 Commandments helped the Hebrew people then and help us NOW have FAITH in what God is like.** And what is God like? He loves people and He wants us to love people. So He made rules that showed that.

Tonight, before you go to bed ask your parents to explain one rule they have and why it matters to them.

DAY 8

Ruth 1:16-18

Have you ever given up your spot in line for someone else to go first? Or told your brother or sister or friend they could have the cookie when there was only one left? Or done something else where you could have done something YOU wanted, but instead did something to make someone else happy?

It's so hard! (Especially when it comes to cookies. I would have to REALLY love someone to give them my last cookie!!)

Looking out for someone else doesn't happen by accident. Something inside of us will always want to put ourselves first, so when you find stories of people who did the opposite, you want to pay attention!

In the first half of the Bible there is a story about a woman named Ruth. Her husband wasn't alive anymore, but she was living with her husband's mom, Naomi, until one day Naomi told Ruth she could go back to her own land and her own people, and Ruth didn't have to stay with Naomi anymore.

It would make sense for Ruth to leave. There was no reason for her to be with Naomi, but Ruth tells Naomi the craziest thing. She says, "Wherever you go, I'll go too! Your family will be like my family! I'm not going anywhere without you!" Naomi didn't know what to think. This sounded crazy! Ruth was putting Naomi first. **Ruth was giving up a chance to do what was best and easiest for her, to do something better for someone else.** She didn't have to. No one was telling her to. But she made a decision with FAITH, that even if what she did was hard, it was worth it because of what it meant for Naomi.

(This was a bigger decision than letting her eat the last cookie!) This was Ruth saying, what you want matters more than what I want. I'll be your friend and live where you live and help take care of you, even if it's hard.

Faith means making a decision, even when it is really hard, but believing it is the right thing to do. That's what Ruth did. **She cared for Naomi before she cared about herself, having FAITH that God would take care of her.**

Think about a way your family can look out for one another, and put each other first even when it's hard. Maybe that's with a friend at school, a little brother or sister, or your mom or dad. Look for ways to be like Ruth. To put someone else first, even when it asks a lot of you.

DAY 9

Daniel 6

Three of my favorite people in the whole bible have some of the craziest names I've ever heard. Ready for this? Shadrach. Meshach. And Abednego. I'm not kidding. They were three teenage boys who lived in a LONG time ago and had a strong faith in God, but lived in a country with a king who didn't believe in God. Not only that, the king was super jealous and wanted to be the most important person in the whole country. So important that no one else could get more attention than him—even God! So the king made a law. You were only allowed to pray to him, worship him and give him the most respect.

Well, *almost* everyone in the whole country was okay with this law, because they did NOT want to make the king angry. So they did whatever the king said.

So who didn't follow the king's rule?

Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego. Well, you probably guess that the king was NOT happy about this. And for disobeying this law, the punishment was going to BIG. The king ordered for Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego to be thrown into a HUGE furnace.

Of course these guys were super scared, but even in this super scary moment they said the most amazing thing. They prayed, asking that God would save them, because they knew God could (and they were right!) But that's not all they prayed. Then they said, "But even if God doesn't save us, we will still trust him."

Wow.

This is exactly what faith is! Trusting God is big enough and strong enough and powerful enough to do anything we ask! But knowing he might *not* do everything we ask. If we believe God can. That's faith. And when God doesn't do what we want him to, but we follow him anyway, that's BIG faith.

Well, you will never believe what happened. Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego survived the fiery furnace! And when the king saw that they were still alive and had FAITH in God even when it was hard, he started to worship God too! So, what does this mean for you? It means, faith is believing God can do anything, even if he doesn't. But even more than that, **when you have faith, you never know who might be watching and learning about God because of the faith you have in your own life! When we have BIG FAITH we are changed and the people around us can be changed too.**

When is a time you saw someone have BIG faith?

Day 10

Isaiah 7:14

Some books in the Bible are written by people who were called prophets. Being a prophet meant you were someone who talked directly to God, and who God talked back to. So any time God had a message for the people of Israel, He would tell a prophet and they would deliver the message.

Sometimes the messages from God were things like, "Keep up the good work! You guys are doing a great job letting the world know what I am like!" And other times the message was more like, "You guys!! You have forgotten all about me! You aren't caring about the things I care about!"

And then there were other messages. Messages about what God was GOING to do, and then the message from the prophets was for the people to get ready to see exactly what was going to happen.

In a book of the Bible written by the prophet Isaiah, he told the people of Israel to get ready, because God was going to send a baby whose name was going to be "Immanuel", which means "God with us." Do you have any idea who that baby was that Isaiah was talking about?

It was Jesus!

Way before Jesus was ever born, God was getting the people ready for His birth, so they could live expecting Him when the time came for Him to be born. These parts of the Bible were like little clues the people could use to find God when He showed up.

It looks a little different now, but we also have clues all around us that help us find God too! Whenever you see anything that is beautiful, or kind, or self-less, or makes you say, "Wow!" you are seeing a clue—a clue that tells you God has been there, or is there! And any time you show other people, you are doing just what the prophets in the Bible did—you are giving others the message of God.

So pay attention. Look around you. We are surrounded by things that point us to God and every time we see one, and notice what God has done, our faith grows!

Where have you seen a clue pointing to God? Where do you see God most?

Day 11

Deuteronomy 34

Do you remember several days ago when we read about Joseph? And how Joseph lived in Egypt? Well, Joseph's family eventually moved there, and after awhile he had babies and then they grew up and had babies, and then they grew up and had MORE babies, and before too long, the family Joseph came from became a HUGE group of people, known as the Hebrews.

Well, the Egyptian king, called Pharaoh, was worried that all of these Hebrews would want to take over and be in control of the land, so to keep that from happening he made them slaves. This meant that the Egyptians were in charge of the Hebrews and bossed them around and made them do all the hard work without ever being paid. It was terrible. And the people prayed to God over and over that they would be rescued and set free.

Well, God heard them, and sent a man named Moses to be their leader. And Moses went to Pharaoh over and over asking to set the Hebrew people free. At first Pharaoh refused, but eventually they were set free, and Moses led this HUGE group of people out of Egypt and into, what God called the Promised Land. **This would finally be the place where they could become the big nation God told them about!** It was an exciting time, but then they ran into some trouble.

The people began grumbling because there weren't a lot of food options in the desert they were travelling through to get to the land. No Chick-fil-A, no McDonalds, no Wendy's. It was miserable. And then they started to wonder if God was really as powerful and big as they once thought. Eventually they started to want to go BACK to Egypt! To being slaves, because they thought it was better than travelling in the desert.

But Moses kept leading them. And he taught them the Ten Commandments from God, and over time they started to learn how to live like they were free and like God was in charge. After FORTY YEARS they finally came to the land that would be theirs. And Moses, now an old man was not going to live to be able to get there. **But do you know what God did? He took Moses to the top of a mountain, and He showed Moses the land he had been leading his people to.** Even though Moses wouldn't be alive to lead them into it, God let him see exactly what they had been waiting for all this time.

Joy is a feeling of happiness you feel deep down inside, even when things on the outside aren't perfect. Moses could have been really mad he wasn't going to be able to live to see the Hebrew people live in their new land, but instead, he had JOY because he had done what it was his job to do. He had led them this far, and even though he would have liked to go farther, he had JOY for doing all he had been able to do.

Learning to have joy is hard because it means we are choosing to see good where it doesn't always seem like there are good things happening. **Joy is learning to be grateful for what is right when not everything is right. Joy is hard. It's a lot easier to grumble and complain and to wish things were different. But JOY says, even though I wish things were different, I am grateful for what is.**

Moses had joy even though the story didn't go exactly as planned. When is a time you can choose joy when things don't go your way?

Have your parents ever asked you to do something you didn't want to do? Like, empty the dishwasher, take in your brother's plate from the table, or sit with a kid at school who doesn't usually have someone to sit with?

Sometimes we are told to do something that doesn't make any sense. Sometimes we do what was asked of us. And sometimes...we don't. Has that ever happened to you? You were asked to do something and you didn't want to so you pretended you didn't hear, or went and did the opposite, or just ran away from whatever it was?

If you've done that before than you have something in common with a man named Jonah from the Bible. Jonah knew God and loved God, but one day God asked Jonah to do something he DID NOT want to do. What was it?

God asked Jonah to go to a city called Nineveh and to tell the people who lived there all about who God was and what He was like and how much He loved the people who lived there. The only problem was, the people who lived in Nineveh were not great people. They made bad choices, they didn't follow God's rules, and they didn't really act like they wanted to be any better. **So when God asked Jonah to go to the people in Nineveh, Jonah thought, "Nah, I'd rather not."** And do you know what he did instead? He got on a boat and went in the opposite direction of Nineveh. Maybe he thought he could trick God.

Except, God was not tricked. He saw Jonah. He noticed how he avoided doing what God asked him to do. And God was not happy. Sure, He was upset that Jonah disobeyed him. He was sad that Jonah thought he could lie to God and that God wouldn't notice. But that wasn't what made God the most upset.

What made God the most sad, was that Jonah thought the people of Nineveh didn't deserve to hear about God and how much God loved them. What made God the most upset was that Jonah didn't think the people of Nineveh were good enough to learn about who God was. God was disappointed because Jonah thought he was better than the people who lived in Nineveh.

God is a God who shows JOY. He shows JOY when we do the right thing, even if doesn't make sense. But do you know what brings Him the greatest JOY? When we believe what He is like. And what is He like? **He is so good and kind and generous and He wants EVERYONE to know about Him.** He never looks at someone and thinks they aren't good enough to hear about His love. That they are so bad He can't rescue them. **God gets JOY from sharing what He is like with everyone, even the people we might not expect.**

That's what Jonah learned. In fact, God cared so much about His message of love getting to Nineveh that God had a big fish swallow Jonah up, then spit him out so Jonah understood God was not kidding around. **GO TO NINEVAH!!! God said. And this time Jonah did.**

What is a way you can love someone this week that will give them and God JOY?

Zephaniah

Can I tell you a secret? Your parents are CRAZY about you. It's true. I know because I am a parent and I am crazy about my own kids. Your parents stay awake at night thinking about you and how you make them smile and make them laugh (and maybe sometimes drive them crazy too) but mostly about how they can't believe how lucky they are to get to be YOUR parents.

If you ever find your parents looking at you funny it's probably because they are imagining what you were like as a little baby and trying to figure out how it is you got so big that now you are losing teeth and going to school and building legos and telling jokes and acting like this little adults when they are sure you were born just five minutes ago.

Parents can be weird like that. They don't look at you and see your mistakes or the things you've done wrong, or how you've messed up. They look at you and see how perfect the color of your eyes are, or how easily you smile, and how your laugh makes them want to laugh, and how much they love your curiosity and your energy and the sound of your feet running around in the hallway upstairs.

See? I told you parents are weird.

You now what's even crazier? God feels the same way about you! He's like a parent who can't get enough of you. There's a verse in a book of the Bible called Zephaniah that says,

For the Lord your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will REJOICE over you with JOYFUL songs.

Close your eyes for a minute. What do you think about when you think about God? Maybe you picture someone far away. Maybe you picture someone who is watching you to make sure you don't mess up. Maybe you imagine a old guy with a long white beard. But have you ever thought of God like this verse from Zephaniah describes Him?

God delights in us. His eyes light up when He thinks of us. When we laugh, He laughs along with us. He is glad around us. He calms our fears and sings songs of love and joy to us and about us.

When we begin to understand just what God thinks of us, you will notice something. You will start to think of yourself differently. And you'll start to think of others differently too. When you see God as joyful you will begin to become the person He sees you as!

That's why parents want you to know how much we love you, and why God wants you to know how much He loves you. Because when you live like you are loved, when you live like the God who created you takes JOY in you, you make better choices, you are a kinder person and you are more loving to others.

Don't ever forget it. No matter what it *feels* like, God takes JOY in YOU!

Day 14

1 Samuel 18

Have you ever wanted something so bad it was all you could think about? And then, not only did you NOT get it, but someone else got it instead? Maybe it was a fit bit, or a new Lego set, or an American doll. **No matter what it was, when you didn't get it, I bet it was a terrible feeling. It might have made you feel angry, or sad, or frustrated, or jealous.**

But I bet what it didn't make you feel was JOY.

There is a story in the Bible about David, who was one of the best kings of Israel, but before he was king, a man named Saul was king. Now, a long time ago when it came time to figure out who was going to be the next king, it usually just stayed in the family. So if Saul was king, than one of Saul's sons would be the next king. But God had told a prophet, Samuel, that David was going to be the next king, and pretty soon, people started to hear about it. I bet David was excited to get to be king. But do you know who probably wasn't excited at all? Saul. But not just Saul, Saul's son, Jonathan, would have been upset too.

Wouldn't you have been? I mean, if your dad was the king and everybody thought you should be the next king, wouldn't you be mad if some guy who wasn't a part of your family got the job that should have been yours? I would be.

But here's what's so crazy. *Jonathan wasn't upset.* Saul was furious. Saul was mad. Saul was so angry he tried to get rid of David so that the kings could stay in his family. But Jonathan not only wasn't mad at David, Jonathan was his friend, and when Jonathan heard his dad was trying to hurt David, do you know what he did? Jonathan told David, so David could get away and stay safe.

It would have made a lot more sense of Jonathan to be angry because he was losing something that he thought he deserved and belonged to him—the chance to be king. But instead, Jonathan found joy in his friendship with David. In celebrating the opportunity David had to be king, Jonathan was able to find JOY some place where it would have been hard to find it. And when he did that, Jonathan was letting David know that their friendship meant more to him than any position of king.

Joy isn't always about getting what we want or what we think we should have. We can have joy even when someone else gets what we want. We can celebrate them, even if it is hard for us.

What is a time when someone got something you wanted and you had a hard time celebrating it? What was it? How did it make you feel? Who is someone who can celebrate this week?

Day 15

Have you ever had a day where it feels like everything goes wrong? Maybe you wake up super grumpy and discover the shirt you wanted to wear to school is at the bottom of the dirty clothes

hamper. Or when you go to brush your teeth, you spill toothpaste all down the front. Then when you got eat breakfast, you are out of your favorite cereal, your brother got the last granola bar for lunch and your shoes are still wet from that giant puddle you jumped in the day before. When you get to school it's still raining so there's no outdoor recess, your water bottle leaked in your backpack and you have no one to sit with at lunch.

This day is officially the WORST DAY EVER.

Sometimes days like this make us wish we could climb back in bed and start all over. When everything feels like it is going wrong, it can feel like nothing good could possibly happen.

Remember how we talked about David yesterday and how he became the king of Israel? What is so cool about David's story is that in one part of the Bible we read all about his life—who his family was, and what he did when he was king. And in another part we get to read some of the things he wrote himself—kind of like a diary or a journal.

The book of Psalms is a book full of poems written by a lot of different people, but mostly David. Some from when he was a king and some from when he was still a shepherd, spending his days and nights in the fields taking care of the sheep.

In Psalm 100, we read some verses that David actually wrote where he says, *"Shout with joy to the Lord all the earth! Worship the Lord with gladness. Come before him, singing with joy."*

It's easy to imagine David had a pretty god life. He was a king, right?!? But before being a king when he was a shepherd, he had to sleep outside and try to keep his sheep safe from wild animals. After he knew he was going to be king he had to be patient, waiting for the right time before he could be in charge. After he became king he had enemies, people who wanted to hurt him, who didn't think he should be in charge. David would have had easy time to come before God complaining and whining and frustrated. But David writes about coming before God with JOY. About worshipping God not because everything was going the way David wanted it to. But because God was God. Because God was good. Because even if not everything was perfect, God was still in control. And that was a reason to have joy.

That means on our hardest days, on our terrible, no good, rotten days, we can choose joy because of who God is.

Think of a time when it is hard to have joy but you can choose to worship God anyway.

Day 16

Way back in the very first book of the Bible, there were two brothers. Their names were Jacob, whose name meant "trickster" and Esau. They were twins, but Esau was older by just a few minutes than Jacob. Jacob and Esau were very, very different. And Esau, because he was the older brother, would be the son who would get special treatment from his parents. When he got old enough he would get their land and animals and a special blessing. And Jacob was jealous. He wanted to be the oldest and get these things from his parents.

So one day, Jacob set out to trick his brother. Esau had been out all day and hadn't had anything to eat, and Jacob had spent the day making a delicious stew. You know when something good is cooking in the kitchen and the smell takes over the whole house? And when you are hungry, imagining how good that food is going to taste is all you can think about? Well, that was Esau. He was hungry and tired, and the smell of the food was so good he thought he was going to faint if he didn't eat it soon.

So he came in and said, "Jacob! Can I please have some soup?" And do you know what Jacob did. He acted like a trickster. He said, "Sure, you can have some! But...you have to give me something in return. I'll give you the soup if you give me all things you are supposed to get as the older brother. The blessings from our mom and dad. All the special treatment because you came first."

And do you know what Esau said? He was so hungry and so tired and the soup smelled so good, he *agreed*.

So when their father got really old and the time came for each of the brothers to get what was going to be left to them, Jacob pretended to be Esau and got everything that should have been for Esau.

You can probably imagine what this did to Jacob and Esau and their relationship. Jacob cared more about stuff than his brother. And Esau cared more about soup. When they stopped caring about each other, they made poor choices, selfish choices that broke their relationship. In fact, Esau got so mad at what Jacob had done, he was going to try to hurt him, so Jacob ran away from home.

And Jacob stayed away from home for years! He got married and kids, and all of that time, he and Esau never saw each other. They forgot more and more what it was like to be brothers and friends. It was like they forgot the other one existed.

Until one day, when Jacob had packed up his family to move to a new place, and he heard that Esau and his family weren't far away. Can you imagine how Jacob felt? Scared about what Esau might do to him. Angry that after all of this time his brother could still make him this upset. Afraid of what Esau might say.

The next day, when it came time for the brothers to meet...after years of being apart, after years of silence, after years of being mean to one another and hurting each other and looking out for themselves over their brother and making choices that made their lives better but hurt their brother's...after all of that, when Esau saw Jacob, *he hugged him*.

Not only that, they both cried out of happiness and seeing each other again. They made peace with each other.

Have you heard of that phrase before? Make PEACE? It's when you realize things between you and someone else are bad, that you and someone else have both done something wrong, that the relationship was broken because of it, and you both want to work at fixing it.

Jacob gave Esau a lot of gifts. He was humble. He did everything he could to fix it. It didn't make what he did wrong go away. And it didn't make it okay that he did it. **But when you make peace you are making a decision to pick hope for a relationship in the future, instead of holding anger over the past. Making peace is imagining what might be able to happen with someone who has hurt you instead of focusing on the wrong.**

Making peace is hard work. It doesn't always make you feel warm and fuzzy inside. But we choose to it, because we want to work for a future of peace instead of a future of hurt.

Has there ever been someone who hurt your feelings that you had a hard time forgiving? How can you begin to make peace?

Day 17
Luke 1:26-38; 46-56

We are just a few days away from Christmas! Can you believe it? You have made it so far, and now it's closer than ever. In these last couple of days, as we learn more and more about PEACE, we are going to look at some of the most important people in the Christmas story. And we are going to start with someone who, if it hadn't been for her, we wouldn't have Christmas to celebrate! Do you know who I'm talking about?

Mary!

Mary was Jesus' mom, but when she found out she was going to have a baby she was younger than most moms now. It says in the book of Luke that an angel came to visit Mary to give her the news. (Can you imagine what that must have felt like? To have an angel visit you? And then tell you, you were going to have God's son?) Luke says Mary was confused. And the angel tells her to not be afraid, (which means she was probably afraid.) And I don't blame her! The angel tells her not to be afraid, that God has chosen her and is happy with her! Then the angel tells Mary this baby comes from God and will grow up to be as powerful as the king David.

I bet Mary had a lot of questions. But Luke tells us Mary responds to the angel, saying,

"I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true."

That's what PEACE looks like. Mary had peace even when her mind was full of questions. Even when she was confused. Even when what she was hearing didn't make any sense. In fact she had so much peace that when she went to visit her cousin, who was also going to have a baby, she sings a song about how big God is, how great He is, how much He looks after His people, even the ones who aren't considered important! Especially those people!! Mary knows that even though her future looked scary and confusing, God could be trusted. And when she could trust God she could have peace.

Peace is possible. Not just when everything goes your way, or when everything is good and there is nothing to worry about. Peace is possible ALL THE TIME, because all the time, God is

STILL God. Which means he is always looking out for you. He is always close to you. He is always full of love and goodness and kindness. And He has never and will never leave you alone.

Even when peace on the outside seems impossible, peace on the inside is possible!

Day 18

Matthew 1:18-24

You know what I think one of the hardest parts about being a kid is? Not being in control of anything. Your parents tell you what to do, your teachers tell you what to do, your coaches, maybe even your older brother or sister tell you what to do. Sometimes, as a kid, it can feel like everyone is your boss except you!

And **when you don't have control, peace can be hard to feel.** Instead, you get a feeling in your stomach or in your chest that feels kind of tight, and makes you feel anything but good.

When I think about the Christmas story there is one person who I think can understand that feeling of not being in control: Joseph. Joseph and Mary were going to get married but then an angel comes and tells Mary she is going to have a baby and that this baby is God's son. And then the angel comes to Joseph and tells him the news, and talk about a surprise! Talk about things being out of your control!

When things happen to us or around us that aren't what we have planned we have a couple of choices for how we can act.

We can throw a temper tantrum, like toddlers do (and some grownups—even if they aren't kicking and screaming like a toddler, grown ups can act pretty silly when they don't get their way sometimes) or we can make a decision to make the best with what we have.

Joseph made the decision to make the best out of what happened. So he loved Mary and took care of her, even though he didn't understand why or how he had been chosen to be the dad on Earth for baby Jesus. **He did the best he could and chose to have peace even when he didn't have any control for how his story was going.**

Not having control can mean not having peace. But it doesn't have to. You can decide what you do have control over. And one of those things is your attitude. If you can't control what's happening, you can control how you react to it. And even having that little bit of control might make peace easier.

So the next time you are told to do something you don't want to by a parent or teacher or anyone else, or the next time things don't go the way you expect them to, decide if not having control is going to take your peace. Because it doesn't have to. **And when you decide to have peace, even though it's hard, you'll find things aren't as difficult as they could be.**

When is a time you can have peace, even if things don't go the way you want?

Day 19

Birth of Jesus

Have you ever asked your parents for something and they don't answer you back? Like you ask how much longer until you get to your grandparent's house, or where your shoes are, or if you can get a puppy for Christmas, and your parents just give you SILENCE?

Not hearing anything can almost be more frustrating than hearing an answer you don't want!

Back before Jesus was born people had been praying to God and talking to God and asking God when He was going to come and rescue His people from being under the control of the Romans who ruled their land. They wondered when God would send someone to be in charge of their people. But the problem was, *God wasn't answering. There were no prophets. There were no messages. There was nothing happening. And people started to wonder if God had forgotten them.*

Because it kept being so, so, so, quiet.

Until one night, in a crowded town, with full hotels and busy streets, and chilly night air, the strangest thing happened. **A baby was born. And even though no one knew it yet, Mary knew and Joseph knew what that baby meant. That God wasn't quiet anymore. That God had finally spoken up. That God was moving again. And that God had not forgotten them after all.**

There was a name the prophet Isaiah gave Jesus years and years and years before He was born, describing what Jesus would be like when He showed up. Isaiah called him the *Prince of Peace*. And He came at a time when they needed that peace most. Because it felt like God was nowhere to be found. But that's what was so great about Jesus being born when He was. **Just because it seemed like God had been quiet that whole time, doesn't mean He was. Just because it seemed like God wasn't working, doesn't mean He wasn't.**

God does His best work when we least expect it. Like He did with baby Jesus. And in the darkest night, with no one else around, the people who were paying the closest attention saw it. The baby who was a prince. The prince of peace.

Just because you get silence sometimes doesn't mean God isn't listening. And it doesn't mean God isn't doing something. It just might look different than you think. But you have to pay attention! Because when Jesus came as the prince of peace, it wasn't how people expected. **So don't stop paying attention, don't stop looking, don't stop hoping that God can do the most wonderful thing you can imagine!**

DAY 20

Luke 2:8-20

Do you have a favorite character in a movie or a book? What makes them your favorite? When it comes to the Christmas story, I have a favorite character, but the best part about the Christmas story is it's real! It actually happened. Which makes it even more amazing. Because God used real people to tell the greatest story ever told about the birth of His Son!

So, do you know who my favorite people are? The Shepherds.

Now let me tell you why. Mary and Joseph both got a visit from an angel months before it was time for Jesus to be born. And then, when they were in Bethlehem and it was time for Mary to have a baby and there was nowhere to go, they stayed in what would have been like a barn, where people kept their animals, but imagine it being made out of rock. So it was more like a cave—dark and maybe kind of damp and quiet. And because they were in a barn, there was no one there to celebrate their new baby's arrival!

Well, one of the things people like most in the whole world is celebrating a new baby. If you have a younger brother or sister you may have found this out. You go to the hospital and there are balloons and flowers and you come home and there is food and presents. People love new babies! But Mary and Joseph? They were all alone. More than that, they were all alone with the news about who Jesus was going to be! It was supposed to be a big, special, and important day. But it happened far away from home, with no friends around and no one to understand just how HUGE this moment was.

Until something happened...

Maybe God thought it was too quiet in that barn (except for a crying baby.) Maybe He couldn't keep His work a secret anymore. Maybe He was just BURSTING, so excited to let the world know about the biggest news yet. I don't know exactly, but I know, that night, God didn't just send one angel, but a whole BUNCH of angels to a group of people NO ONE would have expected to be the ones to hear the good news. He sent angels to the shepherds to let them know the great news!!! That not far from them, there was a new king! And this wasn't just any king. This was a king sent straight from God, and who was there to let people know exactly what God was like, to let people know God was happy with them—so happy he was willing to become a little baby to join them! The actual words the angels said were, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests!"

The most interesting thing about it, is that the news of the newborn king didn't go to other kings, or important people, people who would have been able to spread the news to as many people as possible as quickly as possible. Nope. God asked himself, "Who needs this good news the most? Who are the people who might not think I like them, or that they matter to me, or that they're important? I know! The people who take care of stinky, smelly, dirty, sheep in the middle of the night, in the cold, in the loneliness, in the middle of the wilderness—they need to hear I came for THEM!"

And so that's what God did. He sent angels to the shepherds, not because they were famous, not because they had a lot of money, not because they were super good and followed all the

rules. He sent the angels to the shepherds because they were normal, average, regular people who sometimes mess up and sometimes have bad attitudes, who don't follow all the rules or get it right all of the time. He sent the angels to them and said, "Hey guys! This good news for EVERYONE! Even you! ESPECIALLY you!"

The peace we can feel on the inside is because we are the like shepherds and God is God. Because the good news was for them. And the good news is for us. And the good news is of God coming to Earth in the most ordinary way that no one expected, because He God likes us enough to be with us. All of us. Nothing could keep him away.

I think I like the shepherds so much because sometimes I feel like a shepherd. Maybe you do too? Like you don't get it right all the time, or you aren't important enough or fancy enough for something. But then God looks at the shepherds and He looks at you and He looks at me and he says, "Nope. You are just the one I wanted to share my good news with. Are you ready? I'm here! I'm with you! No more guessing what I'm like, no more wondering who I am. Just look at Jesus. You'll see me. Now go and tell everyone what you've heard!"

That's the good news of Christmas. That God has come and He came to be with all of us!

Who is someone you can share the good news of Christmas with?