



WORSHIP

DESIGN STUDIO

WDS

The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of hands holding several lit Advent candles. The candles are in white holders and have a warm, orange glow from the flame. The hands are positioned in a way that suggests they are holding the candles together, creating a sense of unity and shared light.

# What Child IS This?

*Beyond the Lullaby*

A DAILY JOURNAL FOR ADVENT

This journal is an accompaniment to the  
Worship Design Studio Advent series,  
“What Child IS This?”  
<https://worshipdesignstudio.com/whatchild>

This journal can be used independently  
from the worship series or any church gathering.  
It can be used privately or shared with a friend  
or in a small group setting.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                        |         |
|----------------------------------------|---------|
| Introduction                           | page 4  |
| Advent 1: King of Kings                | page 7  |
| Advent 2: The Silent Word              | page 12 |
| Advent 3: Son of Mary                  | page 17 |
| Advent 4: Enthroned by Love            | page 22 |
| The Sunday after Christmas: This, This | page 27 |

# INTRODUCTION

Advent is a wonderful time of reflection. When we consider the story of the birth of Jesus in conjunction with our own life narratives and the difficulties of our day, we might see some similarities. This Guided Journal will help you make those connections and know that God-with-Us, Emmanuel, is always near.

Making time each day to pause, to sit and journal for a few minutes, is a way to deepen our understanding of our faith journey and of our world in the midst of what sometimes feels like a pretty “ramped up” pace. I encourage you to light a candle next to a nativity set, if you have one, each time you journal as a practice of bringing more light into your little corner of the world.

The series “What Child IS This? Beyond the Lullaby” is one that encourages us to move beyond the simple sentimentality of this season of Advent and Christmas and consider that God knows our pain because of God’s Divine Experience of Being Human through Jesus. We are never alone. We are understood. We are loved. And we are called to alleviate suffering just as Jesus showed us in his time on earth because it all started with his birth into a world that was not-so-calm-and-bright... just like ours today.

One day of each week calls special attention to refugees. These are the most vulnerable of our world—people whose lives have been upended by those who make building empires a priority. This was the world into which Jesus was born. This is still a world struggling with empire.

May your compassion for all those experiencing hardship (including for yourself) grow into the kind of deep love that Jesus was given at his birth, and that he encourages us to embody each and every day.

Peace & Passion,  
Dr. Marcia McFee, Creator & Visionary  
Worship Design Studio



# PRESERVED LEMONS — AN ADVENT RECIPE

You will experience some quotes in these pages from an inspirational author, Kelley Nikondeha, from her book *The First Advent in Palestine*. If you want to read her book, use the link or QR code below to order it.

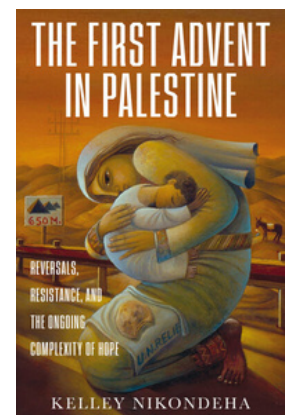
Whether or not you read her book, you may want to try her recipe for preserved lemons, a staple in Palestinian cuisine! It takes four weeks to preserve lemons... what a great Advent practice!



Kelley's Preserved Lemons Videos



Link to purchase the book



# A SONG FOR THE AGES

6

In 1865, William Chatterton Dix penned a poem that would become the beloved Christmas-time favorite, "What Child Is This?" During Advent, we will dive into this question that is much more complicated than the lilting lullaby tune conveys. The story of humanity and its recurring themes of oppression and corruption run right through history and into our own narratives. Yet, we can rely on the assurance of the carol to confirm that God is "present with us" in powerful ways that continue to be the Word of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love even and especially in the midst of hard times. The version of the song in the link and code on this page is a beautiful combination of "What Child is This?" and "The Child of the Poor" by The Hound + the Fox, making the connections so clear.

What Child is this, who, laid to rest,  
On Mary's lap is sleeping?  
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,  
While shepherds watch are keeping?

Chorus:

This, this is Christ, the King,  
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:  
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,  
The Babe, the Son of Mary!

Why lies He in such mean estate,  
Where ox and ass are feeding?  
Good Christian, fear: for sinners here  
The silent Word is pleading. [Chorus]

So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh,  
Come, peasant, king to own Him.  
The King of kings salvation brings;  
Let loving hearts enthrone Him. [Chorus]

Helpless and hungry, lowly, afraid  
Wrapped in the chill of midwinter;  
Comes now, among us,  
born into, poverty's embrace  
New life for the world

Who is this? Who lives with the lowly?  
Sharing their sorrows  
Knowing their hunger?  
This is Christ revealed to the world  
In the eyes of a child, a child of the poor

Who is, this stranger?  
Here in our midst?  
Looking for shelter among us?

Who is, the outcast?  
Who do we see amidst the poor?  
The children of God?

Link to listen: <https://youtu.be/pD3JNuYZpKo?feature=shared>



# ADVENT WEEK ONE

## “King of Kings”

7



**The nature of humanity seems to point to the need for a “savior,” especially when we feel things are out of control. People in the time of Jesus’ birth were no different. They hoped for a new reality of communal wellbeing in the midst of corruption and violence. Peace only existed by definition of the empire. The collaboration of religious and state authorities for the sake of the rich and the demise of the poor was a hard reality for most. For what do we hope in our time that will be “good news for all people?”**

*In those days, Caesar Augustus published a decree ordering a census of the whole Roman world. This first census took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All the people were instructed to go back to the towns of their birth to register.*

*— from Luke 2: 1-5 (Inclusive Bible)*

Song: “He Shall Reign Forevermore” by Chris Tomlin  
Direct link: <https://youtu.be/R-P8pUCV5MI?feature=shared>



## A PRAYER FOR THE WEEK AHEAD

*Light a candle, perhaps near a nativity scene, and whisper this prayer for the world:*

I light this candle of Hope for those who need it most.  
For all who search for a place to belong.  
For all who are frightened by imposing forces.  
For all whose future seems uncertain.  
What child IS this?  
This, this, is Christ the King who reigns with hope forever.  
Amen.

The question for this week at the scene of the nativity is this:  
For what do you hope in our time that will be “good news for ALL people?”

[illegible]



## Monday: Caesar's Census

9

Read Luke 2: 1-5.

The census we read about in Luke was likely for the purpose of assessing taxes which would mean economic hardship for people like Joseph and Mary. How are faith and fair economics related for you?

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## Tuesday: Herod, King of the Client State

Herod was charged with governing the Jewish and non-Jewish people living in the region where Jesus was born. He was known to be a particularly cruel person who caused deep suffering. In the book, *The First Advent in Palestine*, author Kelley Nikondeha says this: *"...grief work is the seedbed for Advent hope. We cannot grasp the fullness of the Advent narratives to come without attending to the brokenness of our world. Lament is how we name and honor what has been lost or taken from us by one empire or another."* For what do you grieve—either societal or personal... or both?

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## Wednesday: Stateless People

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The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that at least 4.4 million people worldwide are “stateless,” meaning that they are not recognized as citizens of any nation. Without citizenship, it is hard to qualify for employment, education, housing, legal defense, and many other social services and necessities. Imagine you suddenly found yourself in this situation, stripped of your citizenship and legal rights. What would you do, and what would you hope others would do to help you?

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## Thursday: King of Kings

In one of the verses to “What Child Is This?”, Jesus is referred to as the “King of Kings,” an echo of scripture found in Revelation. How would you describe the “rule” of Jesus during his life and ministry? Can you imagine why he was perceived as a threat to the “Kings” of his day? What do you think Jesus wants us to change in our day to fulfill a “kingdom on earth as it is in heaven?”

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## Friday: Setting the Nativity Scene

II

The “barn” in which Jesus was born was likely the lower part of a common Bethlehem house where the animals were fed and kept. It might even have been a house of relatives of Joseph. But the long journey on a donkey from Nazareth could have meant that they arrived at a time when other relatives had already filled all the sleeping rooms. Rather than an inhospitable situation, it could have been that Joseph’s family did the best they could in offering a safer place than the streets for a child to be born. When has someone gone out of their way to provide help for you?

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## Saturday: The Not-So-Silent Night

The story of Jesus’ birth is often envisioned as a peaceful, charming story of hope and love. A warm straw bed, with milk and cookies at midnight. We will continue to see as this devotional unfolds how Jesus was born into a world of suffering and pain, not unlike our world today. Yet, there *is* silence to be heard amid the tumult. There *is* a quiet center to be found within. How do you find your center when the world gets too loud?

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# ADVENT WEEK TWO

## “The Silent Word”

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The poet of our theme carol, “What Child is This,” penned the phrase “the silent Word is pleading.” Our vision of that child may be the soothing lullaby and the silent night, but the reality of babies, and of that time in history, was a “crying out.” It was a time for prophesying justice in the midst of trauma, as Zechariah does when his silence is lifted. The Word became Flesh for such a time. How will we cry out for true peace for all people? How will we soothe the trauma of the world in our time?

*Immediately Zechariah’s mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak in praise of God... [he] was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: “Blessed are you, the Most High God of Israel—for you have visited and redeemed your people... Such is the tender mercy of our God, who from on high will bring the Rising Sun to visit us, to give light to those who live in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

— from Luke 1: 5-25; 57-80 (Inclusive Bible)

Song: “Longest Nights” by The Many

Direct link: <https://youtu.be/CUjIb82-pow?feature=shared>



## A PRAYER FOR THE WEEK AHEAD

*Light a candle, perhaps near a nativity scene, and whisper this prayer for the world:*

I light this candle of Peace for those who need it most.

For all who are being silenced.

For all who are afraid to speak out.

For all who know that peace comes with justice.

What child IS this?

This, this, is the Prince of Peace

who invites us to proclaim his reign forever.

Amen.

The question for this week at the scene of the nativity is this:

## How will we cry out for true peace for ALL people?

## How will we soothe the trauma of the world in our time?

[illegible]



# Monday: Struck Silent

14

Read Luke 1:5-25; 57-80.

Zechariah the priest had to walk a tight-rope. It was in this time of “peace with oppression” that religious leaders like Zechariah had to serve, making sure to walk the line of honor to God, but deference to Caesar and to Herod, the so-called “King of the Jews.” When Zechariah was struck silent, it may not have been the first time he felt silenced. Have you ever had the experience of feeling that you wish you could say something but did not feel that you could? What do you want to say right now?

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# Tuesday: “Pax” Romana

The time in history into which Jesus was born was known as the “Pax Romana”—the Roman Peace. But Caesar kept “peace” by oppressing the lowly so the richest would benefit. Author Kelley Nikondeha writes, “[Zechariah] prayed from a certain place, for a certain people. His prayers were shaped by life in an occupied land, by economic policies that dispossessed many. His practice of prayer was tethered to his neighborhood, to the friends who lived there.” What are your prayers for peace in your “neighborhood?”

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## Wednesday: Caring for Our Elders

15

The story of elderly refugees is one of heightened hardship because of the vulnerabilities they can face – language and technology barriers, reduced opportunities for work, greater needs for medical care, to name a few. And yet, their contributions to keeping cultural traditions alive for younger refugees is so important. Zechariah and Elizabeth were considered elderly, but their role in the story of Jesus is significant. How have elders been significant in your life story? How can we increase our respect and care?

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## Thursday: The Pleading Word

“Good Christian, fear: for sinners here the silent Word is pleading.” This unusual turn of phrase from the carol “What Child Is This?” points to the idea that Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, pleads on our behalf. What do you think it says about the nature of power that God’s great act of redemption began with a humble baby?

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## Friday: The Feeding Trough

16

Many nativity scenes feature barn animals: sheep, oxen, donkeys, camels, and other livestock. Jesus' humble bed in a feeding trough indicates a connection with all of creation, a subtle echo of our calling to care for the planet and all its species. What is something you can do during this Advent season to care for animals or connect with nature?

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## Saturday: The World Turned Upside Down

Our opening prayer this week proclaims that "peace comes with justice." Justice often comes with a reckoning, a rejection of the status quo as the mighty are laid low. What is the difference between passive acceptance and peace? Have you ever had to sacrifice a frictionless existence in the name of standing up for a worthy cause?

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# ADVENT WEEK THREE

## “Son of Mary”

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**We often hear Jesus referred to as the “Son of God” and the “Son of Man.” But this carol points out his identity over and over as the “Son of Mary.” This equally powerful description points to his being reared by a woman who, upon hearing she would bear a child, said “yes” to one of the most difficult and precarious situations she could face. And then she sings with joy a song of justice for the ages. She goes on to guide and help form this child who would tend to the suffering ones. How can we proclaim a deep joy “in spite of” hardship in our time?**

*“Don’t be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You’ll conceive and bear a son, and give him the name Jesus—‘Deliverance.’ His dignity will be great, and he will be called the Only Begotten of God. God will give Jesus the judgment seat of David, his ancestor, to rule over the house of Jacob forever, and his reign will never end.”... “Your mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear you. You have shown strength with your arm; you have scattered the proud in their conceit; you have deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places.”*

*— from Luke 1: 26-56 (Inclusive Bible)*

Song: “Canticle of the Turning” uploaded by Gobin UMC

Direct link: <https://youtu.be/iiuoRpOa2gg?feature=shared>



## A PRAYER FOR THE WEEK AHEAD

*Light a candle, perhaps near a nativity scene, and whisper this prayer for the world:*

I light this candle of Joy for those who need it most.

For all whose despair feels endless.

For all who find little joy in daily living.

For all whose disappointment runs deep.

## What child IS this?

This, this, is the Son of Blessed Mary who reigns with joy forever.

Amen.

The question for this week at the scene of the nativity is this:

What gives you joy “in spite of” hardship in our time?

[illegible]

# Monday: Magnificat

19

Read Luke 1: 26-56.

Mary's song of liberation, known as the "Magnificat," is full of reversals and resistance and resilience. She is part of a long line of biblical women who stood up for what was right and just. What strong women of history, or in your own life, can you name as those whose witness helped you to have courage to work for a better world?

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# Tuesday: Family Systems

In Mary's day, it was a huge deal to get pregnant out of wedlock. Author Kelley Nikondeha writes: *"Amid taboo, gossip, and misunderstandings, Mary stood. She had agreed to be seen as an unwed mother, to risk disgrace among her community in order to birth hope. Surviving stigma and struggle was her experience, and it became part of the DNA of her son."* Who lives with unfair stigma today that we can, like Jesus did in his ministry, stand up for and protect?

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## Wednesday: A Mother's Prayer

Data suggests that women and children together often constitute the majority of refugee populations, and many of these women are mothers. Organizations like Mary's House explicitly support single mothers who are refugees. Try to imagine what it would be like to try to care for children without a home. For what do you pray for the children of the world, especially those who are refugees?

[illegible]

## Thursday: Sleep, Baby, Sleep

In the text of "What Child Is This?", baby Jesus sleeps on Mary's lap while "angels greet" and "shepherds watch." Who are the angels and the shepherds of your own childhood? Who did you feel safe with, and who gave you joy? What children are part of the joy of living in your life now?

[illegible]

## Friday: Mary

21

The figure of Mary in our nativity is often portrayed leaning towards the baby, tending to the needs of her child, Jesus. Mothers everywhere want a good life for their children. Often, it is the needs of children that move people from war to peace. In 2014, a group of Israeli and Palestinian women marched for peace together. Watch [THIS](#) powerful music video and then write about how it moved you.



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## Saturday: Surrounded by Love

Mary and Joseph were on the receiving end of profound and perhaps surprising support in the days leading up to Jesus' birth and afterward. Where have you found support and love in unexpected ways?

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# ADVENT WEEK FOUR

## “Enthroned by Love”

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When we hear “let loving hearts enthrone him” in our theme carol, we are encountering the “essence of the message.” Love is at the heart of this beloved story of the birth of Christ. It is love that is the true definition of “kingdom,” of “kinship.” No one exemplifies this more than Joseph’s love for Mary and for the child. He is protector of Love; he is hospitality incarnated. Not only the very life of Jesus was in his hands, but his own character and sacrifice were influential in the way that Jesus went on to live his life and center “love for all” as his message. How will we make sacrificial love our aim in our time?

*When Jesus’ mother, Mary, was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her husband, an upright person unwilling to disgrace her, decided to divorce her quietly. This was Joseph’s intention when suddenly the angel of God appeared in a dream and said, “Joseph, heir to the House of David, don’t be afraid to wed Mary; it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child. She is to have a son, and you are to name him Jesus—‘Salvation’—because he will save the people from their sins.”*

— from Matthew 1: 18-25 (Inclusive Bible)

Song: “Body of God” by Richard Bruxvoort Colligan

Direct link: [https://youtu.be/yOhzW\\_7mtVM?feature=shared](https://youtu.be/yOhzW_7mtVM?feature=shared)



## A PRAYER FOR THE WEEK AHEAD

*Light a candle, perhaps near a nativity scene, and whisper this prayer for the world:*

I light this candle of Love for those who need it most.  
For all who feel they are on the outskirts of love.  
For all who know the loss of a love.  
For all who are rejected because of who they are.  
What child IS this?  
This, this, is the babe who was swaddled in love  
and wraps us all in love forever.  
Amen.

The question for this week at the scene of the nativity is this:  
How will we make sacrificial love our aim in our time?

[illegible]

## Monday: Take Her as Your Wife

24

Read Matthew 1: 1-25.

The Gospel of Matthew reminds us that Jesus' lineage, through Joseph, was "Son of Abraham." Matthew is giving Jesus "street cred" by naming this ancestry in the first verses of the Gospel. But this is only possible because Joseph accepted the child, and his mother, as his own. He sacrifices his own reputation to love Mary and the child who would teach that the greatest commandment is love. Write a bit about unconditional love in your life.

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## Tuesday: All Are Precious in God's Sight

The incredible work of World Central Kitchen has literally saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Founder Chef José Andrés is a kind of "Joseph" figure when we consider his never-ending passion for protecting the least in the midst of disaster and displacement. If you do not know about his work, especially in Gaza in this moment, take some time to research this organization. Chef Andrés says, *"World Central Kitchen started with a simple idea at home with my wife Patricia: when people are hungry, send in cooks. Not tomorrow, today."* What fills your heart with urgency in this moment?

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## Wednesday: Emmanuel

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The baby whose birth we celebrate has many descriptive names: “King of Kings,” “Prince of Peace,” “Jesus (Savior),” and “Emmanuel,” God-with-us. Immanuel was the name given in the Hebrew text of Isaiah as well, when the people in exile needed a sign that God was with them. We may feel that we also need a sign today when bad news can seem to drown out the Good News. This is why we proclaim that Christ is born... year after year. Because the road to hope, peace, joy, and love is long, and we must be reminded that God-with-us, Emmanuel, is ever present. What does this mean to you?

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## Thursday: A Throne of Love

The carol “What Child is This?” invites us to enthrone Jesus with “loving hearts.” Love is the throne on which Jesus would grow, teach, live, and die. This is the story that redefines empire or “Kingdom” into a “kin-dom”—a vision of humanity that loves each other like family, that prioritizes love even when it doesn’t profit us. This Christmas, spend a moment contemplating what things you lift up high on your priority list.

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## Friday: Shepherds and Angels

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The nativity scene is filled this week with those who came quickly as word got out about the birth of this child. *What child IS this?* we ask. This is the child who caused a jubilant connection between heaven and earth. The lowly shepherds and lofty angels share space in the fields and here in our nativity scenes. Because of this, we can be assured that no matter how low we feel, the divine presence is always near. And we, like the humble human shepherds, can tend the Light of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love as we sing like the angels. What good news will you spread throughout the land?

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## Saturday: The Body of God

*"What did it mean for Jesus to be shaped by this landscape, this economy, this political environment? To be born into anxious times and surrounded by family eking out a living under Roman occupation?"* These words written by Kelley Nikondeha remind us that this child Jesus who would grow to be the one who died for love and justice knows first-hand the heartache we feel in our time. God's Body knows the trauma of being human. Write about what you want God to know about your own pain.

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# THE SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

## This, This

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**“This, this...” reverberates into our time, our lives, our world. The Magi see the reverberation of Light and are drawn to it. They, too, were looking for a new world order—one of true peace and compassion. The subsequent story of the flight of the Holy Family as refugees, running from threat of extinction by an insecure tyrant, is much too real in all of human history. Even in the return home, the child of Mary and Joseph would know the heartache of oppression that would shape his ministry—a ministry of proclaiming that God continues to be with us, that we are called to be with one another, even and especially in the midst of hard times.**

*They were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went back to their own country by another route. After the astrologers had left, the angel of God suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph with the command, “Get up, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you otherwise. Herod is searching for the child to destroy him.” Joseph got up, awakened Jesus and Mary, and they left that night for Egypt.*

*— from Matthew 2: 1-12 (Inclusive Bible)*

Song: “Refugee” by David Brymer

Direct link: <https://youtu.be/OPpajXKv8UI?feature=shared>



## A PRAYER FOR THE WEEK AHEAD

*Light a candle, perhaps near a nativity scene, and whisper this prayer for the world:*

I light this candle of Presence for those who need it most.

For all who need more Hope.

For all who need more Peace.

For all whose Joy lays dormant.

For all who need the salve of Love.

For all who need this Child of Possibility.

## What child IS this?

This, this, is Christ the King who reigns  
with hope, peace, joy, and love forever.

Amen.

The question for this week at the scene of the nativity is this:

How do the messages of this child reverberate into our time, our lives, our world?

[illegible]

# Monday: Gifts for the Newborn King

29

Read Matthew 2: 1-12.

The Wise Ones brought lavish gifts to honor baby Jesus: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts represent the value that these wise ones from the East saw in the newborn King. What are some ways you can honor Jesus with your gifts, time, intentions, and relationships?

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# Tuesday: A Star Overhead

The magi were from Persia, where they also knew occupation and violent overthrow by foreign rulers. Like those in Roman Palestine, they yearned for a just peace. They believed that stars were celestial beings that could point them toward knowledge and a sign of a better future. What signs of hope do you see for our world? Who or what is shining like a star in the dark night, giving you hope for a better day?

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## Wednesday: Kneeling to a True King

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Our nativity scenes usually feature the Wise Ones offering gifts and perhaps kneeling before the baby. These were prestigious people with a certain amount of power and, obviously, considering the gifts they had on them, they had money. Yet, they had a sense that this meek baby would one day be a true king for his people. The act of kneeling was an gesture of humility before greatness. We too often bow down to prestige, celebrity, and wealth instead of what really matters. What misguided loyalty might we need to confess and shed as we kneel before the Christ Child?

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## Thursday: Home by Another Road

The Wise Ones stealthily protected Jesus by not reporting back to Herod. Resistance to ill-will is something that people in every age and place have had to do for the sake of protecting the most vulnerable. What needs our resistance today? In what ways are you ready to help protect the most vulnerable in your community?

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## Friday: Transforming Pain

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Author Kelley Nikondeha says, *"Advent calls us to wrestle honestly with this truth: troubles don't disappear just because Jesus arrived. The world is still harsh and riddled with injustice."* The story of the flight to Egypt reminds us that Jesus and his family became refugees as they fled from the dictator's blood-thirsty desire to remain in power. But Nikondeha goes on to say this: *"Only a God who knows and shares our pain can ultimately transform it."* Are you ready to help God transform situations of violence and greed that create millions of refugees in this world? Find out about how your wider faith community supports humanitarian crises and make notes here.

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## Saturday: New Beginnings

A new year is just around the corner. In this journey, we have asked "What Child IS This?" in order to get a clearer picture of who we are called to be as followers of Jesus. What have you felt or learned that affects your vision for the year to come? What "resolutions" can you make for the new year that would represent a longing to offer hope, peace, joy, and love into the future?

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