



Theme: Christmas Songs for the Journey Home


“Labor of Love – Discovering Peace at Home”


Weekly Memory Verse:

**⁶ And then all people will see
the salvation sent from God. –Luke 3:6**

Spiritual Formation or Family Activity Ideas for the Week: During this week, we are sharing ideas for Advent activities as we “Countdown to Christmas!” Each day includes a simple way to connect and remember what Christmas is truly about. Choose a special place in your home where you can pray this Advent season. Consider creating an altar using a small table or fireplace mantle.

Monday, December 6 – Read Isaiah 40:3-5. Paving on most ancient roads, if any, was rocks or logs, much bumpier than modern roads. When a king traveled from his palace, he would often send work parties to level the highest and lowest spots so he could travel more swiftly and comfortably. Second Isaiah alluded to that custom to promise spiritual preparation for God to come to God’s people. (On Saturday we’ll read Luke 3, in which the gospel writer applied these verses to John the Baptist’s ministry.)


 The exiled prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of ugly pagan worship right in the Jerusalem Temple. Then he saw a poignant image of God’s presence sadly leaving the Temple and city in Ezekiel 11:23. As the exile ended, today’s prophet’s message was that God intends to return to the city. In the second paragraph a voice commissions freeway contractors to carve out a highway to take God back. Even when we’ve pushed God away, God never gives up on us. How does God’s tireless love speak to your heart?


 About 100 years before Christ, the book of 1 Maccabees told of heroic brothers who fought for Israel’s freedom. It noted the sad absence of prophets: “There was distress in Israel, such as had not been since the time prophets ceased to appear among them” (1 Maccabees 9:27). How does this background help you understand why devout Israelites wondered if Isaiah 40 might apply when John the Baptist began his potent prophetic preaching?

Prayer: *Lord God, sometimes I mistakenly think you’re looking for any excuse to leave my life. Thank you for the powerful reminder in Isaiah 40 that, in fact, you’re always eager to pave a road back into my heart and my life. Amen.*

Spiritual Formation or Family Activity for the Day: As you receive Christmas cards, place the cards at the dinner table. Each night pray for the members of the family whose cards you received that day. Do the same as you send greetings to others.

Tuesday, December 7 – Read Malachi 4:2, 4-6. Yesterday and today’s prophetic readings seem general. For example, neither said, “God will send a man named John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus.” When it comes to prophetic words about a messiah coming, many Old Testament texts quoted in the New Testament had an initial fulfillment close to the time of the prophet. Other texts were not meant to predict the future, but simply describe what was happening, or what WOULD happen if people kept acting in a certain way. The New Testament authors saw in these statements a foreshadowing of the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus offered a completion of what these ancient words meant because Jesus is the climax of God’s saving work in the world.


 Moses and Elijah were great leaders in Israel’s history. Roughly 400 years later, the prophet Malachi in chapter 4, verse 5, receives a word from the Lord promising, “before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes,” God will send Elijah the prophet. In what ways did John the Baptist (and the New Testament apostles) embody the same spirit by speaking God’s purposes in their day? Can you think of more recent people who show that same prophetic spirit?

 Malachi was the only Old Testament writer to use the expression, “the sun of righteousness.” He did build on a poetic image from Psalm 84:11. The phrase seemed to clearly show that all that has been darkened by sin will become light in the Lord. In what ways has your walk with God brought greater light into your life? What are some darker corners of your life or your community’s life into which you could shine God’s light during Advent?


Prayer: Lord God, you have communicated to the human family in so many ways (and supremely in Jesus). Give me a heart open to letting your light shine in and illuminate every part of my life. Amen.

Spiritual Formation or Family Activity for the Day: Enjoy a Christmas movie such as *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* or *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, or some other movie of your choice. Think about the themes of peace and talk about how you can be a peacemaker in your life, your community, and your world. Pray for peace everywhere.

Wednesday, December 8 – Read Luke 1:5-25. Because there were an estimated 18,000 priests, special duties had to be assigned by lot. This was likely Zechariah’s only opportunity to perform this service during his lifetime. The angel’s message must have reminded the aged priest of the prophet Malachi’s words we read yesterday in Malachi 3:1 and 4:5. In that day, childless parents lacked support in their old age, and many people assumed that such a condition reflected divine punishment for sin. That’s why Luke stressed that “they were righteous before God.” It was why Elizabeth said God had showed favor by, “removing my disgrace among other people.”

 We find this effect several times in the Advent story: “When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear” (verse 12). That fear made it hard for him to trust the angel’s “good news” (verse 19). Yet the angel’s first words were, “Don’t be


afraid, Zechariah” (verse 13). “Don’t be afraid” is the most common Bible command from God and God’s messengers. This Advent, in what part(s) of life do you most need to take in the message, “Do not be afraid”?


 Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “Luke is careful not to dress up the story by making Zechariah a great hero of faith... God regularly works through ordinary people, doing what they normally do, who with a mixture of half-faith and devotion are holding themselves ready for whatever God has in mind.” What helps you to hold yourself ready for whatever God has in mind? Has God ever surprised you by doing something through you that you didn’t think you (or God) could do?

Prayer: *Great God, sometimes the vast scope of your purposes, so much deeper or bigger than my “ordinary” life, frightens me. Teach me how to hold myself ready to whatever you have in mind. Amen.*

Spiritual Formation or Family Activity for the Day: Pray, “Dear God, thank you for Advent and Christmas. Thank you for this time when we can focus on Jesus and his love. Please help our hearts be open this season so we can grow to know, love, and serve you more deeply. Help us to share your love with all people. Amen.”

Thursday, December 9 – Read Luke 1:57-66. What a series of events! The aged priest struck dumb after offering incense at the Temple, the woman all the neighbors knew couldn’t have children visibly pregnant—in a small-town setting, those things would attract a lot of attention. Then the baby was born, and as soon as the father and mother agreed on an unexpected name, Zechariah could speak again! No wonder Luke reported, “Everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened.”


 Zechariah gave up the highly prized honor (see verse 61) of naming his son after himself to obey God. John’s calling was not to follow his father as a priest. He challenged some of the customs and teachings of those religious leaders. And John’s ministry was to point to someone greater, not to his own virtues or strengths. What inner qualities did Zechariah and John need to live out God’s call without resentment or bitterness? How can you nurture those qualities in your life?


 People in the Judean highlands asked, “What then will this child be?” We know, of course, that when the child grew up, people called him John the Baptizer (or Baptist). His life ended tragically when Herod showed his inner weakness by having John beheaded to appease his wife’s spiteful plotting (see Matthew 14:1-12). Do you believe John lived up to God’s purposes for him? Was he “great in the Lord’s eyes,” as the angel said he would be in Luke 1:15?

Prayer: *Lord God, we read about how Jesus “emptied himself” (Philippians 2:5-11). Zechariah and John also had to do that to follow your call. Keep me from being so “full of myself” that I refuse the role you call me to play in your great mission. Amen.*

Spiritual Formation or Family Activity for the Day: Giving care to others is one way we can show God’s love. Buy or bake sugar cookies, then frost and decorate them as a family. Share them with someone who may feel alone or sad this season. Spend time visiting with the person and pray he or she experiences God’s comfort, peace, and love.

Friday, December 10 – Read Luke 1:67-80. When John the Baptist was born, his father’s song of praise didn’t first acclaim his own son, but the one for whom John would prepare the way. God, he declared, “has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David’s house... He has brought salvation... he has shown mercy.” Then, perhaps remembering Malachi’s phrase, “the sun of righteousness,” he said his infant son would proclaim “the dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness.”


 Rome occupied all of Israel in Zechariah’s day. In verse 71 he said God, “has brought salvation from our enemies.” Scholar N. T. Wright noted that his words were deeper than the obvious “enemies”: “Zechariah’s vision goes beyond simply a realigning of political powers. God’s mercy, the forgiveness of sins, the rescue from death itself; all of this points to a deeper and wider meaning of ‘salvation’.” How did John prepare the way for one who would deliver all humans from “our enemies” in ways a merely political revolution could not?

 The phrase, “just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago” took in so much hoping, praying, waiting, and trusting. God’s covenant with Abraham, God’s pledge to David, God’s promise of a deliverer to make our broken world new—it was all happening after all those waiting centuries! How can the Advent story of John’s (and Jesus’) birth help to nourish and sustain your trust in God’s big promises?

Prayer: *Lord God, sometimes I’m like the man who prayed, “God, give me patience—and do it right now!” Help Zechariah’s song to remind me that, in the end, you always keep your promises, and that those moments are worth waiting for. Amen.*

Spiritual Formation or Family Activity for the Day: In this busy season, take a moment each day to be quiet and still before God. Close their eyes and breathe deeply, being thankful for God’s presence in your life.

Saturday, December 11 – Read Luke 3:1-18. John baptized people as a symbol of cleansing and change. But he did not baptize people as an end in itself. He was preparing the way for the Savior. Luke added two elements not in the other gospel stories about John’s message. In verses 1-2, Luke carefully anchored the time of John’s mission to the reign of a variety of human leaders, a vivid way to convey that, “This really happened.” He also showed John answering questions from various people about how, in practical day-to-day actions, they should respond to his call to change their hearts and lives.

 Scholar N. T. Wright wrote in *Luke for Everyone*, “John was... preparing a pathway for the Lord himself to return to his people. This was the time. Rescue was at hand.” John felt a sense of urgency about his mission. He passionately called people to change their hearts and lives, accept God’s forgiveness of sins and show that through baptism (verse 3). How much of a sense of urgency do you feel in pursuing God’s path for your life? What helps you keep your commitment to God’s call strong and focused? How did John’s specific, practical counsel in verses 11, 13 and 14 prepare a pathway for the Lord to reshape the lives of tax collectors, soldiers and “the crowd”? Each of us can also prepare the way for the Lord through worship, study, serving, generosity and bearing witness. How are you preparing the way for Jesus Christ to work in your life? In the lives of others?

Prayer: *O God, I probably have more than two shirts, and likely enough food. Help me find practical ways to share with those who have none. And I humbly ask you to clean out whatever there is in me that keeps you at arm's length. Amen.*

Spiritual Formation or Family Activity for the Day: Ask one another, “If you could give the entire world one gift this Christmas, what would it be and why?”