

Do You Know the Way to Bethlehem?

Mississippi Conference 2008 Advent Calendar

Saturday, November 29 – PREPARATION FOR THE JOURNEY

Our journey through Advent begins with God. One of the names given to God is “Shepherd.” What is the job of a shepherd? Where in the Bible do you find the word shepherd? How is God like a shepherd to you?

Sunday, November 30 – THE FIRST DAY OF ADVENT

As a family make an Advent wreath together. Light the first candle, the candle of FAITH. Talk about a time you had to rely on your faith in God. Close by praying The Lord’s Prayer together. If you have a nativity set, place the shepherd(s) around the crèche today.

ADVENT WREATH HOW-TO

The Advent wreath is one special way that we observe the season of Advent. An Advent wreath looks a little like an ordinary Christmas wreath laid on its side. The difference is an Advent wreath also has candles on it – usually four candles placed around the edge of the wreath, though many Advent wreaths also have a fifth candle in the middle. In the church, we light one candle on the first Sunday in Advent. The next Sunday, we light that candle, plus a second one. The third Sunday, we light the first two candles, plus a third one...and so on until Christmas Eve when all four candles, plus the fifth one in the center, the “Christ candle,” are lit.

An Advent wreath may have plain white candles, or it may have colored candles. If the candles are colored, the candles for the first, second and fourth Sundays are purple, which is the liturgical color of the Advent season. The purple stands for penance. The candle for the third Sunday is rose-colored (a special shade of pinkish-purple), because it is lit halfway through the Advent season, when we are starting to relax a little in anticipation of Christmas. The center candle, if there is one, is white, which is the liturgical color for Christmas.

Many families enjoy having their own Advent wreath at home. You can buy an Advent wreath, but it's very easy (and fun!) to make your own.

Traditional Advent Wreath

Supplies: small green wreath (real or artificial)

5 candles (3 purple, 1 pink, 1 white or 5 white)

Place the wreath flat on a table and position the purple and pink candles on the wreath. Position the white candle in the center of the wreath.

Children’s Advent Wreath

Supplies: sturdy paper plate (set right side up)

green construction paper

glue

scissors

5 votive candles (3 purple, 1 pink, 1 white or 5 white)

Trace and cut out lots of handprints of the whole family using the green construction paper. Glue these handprints around the edge of the plate. Overlap the handprints in order to make the wreath full. You can use a washable red stamp pad to make clusters of thumbprints as the “berries” on the wreath, if you like. Position the purple and pink candles on the wreath. Position the white candle in the center of the wreath.

Never leave candles burning unattended. Adults should be present any time the candles are lit.

NOTE: Short Advent wreath candlelighting meditations for home and church use produced by the General Board of Discipleship are available on the GBOD Worship Web site. (http://www.gbod.org/worship/default.asp?act=reader&item_id=45396)

Monday, December 1

Community Center Focus: Good Shepherd Center, Vicksburg

How might you serve as a shepherd this week in partnership with the Good Shepherd Center in Vicksburg? Make a list of the variety of animals you think were present in the stable that holy night when Jesus was born. Will you send the gift of \$1.00 for each animal you named? How about \$1.00 in honor of each person that is like a shepherd to you?

What is/was your favorite art activity as a child? Can you gather the supplies for that activity and donate it to the ministries of Good Shepherd Center or another community center?

Tuesday, December 2 – Did you know that sheep are not very smart? They rely on a shepherd to tell them where to go, keep them from danger, and show them where to find food. In fact, sheep often get lost, can't find their way back to the flock, and need their shepherd to lead them back home. Jesus said that he is the Good Shepherd and we are his sheep. We, too, need Jesus to keep us from danger, lead us on the right paths in our lives, and find us when we are lost. What other ways does Jesus, the Good Shepherd, care for you as his sheep?

Wednesday, December 3 – Read Genesis 12:1-4. Abram believed in God and did what God asked of him. Take a walk together and discuss how God is asking you to walk in faith and where you are being asked to put your faith into action.

Thursday, December 4

Community Center Focus: Edwards Street Fellowship Center, Hattiesburg

How might you partner with the ministries of Edwards Street Fellowship? Can you send a bag of rice or beans for each person in your family? What is your favorite winter meal? Can you supply the contents of this meal to Edwards Street Fellowship's food pantry? Yesterday we reflected on putting our faith in action. Consider looking for a time in the coming days that your faith can be put into action through serving others at your local food pantry or soup kitchen.

Friday, December 5 – Plug in your Christmas lights. Do you see the electricity? No – but you know it is there! So, it is with our faith. We do not see the power of God itself, but we can see the evidence of God's power and love within the world and the people around us. Where do you see the evidence of God's power and love today? How do you show evidence of God's power in your own life?

The Bible says faith is believing in or trusting that which we cannot see. Grab a partner and try a faith fall! Standing one person in front of the other, separate yourselves at a distance of two or three steps. The person in front will keep his/her feet together and legs straight while falling into the arms of a partner. Have faith in your partner that he/she will catch you!

Saturday, December 6

Community Center Focus: Wesley House, Meridian

"Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." These words were spoken by the father of Methodism, John Wesley. These words are also the guiding force for the ministries of Wesley House. Talk about how you can live out the words of John Wesley in your community. Pray for Wesley House.

Sunday, December 7 – On your Advent wreath, re-light the candle of FAITH, and light a second purple candle as the candle of HOPE. Take some time to look at the Christmas cards you have received this season. What messages of hope do they contain? What kinds of messages are you sending this season? As you read the cards you have received, pray for those who have sent them to you.

Throughout the Bible, angels are the messengers of hope. If you have an angel or angels to add to your nativity scene, add them today, or draw an angel.

Monday, December 8 – Share with your family your favorite Christmas song or hymn. What does this song say to you about hope?

Tuesday, December 9 – **ΑΩ** Do you know what these symbols are? The first is Alpha and the second is Omega. They are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet and another name for Jesus Christ. Read Revelation 1:8. This is one of the great gifts that Christ gives to us – He is before we are, He is after we are, and He is with us all throughout our lives.

What is the first verse in the Bible? What is the last verse in the Bible? Does the Bible contain the whole Christian story?

Wednesday, December 10

Community Center Focus: Moore Community House, Biloxi

Hurricane Katrina destroyed nearly all eight buildings that comprised Moore Community House. Hundreds of volunteers came and aided in the clean-up. Now, Moore Community House is starting to re-build. Can you send supplies?

Thursday, December 11 – Do you remember the story of Noah and the ark? Re-tell the story as a family. What was the symbol of hope and promise God gave to Noah after the flood? Where do you see signs of God's hope in the world today? Watch the movie "Evan Almighty" together.

Friday, December 12 – "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..." – (Isaiah 9:6) These are some of the names of God. What is the origin of your name? What is special or unique about your name? What characteristics describe you?

Saturday, December 13

Focus: Methodist Children's Homes

Families come in many sizes and shapes; they are made up of many different people who have a variety of interests and hobbies. What is something you and your family enjoy doing together? Maybe it is going out for ice cream or pizza, playing a favorite game, creating a special work of art, or sharing a treasured book. Whatever it is, consider offering it as a gift to the children of Methodist Children's Homes.

Sunday, December 14 – Re-light the candles of FAITH and HOPE on your Advent wreath. Today also light the pink or rose-colored candle, the candle of LOVE. Celebrate the gift of love by baking together and sharing your treats in the week ahead. You might use the family-friendly recipe here. With a focus on love and faithfulness, this is a good day to place Mary and Joseph in the nativity scene.

OREO COOKIE BARK RECIPE

- 1 package (13 oz.) crème-filled chocolate sandwich cookies
- 2 bags white chocolate chips

Line a 9-inch-square pan with waxed paper. Coat with nonstick spray; set aside. Pour the cookies into a large Ziploc bag. Using a rolling pin or the back of a wooden spoon, break the cookies into small pieces. (This is a job the children will enjoy!)

Melt the chips in a large microwave-safe bowl according to the package directions. Remove from the microwave and quickly fold in the crushed cookie pieces with a spatula. Scrape the mixture into the prepared pan and spread evenly. Refrigerate until solid, about 1 hour. Remove the bark from the pan and carefully peel off the waxed paper. Break into bite-size pieces and store in an airtight container.

Monday, December 15 – Read together I Corinthians 13 from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*:

"If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, 'Jump,' and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm

nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

"Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always 'me first,'
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.
Love never dies.

"Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love."

Where do you see love expressed to you in each of your family members? How do you show love to every member of your family? Find one new way to say "I love you" to each member of your family today.

Tuesday, December 16 – How many presents have you already purchased this year? How many more to go? How many presents are under the tree with your name on them?

What about giving yourself as a present to someone this week? Consider what it would mean to give someone you care for the gift of your presence. You don't have to wrap or bake anything, you simply go (or stay home) and visit. You may share a cup of hot chocolate and catch up on what has been happening, gather to watch a favorite movie or curl up in front of the fire in order to re-connect with one another and reflect on the gift of God's presence to us in the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. Think about it – the most precious gift we can offer someone, sometimes including our own family, is the gift of our presence, wrapped in love and tied up with precious memories. The gift of yourself – to whom will you offer it?

Wednesday, December 17

Community Center Focus: St. Andrew's Mission, McComb

Read Matthew 25:31-45. St. Andrew's Mission offers the gift of love to those who need it most in its community. Think about your class at school, the places you work and play. Identify those you believe to be the "least of these." How might you offer them love in the days and weeks ahead?

Thursday, December 18 – "Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. You must make allowance for each other's faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony." (Colossians 3:12-14)

Look at your Christmas tree. What did you "clothe" your tree in this year? One family's Christmas tradition is to place a new family ornament on the tree each year. The ornament has to be something that is significant and representative of the whole family. This year the family will be placing some Disney characters on the tree to remind them of the fun they shared at Disney World this spring. Each year, the ornament will remind them of love and laughter, the endless walking and talking, the joy of being a family and the blessings of vacationing together. What characteristics do you see in the "clothing" that has been placed on your tree?

What Christ-like clothes do you wear today? Are there things that you are wearing that need to be shed? Where do your clothes of love, patience, humility, gentleness, and kindness need a little mending?

Friday, December 19 – In only six days we will celebrate the birth of a brand new baby – baby Jesus! What things have to be done to prepare for a new baby? What would need to happen in your own home to welcome in a new baby? Think about your church nursery. Pray for the babies and the nursery workers.

Saturday, December 20 – Consider the saying “Change a life, change the world.” Think about your own life. Who are the life-changers in your life? What have they done to be a life-changer for you? How can you be a life-changer for someone else?

Sunday, December 21 – On your Advent wreath, re-light the candles of FAITH, HOPE, and LOVE. Today also light the last purple candle, the candle of JOY. As you light this candle read Psalm 66:1-4. How do your words and your actions share the joy of God’s goodness with all the earth and its inhabitants?

As a family, look for where the word “joy” is used in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. Then read Matthew 2:10. With joy and excitement for the coming of Christmas and the birth of Jesus Christ, place the star in your nativity scene or cut out paper stars.

Monday, December 22 - Yesterday we focused on the way we bring joy to others. Today, the question we ask is “What brings you joy in your own life?” “How often do you recognize and celebrate the gift of joy as it comes to you? Take time to offer a prayer of gratitude for the joy in your life.

Tuesday, December 23 Community Center Focus: Bethlehem Center, Jackson

Be creative and experience again the journey that Mary and Joseph took to Bethlehem. How might your family dramatize the story found in Luke 2:1-20?

Some suggestions:

- Assign each family member a character (Mary, Joseph, shepherd, angel, innkeeper, animals). Read Luke 2:1-20 and then ask each person to share what this experience might have been like from his/her character’s perspective.
- Act it out! Grab your bathrobes, dish towels, canes, baby doll, stuffed animals and See and Say toys! One person can be the narrator. As the narrator reads, the actors and actresses perform according to the story.

Re-tell the story. This is a story most of us think we know. But, how much do we really know? Give everyone a piece of paper, and have each person write out the nativity story. Then, look up the story in the Bible (Luke 2 and Matthew 1). How did you do?

Wednesday, December 24 “Be still and know that I am God!” Today is a busy day and night for most of us. It is full of last minute preparations, travel, worship, excitement and busyness. Yet, in the midst of all the noise, God reminds us to be still and rest in His presence. When will you sit, be still, and rest in the presence of God this day? Find a seat, take a breath, and simply be in the presence of Christ.

Thursday, December 25 – Merry Christmas! Celebrate today for Jesus Christ is born! Put Jesus in the manger. Light all the candles in your Advent wreath, including the Christ candle in the center. As you gather with your family today, offer a prayer of thanksgiving for each person that Christ has placed in your family.

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