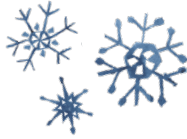


A
"LESS IS MORE"
CHRISTMAS
DEVOTIONAL





*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.*

+ JOHN 1:1





INTRODUCTION



Christmas has become the biggest holiday in North America, arguably the biggest in the world – and in many ways, it has become a holiday of “more”: more presents, more stuff, more events, more expectations, more stress.

But as it turns out, if we dial back the “more,” we get closer to the heart of Advent and Christmas. For the stories of the season all point in a “less is more” direction. Jesus is born not in a palace, but in a barn. The angel Gabriel appears to a young, vulnerable, pregnant teenager. The heavenly host appears not to royalty, but to shepherds, with nothing to give but their presence. And even the Wise Ones from the East, the only figures in all the stories who bring gifts, offer only three.

Less is more.

So this year, let’s get back to basics. Let’s recapture the beauty of simplicity. Let’s have music and presents and celebration, yes, but let’s focus on what’s most important, and put first things first. This year, let’s have less stuff and less stress – and more hope, more peace, more joy, and more love.

Here’s how to use this “Less is More” Christmas Poster and Devotional to do just that.

Put the poster up somewhere conspicuous (think: the fridge!), so you can check off activities each week as you do them, in no particular order.

And keep the devotional handy (think: kitchen counter or dining room table) for two reasons: first, to follow the weekly devotional services; and second, for instructions, ideas, and resources for some of the activities on the poster.

Together, the poster and devotional will help make this Advent and Christmas season the most “less is more” yuletide yet!

Week One

HOPE



LIGHT

One candle (for hope)

READ

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Humanity coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." + Luke 21:25-28

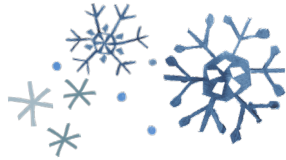
MEDITATE

We are living through a time of extraordinary distress and confusion. When we think about how many lives have been lost to the pandemic; how unfair our systems are to women, people of color, people with disabilities, the LGBTQ+ community, and so many others; and how easy it is to let the daily grind distract us from the pain and inequity all around – it's enough to make us feel numb all over and fall into despair. But this week's guiding scripture calls us to "stand up," to "raise our heads," and to believe deep down in our bones that the night is always darkest right before the dawn. We don't need to do it all, but we can do a little bit each day. We can take part in God's work with humble, simple clarity. Less is more – and thanks be to God, our "redemption is drawing near!"

PRAY

Loving God, turn our despair into hope, our apathy into action. Give us humble, strong hearts to act in simple, beautiful ways, always rejoicing in your redemption drawing near. In Jesus' name, Amen.

ADVENT BODY MEDITATION

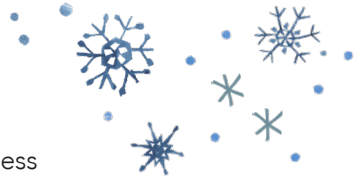


Meditation, or the practice of awareness in body and mind, has been an important spiritual practice for thousands of years. It's a great way for adults and children alike to regulate stress, relax, listen to that still small voice, and simplify this hectic holiday season.

This "body meditation" is for the whole family. Have one person read while everyone else participates. Change readers the next time everyone does the weekly meditation:

Lie down on your back, close your eyes, let your legs and your arms relax and fall to the sides

Take a deep breath:
God is in the air we breathe



Breathe in hope, breathe out anxiety or sadness

Pay attention to different parts of your body, starting with your feet: how do your feet feel? Are they hot or cold? Light or heavy? Take a moment to notice...

Here's what God says about your feet: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace..."

Take a deep breath:
God is in the air we breathe

Breathe in peace, breathe out anger or stress

Move your attention to your legs: how do they feel? Are they feeling relaxed, restless, warm, cold, or something else?

When Mary found out she was pregnant with Jesus, she ran with haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who lived in a Judean town in the hill country

I wonder if her legs were tired. I wonder if your legs are tired. I wonder where your legs carried you today

Take a deep breath:

God is in the air we breathe

Breathe in joy, breathe out fatigue or sorrow

Let go of frustration

Let go of trying to do everything right

Welcome into your heart more joy, more gladness

Move your attention to your heart

Place your hands over your heart: can you feel it beating? Can you feel your breath making your chest rise and fall?

Before Jesus died, a friend of his laid his head on Jesus' chest. Can you imagine that? Hearing the very heartbeat of God? And then Jesus announced one of his quintessential commandments: "Love one another just as I have loved you."

Breathe in love, breathe out meanness and indifference

Take a deep breath in and out, in and out:

God is in the air we breathe

Amen.

Observe a minute of silent meditation, focusing on your breath. End the minute with the gentle sound of a bell or a chime (feel free to use your phone).



Week Two

PEACE



LIGHT

Two candles (for hope and peace)

READ

"See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the God whom you seek will suddenly come to the temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says God. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap..."
+ Malachi 3:1-2

MEDITATE

The prophet Malachi declares that God is on the way – and so is God's messenger, John the Baptizer, all dressed up in camel hair and eating locusts dipped in honey. But "who can stand," the prophet asks, when God arrives as "a refiner's fire"? Remember, the purpose of both "a refiner's fire" and "fullers' soap" is to refine and strengthen, not destroy or exclude. A refiner makes stronger, more beautiful metal; a fuller makes stronger, more beautiful cloth. And they do these things through simplification: specks of non-metal and non-cloth are removed, resulting in a better, simpler, stronger material. Accordingly, the message here is that God will bring out the very best in each one of us: cleansing our hearts of pettiness and contempt; healing our wounds so that we can live into God's sweet realm of peace (and the justice that leads to peace!). The promise of Advent is that a whole new world is coming into being, stronger and more beautiful, in our hearts and in our neighborhoods. Thanks be to God!



PRAY

Dear God, fill us with your beauty and glory. Simplify us, refine us, help us change our hearts and our communities in ways we need to change, so that all of your children may inherit a world full of justice and peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FEAST OF SAINT NICHOLAS

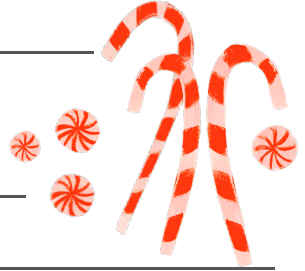
DECEMBER 6

Little is known about the life of Saint Nicholas, but here's what we do know: he's remembered for being a fierce advocate for the poor, the vulnerable, and the unjustly condemned. According to tradition, Nicholas' parents died when he was young, leaving him a large inheritance. Whenever he heard of a family in need, he would toss bags of gold into their open windows. At one house, the gold landed on some shoes and stockings that had been laid out near the fire to dry, which in time led to the custom of children putting out their shoes or boots the night of December 5th for Saint Nicholas to fill up and for the children to enjoy on his feast day (December 6th). Try filling up your family's shoes with something simple: a couple of clementines, sea shells, little chocolates, or some beautiful stones painted gold. Then invite everyone in the family to follow St. Nick's lead and perform their own secret (or not so secret) act of kindness.



FAMILY CHRISTMAS WISH LIST

Name: _____



Want: _____

Need: _____

Wear: _____

Read: _____

MY FAVORITES

Color: _____

Hobby: _____

Book: _____

Local Nonprofit: _____

MY HOPE FOR THE WORLD THIS CHRISTMAS:



Week Three

JOY



LIGHT

Three candles (for hope, peace, and joy)

READ

"John said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise...' As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people."

+ Luke 3:11,15-18

MEDITATE

Is being baptized with "fire" really good news, a cause for joy? The key to what John the Baptizer has in mind here is to remember what "chaff" is: it's the husk around every grain of wheat. John declares that even now God is gathering us together like wheat in a granary, and burning away all the chaff, the husks – the greed, anger, resentment, apathy, pettiness, self-absorption, and so on – that get in the way of being who God created us to be. A baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire means that our cold hearts will be warmed, and we will become more hopeful, more peaceful, and more joyful. Once again, less is more: less chaff, and more wheat! It's enough to make you want to sing, "Joy to the World" (originally written as an Advent hymn) at the top of your lungs – so, go ahead and sing!

PRAY

Dear God, baptize us with your Holy Spirit and fire, so that we might become more like Jesus, more hopeful, peaceful, joyful, kind, bold - and always glad to share our coats, our food, our blessings with our neighbors near and far. In Jesus' name, Amen.



FEAST OF SAINT LUCIA DECEMBER 13

The Feast of Saint Lucia commemorates Lucia of Syracuse, an early fourth century martyr who, according to legend, brought food and aid to Christians hiding in the Roman catacombs while wearing a candlelit wreath on her head to light her way, leaving her hands free to carry as much food as possible. Honor Saint Lucia by giving a gift to a local nonprofit fighting food insecurity in your community.

Week Four LOVE



LIGHT

Four candles
(for hope, peace, joy, and love)

READ

"Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name. God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. God has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped her servant Israel, in remembrance of her mercy, according to the promise she made to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah and to her descendants forever.'" + Luke 1:46-55

MEDITATE

We're getting closer to Christmas now, close enough to hear a young, vulnerable, pregnant teenage girl singing a revolutionary song about a God who sides with the weak, the lowly, the hungry, and the outcast. Love has already begun its leveling work, Mary sings, scattering the proud and sending the rich away empty. The lowly have already been lifted up; the hungry have already been filled! This song shows us how to hold together two seemingly contradictory things: 1) an impatient dissatisfaction with the world's systems as they are, and 2) a deep trust that God is already turning the world upside down. Mary's song, with its simple, faithful daring, is at the heart of Advent – and at the heart of what it means to be Christian. It's just a few simple lines, but it's been turning the world upside down ever since. Less is more!

PRAY

Dear God, give us the courage and conviction of Mary, the boldness and trust to lift our voices in song, even as you lift our lives in love. Make us shining examples of your hope, instruments of your peace, emblems of your joy, and channels of your care. In Jesus' name, Amen.

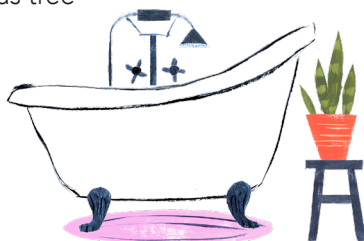
SELF-CARE CHECK-IN

Are you feeling overwhelmed, stressed out, disconnected, socially spent, or financially burdened at this point in your Advent journey?

Well, slowing down, simplifying, and engaging in acts of self-care – especially during the holidays – have the power to reduce anxiety, increase happiness, improve energy, and keep you spiritually connected to the God who invites (and commands!) us all to stop and rest.

Self-care includes anything you do to keep yourself healthy. Here's a list of ideas (but feel free to add your own):

- Eat 3 healthy meals a day
- Meditate (or just breathe) for 5 minutes
- Light a candle
- Listen to your holiday playlist
- Exercise 3 (or more) times a week
- Spend time outdoors
- Read a book in front of the Christmas tree
- Say "no" more often to things that make busy-ness
- Take a nap
- Do a puzzle
- Try forest bathing
- Fast from complaining
- Start a gratitude journal
- Do a digital detox
- Unfollow on social media people that make you feel yucky
- Get 8+ hours of sleep
- Put your phone away for a set amount of time
- Drink 8+ glasses of water each day
- Sing a Christmas carol at the top of your lungs



CHRISTMAS GRATITUDE LIST

Name: _____

Who and what are you thankful for? List as many as you can! And then share your lists with each other over a meal. A great way to get to know each other better is to find out what we're most thankful for...

PEOPLE *(friends and family)*




A large empty rectangular box for writing. In the bottom right corner, there is a small illustration of two children, one in a red shirt and one in a blue shirt, holding up three small green Christmas trees.

ACTIVITIES

A large empty rectangular box for writing.

PEOPLE *(in the wider world)*

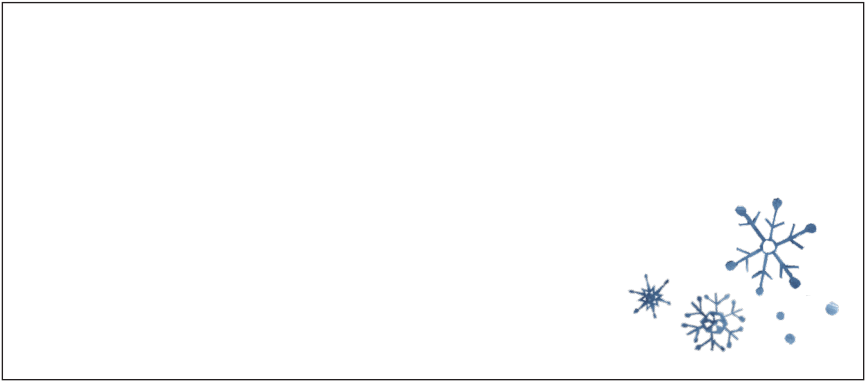


A large empty rectangular box for writing. In the bottom left corner, there is a small illustration of holly leaves and red berries.

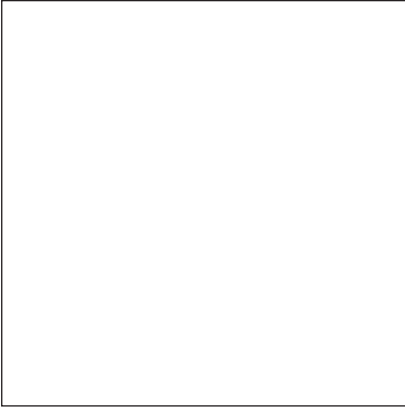
OTHER

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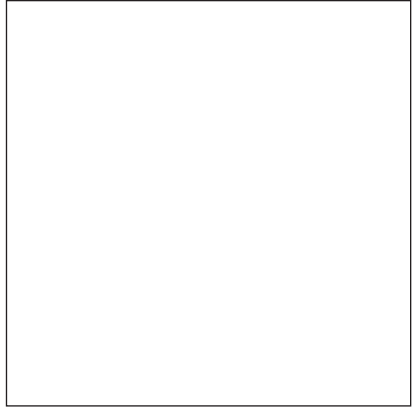
PLACES



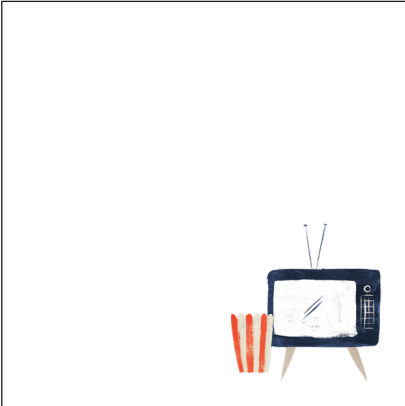
ANIMALS



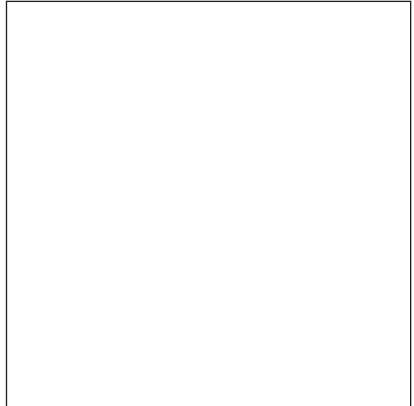
OBJECTS



ART (music, movies, etc.)



ORGANIZATIONS





Christmas Eve

EMMANUEL, "GOD WITH US"

LIGHT

Five candles (for hope, peace, joy, love, and baby Jesus)

READ

Luke 2:1-20

MEDITATE

When we slow down and practice a less-is-more simplicity, it's easier to recognize God's beauty all around: twinkling candles and Christmas lights, hot chocolate, family, a few precious presents under the tree. Surrounded by beauty, tonight we slow down to remember Jesus' arrival, born into simple, ordinary circumstances. Tonight we proclaim the wonder of our faith: the God who made everything (think the stars, the moon, and a ladybug's tiny spots!) slips into the world, all wrinkled and wet and vulnerable, in order to be with us. The road ahead for this newborn child will be difficult, but tonight, we celebrate his coming. Tonight, we take joy in the miracle of Incarnation, the beauty of Emmanuel, "God with Us." Tonight, we give thanks for a God who chooses again and again to dwell with us and within us. Thanks be to God!

PRAY

Dear God, thank you for coming into the world. Thank you for being Emmanuel, "God with Us." Thank you for slowing us down enough to catch a glimpse of your simple, beautiful blessings in our lives. Help us carry those blessings out into your broken and beautiful world, so that everyone might know that the One who created everything, the One who redeemed everything, and the One who sustains everything is with us every step of the way. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.