Advent, Simplified*



Zach Windahl

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If you grew up going to church and never really did Advent, you aren't the only one.

I was a chocolate-calendar-advent-celebrator, meaning I opened a little door on a cardboard cutout Christmas tree and got a piece of chocolate every day. The chocolate itself was the celebration. I never knew what the tradition was rooted in. Even if I was taught it as a child, I seemingly forgot over the years. So this is the simplified version I wish I had back then.

What Advent is

Advent is a word that means "arrival." For well over a thousand years, Christians have spent the four weeks leading up to Christmas waiting in anticipation for the arrival of Jesus. It's a time to remember how Israel waited for a promised king, and how we're still waiting for him to come back and make everything right one day.

How this will work

Christmas makes a lot more sense when you know what everyone was waiting for. So we're going to walk through the whole story of the Bible, in order, and arrive in Bethlehem on the 25th. Each day takes about five minutes.

> **The Story**
> A short passage to read, and what was actually going on when it happened.
>
> **Where is Jesus?**
> How that scene points to Christmas.
>
> **One Thought**
> One thing to carry with you today.
>
> **One Question**
> Something to think about throughout the day.

The four weeks start on the first Sunday of Advent, November 29, and follow the four traditional Advent candles:



The Promise
Hope
Days 1–7

The Rescue
Peace
Days 8–14

The Wait
Joy
Days 15–21

The Arrival
Love
Days 22–27

If you miss a day, you won't be the only one. Feel free to pick up where you left off, or you can skip ahead to the current day. This is a time to grow in expectation for the coming of Christ.

Day 1

God Moves In

The Story

Read Genesis 2:1-3

I'm sure you've heard the pattern of Genesis 1 before, where God worked for six days and then took the seventh day off. When I was growing up, I always pictured God being tired after creating the world and filling it for six days of the week. Like now it was time for him to put his feet up and recharge. But that never made sense to me, because I'd think "Does God get tired?"

Nobody in the ancient world would have heard this story in the way I interpreted it. In their world, once a temple was finished, the god "rested" in it, meaning he moved in. The god would be on the throne and start running the place. Psalm 132 uses the same language about the temple in Jerusalem when it says, "This is my resting place forever; here I will sit enthroned."

So the first readers of Genesis saw God as building a home and moving in, with humans living right there with him. God's space and human space in the same place, heaven and earth overlapping.

The rest of the biblical storyline is about how we lost that, and how God has been working his way back into that place ever since.

Where is Jesus?

Every December we sing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Emmanuel means "God with us." That's the same idea we see in Genesis 1-2. Christmas is about God moving back in.

One Thought

If Advent is new to you, or you've tried it before and quit by the first week of December, know that you're right where you're supposed to be. This season is about waiting on something that you didn't have to do in order to reap the benefits of it.

One Question

Who is someone that always makes you feel at home, and what do they do?

Day 2

The First Promise

The Story

Read Genesis 3:8-15

It took about two chapters for everything to start falling apart.

Adam and Eve trust the serpent's word over God's word, and the first thing they do afterward is try and hide. God walks into the garden and asks a question he already knew the answer to: "Where are you?"

Then, before kicking them out of the garden, God makes a promise. He tells the serpent that one day a child born of a woman will crush its head, even though the serpent will strike his heel.

The early church called this verse the first gospel, because it was the first hint of good news that we see in the Bible. The expectation of Jesus was found on one of the first few pages, pointing towards a specific person who is coming to finish this fight.

And notice how that promise shows up right in the middle of the mess, while they're still hiding from God.

Where is Jesus?

Paul writes that "when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4). That's Genesis 3 coming true. The child shows up in a manger, and thirty-three years later the serpent gets its strike at the cross, but its head gets crushed, and it stays crushed.

One Thought
God's first response to our worst moment as humanity was a promise of future hope.

One Question
When you were a kid and you messed up, did you hide from your parents or confess?

Day 3

The Bow in the Sky

The Story

Read Genesis 9:8-17

I've always found it funny that we put rainbows on kids' books and on the walls of nurseries, especially when you realize it came right after a story where almost everyone in the world drowns. I know it's a promise that God won't flood the earth again, but the situation is still a little off-putting to me.

Here's something that I found cool to learn:

The Hebrew word for rainbow is qesheth, which is the same word for a warrior's bow, the kind you'd shoot arrows with. So in the ancient world there were stories of gods hanging up their bows in the sky after a battle, as a sign that the war was over.

And in our story, after the flood, it's almost like God hangs up his weapon. He promises to never wipe out the earth like that again, and he puts the bow where everyone can see it.

Where is Jesus?

The problem that the flood tried to fix didn't end up disappearing. Sin was still around, and instead of flooding the world again, God comes down himself, as a baby, and eventually takes the storm on himself.

One Thought

The next time you see a rainbow, think of a weapon being hung up for good.

One Question

What is one promise you've made to someone that you've kept for quite a while?

Day 4

Count the Stars

The Story

Read Genesis 15:1–18

Abraham is old at this point in the story with no kids, and God keeps promising that one day he will have a family. So God takes him outside at night and basically says, "Look up. Count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you're going to have one day."

Then God has Abraham do something that's a little strange to us, but totally normal at the time. He has Abraham cut some animals in half and lay them across from each other. It was the way people made a binding deal back then. The thought was that if I break this promise, let what happened to those animals happen to me. Kind of gory if you ask me.

But Abraham falls asleep, and God, appearing as a smoking firepot and a torch, passes between the pieces that Abraham cut. It was like God made the deal with himself. He took all of the weight of the promise on his own shoulders, and Abraham doesn't have to do anything to keep up his side of the bargain, he just needs to believe.

Where is Jesus?

The very first line of the New Testament calls Jesus "the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1). He's the descendant that the whole promise was pointing towards.

One Thought

Some promises depend on us keeping up our end of the deal, but this one never depended on you.

One Question

What's the longest you've ever waited for something that you were promised?

Day 5

Sarah Laughs

The Story

Read Genesis 18:9-14 and 21:1-7

Three visitors show up at Abraham's tent, and one of them says that this time next year, Sarah will have a son.

Sarah is listening to what the man said from inside her tent and she doesn't believe him because at this point she was around ninety years old. So she laughs to herself. But God hears it, even though she was quiet, and asks, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

A year later, Sarah is holding a baby boy and they name him Isaac, which means "he laughs." Every time someone said his name they were basically bringing up this story without even realizing it. Sarah laughed at first because it all seemed impossible, but then she laughed again when the promise actually happened.

Where is Jesus?

The Christmas story begins with almost the same scene. An old couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who couldn't have kids, are told by an angel that a son was coming. Then the same angel visits a young woman named Mary and tells her about Elizabeth, and says, "No word from God will ever fail" (Luke 1:37).

One Thought

Even if you laugh at a promise that was spoken over you, God doesn't get offended by it. He might even name the promise after it.

One Question

What is something that you've stopped hoping for?

Day 6

Stairway to Heaven

The Story

Read Genesis 28:10-17

When we think of Jacob, he isn't the hero that we'd typically pick for the story since at this point in the story he had cheated his brother out of everything and is now running for his life.

One night, while Jacob was on the run and sleeping outside with a rock for a pillow, God showed up.

Jacob dreams of a stairway that reaches from the ground up to heaven, with angels going up and down on it. The image was essentially showing that that place connected heaven and earth. And at the top of the stairway, God repeats the promise that he made to Abraham, and now to Jacob.

Jacob wakes up from the dream and says, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He ends up naming the spot "Bethel," which means "House of God."

Where is Jesus?

In John 1, Jesus tells a new follower named Nathanael that he'll see "heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Jesus is saying that he is the place where heaven and earth meet.

One Thought

God showed up when Jacob was at his lowest point. He may already be in the place you're in, even if you haven't noticed him yet.

One Question

Where have you felt closest to God?

Day 7

The Lion of Judah

The Story

Read Genesis 49:8-10

Jacob is on his deathbed and he gathers his twelve sons to bless them. When he gets to Judah, he says something really important for us, "The scepter will not depart from Judah...until he to whom it belongs shall come." If that seems like a secret message to decode, you aren't alone. A scepter is what a king holds, so Jacob is saying that the king that everyone had been waiting for will come from Judah's family.

Which is a very surprising pick since Judah is the one who came up with the plan to sell Joseph into slavery. Not only that, but later on, he treats his daughter-in-law Tamar so badly that she has to trick him just to be treated fairly (Genesis 38 but don't read it with your kids).

And yet this is the family line that God picks for the king.

Where is Jesus?

Matthew's family tree of Jesus goes out of its way just to mention Judah and Tamar by name (Matthew 1:3). In Revelation 5, John is told to look at "the Lion of the tribe of Judah."

One Thought

Your family tree doesn't disqualify you from being used by God in mighty ways.

One Question

Who is someone in your family that you're proud to come from?

Day 8

The Lamb at the Door

The Story

Read Exodus 12:1-13

At this point, Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years and God was dealing with Pharaoh through Moses. They were nine plagues in and Pharaoh still won't let the people go. So God tells every family to do something specific on the night of the last plague. They were to pick a lamb that had no blemish, then roast it, and put its blood around the doorframe of their homes. They were to eat dinner dressed as if they were about to leave, with their sandals on and walking stick in hand, because that night they were to be freed.

As they are sleeping, death moves through Egypt, but "passes over" every house that had been marked by the blood. That's where the name Passover came from.

The biggest key for us to remember in this story is how the blood over the door is what spared the Israelites from death. Jewish families still eat this meal every year in the Spring as a way to remember what their ancestors went through.

Where is Jesus?

When John the Baptist sees Jesus for the first time as an adult, he says, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Only a few short years later, Jesus dies during Passover week, and Paul writes, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

One Thought
The blood of Jesus is what covers and protects us today.

One Question
What family tradition do you have that tells a bigger story?

Day 9

God Pitches a Tent

The Story

Read Exodus 40:34-38

Israel is finally out of Egypt and now they're camping in the desert. So God gave Moses a very specific set of instructions to build him a tent.

Now, as strange as that might seem, because well, he's God, this tent was a portable temple that the people would move with them throughout their travels. The tent (or Tabernacle) was placed in the middle of the camp so every family's tent would face it. Inside, it was decorated to look like Eden with golden lampstands that looked like trees, cherubim woven into the curtains like the ones guarding the garden, images of pomegranates and other fruit, all to make it feel like Eden. It was a piece of the garden, set up in the wilderness.

When they finished building it, the cloud of God's presence filled the tent. Remember Day 1 of this devotional when God moved into his home? This is God moving back in, in a tent in the desert.

Where is Jesus?

John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." The word for "made his dwelling" literally means to pitch a tent. Then John adds, "We have seen his glory," the same glory that filled the Tabernacle.

One Thought

God camped with the Israelites while they were in the middle of the wilderness, and he will do the same with you.

One Question

Have you ever been camping? If so, what were the best and worst parts about it?

Day 10

The Outsider

The Story

Read Ruth 4:13-17

(or the whole book since it's only four chapters)

Ruth is a Moabite, which was one of Israel's long-time enemies. The law even said that Moabites weren't allowed into the assembly of God's people (Deuteronomy 23:3).

But Ruth marries into an Israelite family, loses her husband, and refuses to leave her mother-in-law, Naomi, when life falls apart for them. She follows Naomi back to Bethlehem and has to glean leftover grain at the outskirts of a stranger's field just so the two of them could eat.

This is where the story gets interesting. The field belonged to a man named Boaz, who turns out to be a relative of theirs. At the time, a close relative could step in as a "redeemer" and buy back the family's land, carrying on the family name. Boaz does it and marries Ruth.

The last line of the book says their son is Obed, Obed's son is Jesse, and Jesse's son is David. This outsider from Moab ends up being the great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king.

Where is Jesus?

Matthew names Ruth in Jesus' family tree (Matthew 1:5). Genealogies back then typically only listed the men, so including her was very intentional. Boaz is also a picture of how Jesus stepped in and bought back what the family lost.

One Thought

If you've ever felt like you don't belong to God's family, read the family tree, it's full of people just like you.

One Question

Who is one person that made you feel welcome the first time you were somewhere new?

Day 11

The House of Bread

The Story

Read Micah 5:2-5

Around 700 BC, the prophet Micah makes a prediction about where the coming king will be born. His listeners would have expected Jerusalem since that was the capital, but he says the small town of Bethlehem instead.

Bethlehem was David's hometown, but it was nothing impressive at all. The name Bethlehem is pretty cool though, because it means "House of Bread." It's the same town where Ruth gleaned grain in the fields that we learned about yesterday.

Micah goes on to say that the king's origins are "from of old, from ancient times," and that he will shepherd his people and "be their peace."

Where is Jesus?

Seven hundred years later, wise men show up in Jerusalem asking where the new king is and Herod's people quote Micah 5:2, saying he would come from Bethlehem. And when Jesus is born in the house of bread, Mary lays him in a manger. Years later he'd say, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35).

One Thought

God often chooses unlikely, unimpressive, small beginnings to be used in extraordinary ways.

One Question

What is one meal that always makes you feel at home?

Day 12

The Shepherd Boy

The Story

Read 1 Samuel 16:10-13

God sent the prophet Samuel to Bethlehem, to Jesse's house, to anoint the next king. Jesse lines up all of his sons, but God tells Samuel that it isn't any of them. Samuel finally asks, "Are these all of your sons?"

Jesse says, "Well, there's the youngest one, but he's out watching the sheep."

Notice how Jesse didn't even think to call David over to be presented to Samuel because in Jesse's eyes, he was the last person who would be picked for such a role. But when David walks in, God says, "That's the one." Samuel pours oil on his head right there in front of his older brothers.

David, the shepherd from Bethlehem, becomes Israel's greatest king, and God promises that the "forever king" will one day come from his family.

Where is Jesus?

On the night Jesus was born, the first people to hear about it are shepherds in the fields outside of Bethlehem. The angel tells them, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you" (Luke 2:11). The king from David's line gets announced to people doing David's old job, in David's old fields. Later on, Jesus calls himself "the good shepherd" (John 10:11).

One Thought

You might be the one that nobody picked for the role, but God looks at potential more than status.

One Question

What is a job that you've had that nobody noticed but you were proud of?

Day 13

The Forever House

The Story

Read 2 Samuel 7:1-16

David is king now in Jerusalem and one day it starts to bother him that he lives in a nice house while God's presence is still in a tent. So he decides to build God a proper temple.

But God answers David through the prophet Nathan by saying, "You want to build me a house? I'm going to build you a house."

He wasn't talking about a physical house, but a family line. He's promising David a dynasty. He's saying that someone from David's family will sit on the throne and be established forever.

There's a twist in the story though because over the next few hundred years, David's descendants make it look like that's an impossible promise as they failed time and time again.

Where is Jesus?

When Gabriel visits Mary, he quotes the promise almost exactly, "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:32-33). The forever king that was promised to David ended up being Mary's son.

One Thought

David tried to do something big for God and instead, God did something even bigger for him.

One Question

What do you hope people will say about your family hundreds of years from now?

Day 14

The Stump

The Story

Read Isaiah 11:1-10

By the time Isaiah writes his prophecy, David's family tree is in serious trouble. King after king has turned away from God and little did they know that soon enough they would be dragged away from their land into Babylonian exile. Their family tree will look like it was cut down.

That's the exact image that Isaiah uses when he talks about a stump. He says, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit."

Do you remember who David's dad is? Jesse. He goes back, before the kings, before the downfall, and says to look at the root.

Then Isaiah describes what happens when the Branch grows and how the whole earth is "full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." He describes an Eden-like time, except this time it's spread across the whole world.

Where is Jesus?

The Hebrew word for "branch" is netzer, and many scholars think that's what Matthew had in mind when he says Jesus would be called a Nazarene (Matthew 2:23). Jesus grows up in a nowhere town whose name sounds like a branch.

One Thought

There might be something in your life right now that looks like a dead stump, but the good news is that a stump can grow back.

One Question

What's something in your life that came back after you had given up on it?



If you're enjoying this Advent devotional, The Bible, Simplified walks through the entire storyline of Scripture in a similar way.

It's 40 short chapters, Genesis to Revelation, broken down simply with where to find Jesus in every part of the story.

And if you're still Christmas shopping, it's a perfect gift for the friend who keeps asking where to start.

Available everywhere books are sold.

Day 15

God With Us

The Story

Read Isaiah 7:1-14

It's around 735 BC, and King Ahaz of Judah is terrified because two neighboring kings have teamed up to attack him. Isaiah says the hearts of Ahaz and his people "were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind."

So God sends Isaiah to Ahaz to tell him to ask for a sign, any sign.

Ahaz replies with such a spiritual answer, saying "no, I will not put the Lord to the test." But he had already made up his mind to trust Assyria instead of God.

God gives him a sign anyway, saying that a young woman will one day have a son and she will name him Immanuel, meaning "God with us." And before that boy is even old enough to know right from wrong, the two kings that Ahaz is afraid of will be long gone.

Where is Jesus?

The sign came true for Ahaz in his own lifetime, but Matthew sees it come all the way to fruition in Bethlehem. He said, "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (Matthew 1:23). God himself, with us.

One Thought

God gave a sign to a man who said he didn't even want one and he made it come true anyway.

One Question

When you've been scared, who is someone that has stayed with you through the hard times?

Day 16 A Light in an Occupied Land

The Story

Read Isaiah 9:1-7

When Isaiah begins his prophecy, he talks about the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, up north in Galilee. It's the region where Assyria first conquered Israel. And, as dark of a time as it was, that's where Isaiah says the light will show up first.

Then he goes on to say that, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders." He says that he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

When you are living in oppression under an empire, seeing plenty of kings promise peace but go to war instead, those titles come across differently because now Isaiah is promising a king whose peace will have "no end."

Where is Jesus?

When Jesus begins his ministry, Matthew points out that he first goes to Galilee, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. Then Matthew quotes the passage from Isaiah (Matthew 4:13-16). On the night he was born, the angels announce the promise exactly, saying "on earth peace" (Luke 2:14).

One Thought
Oftentimes the darkest places are where the light shines brightest.

One Question
What is a hard season that you've been through, and what brought you through it?

Day 17

Comfort, Comfort

The Story

Read Isaiah 40:1-5

Isaiah 39 ends with bad news for everyone listening, because Babylon was going to destroy everything, leading the people into exile. Then chapter 40 opens with a completely different tone for all of the people living through exactly what the previous chapter prophesied about.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem." Then a voice calls out, "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

In the ancient world, when a king was coming to visit a city, people would go ahead of him to clear the road for easy travel. Isaiah's picture is of these people going ahead in the desert, getting ready for the arrival of a king. And the king that's coming this time isn't an ordinary king, but God himself in human form.

Where is Jesus?

Mark's Gospel opens by quoting this passage and pointing at John the Baptist out in the wilderness preparing the way (Mark 1:2-4). And if Isaiah is saying that the one coming down the road is "our God," then Mark is telling you who Jesus is before he's even introduced him.

One Thought
After the hardest season in their history, God's first word was comfort, and it still is for you today.

One Question
What is something that someone does that always comforts you?

Day 18

God Leaves the Temple

The Story

Read Ezekiel 10:18-19 and 11:22-23, then Ezekiel 43:1-5

Ezekiel is a priest who had already been carried off to Babylon even though Jerusalem hadn't fallen yet, but is about to. In a vision, God takes him back to the temple and shows him how the glory of God, the same presence that filled the tent in the desert on Day 9, lifts up off the temple and leaves.

A few years later Babylon burned the temple to the ground, but God had already moved out of the house before they set fire to it.

Ezekiel's prophecy doesn't end there though. In chapter 43 he sees the glory come back from the east and fill the temple again. The strange part is that when the exiles came home and rebuilt the temple, the Old Testament never says that the glory came back to fill it. They had the building but were still waiting for God to come home.

Where is Jesus?

Forty days after Jesus is born, Mary and Joseph carry him into that same temple (Luke 2:22-32). An old man named Simeon takes the baby in his arms and says, "My eyes have seen your salvation...a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." The glory had come back to the temple.

One Thought

Even though God left the temple for a period, he was already planning his way back in.

One Question

What is one place you'd love to go back to one day?

Day 19

A New Heart

The Story

Read Jeremiah 31:31-34

Jeremiah was the prophet who had to watch it all fall apart right in front of him. He warned Jerusalem for forty years about what was to come, but nobody listened to him.

Then, Babylon came.

Right in the middle of the destruction, God gives Jeremiah one of the most hopeful promises in the whole Old Testament. He promises a new covenant that will "put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts," instead of the stone tablets that they kept breaking. He goes on to say that he will "forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

A chapter later, with the Babylonian army surrounding the city, God tells Jeremiah to buy a field, which is a terrible real estate decision. But it's also a way of saying, "we're coming back."

Where is Jesus?

Before Jesus is born, the angel tells Joseph to name him Jesus "because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Thirty-three years later, at his last meal, Jesus lifts a cup and says, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20), the promise Jeremiah heard long before.

One Thought
God's plan was always to change what's inside of us by writing his plans on our hearts.

One Question
What's something about yourself that you've tried to change on your own but realized you can't without God's help?

Day 20

The Last Word

The Story

Read Malachi 4:5-6, then Luke 1:13-17

Malachi wrote his prophecy around 430 BC and he ended it with a promise that God would send Elijah, who will "turn the hearts of the parents to their children."

Then nothing happened for about four hundred years.

In our Bibles that's one page flip, but for Israel's history it represented the Greek empire, a revolt, Rome, Herod, etc. Entire generations of people were born, grew old, and died while waiting for this promise to come true.

Then an old priest named Zechariah is working in the temple one day and an angel shows up. He tells him his son will come "in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children."

God picks up right where he left off.

Where is Jesus?

Zechariah's son grows up to be John the Baptist. Jesus later says that John was the Elijah they had been promised in the past (Matthew 11:14). John was part of the story to get the place ready for the arrival of Jesus.

One Thought

Just because God was "silent" during those four hundred years doesn't mean he wasn't putting things in place. Roads were laid for spreading the gospel, a common language was in place, everything was being set up for the good news to spread quickly. So if you've felt like God is silent, he might just be putting the right things in place without you realizing it.

One Question

What is the longest you've ever waited for something, and was it worth it?

Day 21

The Lights Come Back On

The Story

Read John 10:22-30

Yesterday we talked about how God went quiet for four hundred years, but a lot still happened. One of the big things was that in 167 BC a Greek ruler named Antiochus IV took over Jerusalem, set up an altar to Zeus in the temple and sacrificed a pig on it. For a Jewish family, that is about the most offensive thing you could imagine. The house of God was now a pagan shrine.

A family called the Maccabees led a revolt that lasted for three years before they officially took the temple back, tore down the altar, built a new one, and rededicated the temple to God with eight days of celebration. That's the origin of the Jewish holiday Hanukkah.

Where is Jesus?

John 10 says, "Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple courts." He was talking about Hanukkah here. At the festival celebrating the temple's rededication, Jesus says, "I and the Father are one." The crowd picked up stones to kill him because to them it was blasphemy. Earlier, Jesus had called his own body a temple (John 2:19-21) and was saying that he is what the temple was always for, as a place where God lives with his people.

One Thought
God is in the business of rededicating things that were ruined in the past, including us.

One Question
What's something in your life you'd love to start fresh with in the new year?



Day 22

The Priest Who Couldn't Speak

The Story

Read Luke 1:5-25, 57-64

At this point, Zechariah and Elizabeth are old, faithful to God, and childless. To be childless in their world carried a large amount of shame and assumptions.

Zechariah is a priest at the temple, and he would take turns with other priests fulfilling their duty. One of the highest honors of a priest was to burn incense in the Holy Place. Today was Zechariah's day.

He is alone at the altar when the angel Gabriel appeared to him and said Elizabeth was going to have a son. After four hundred years of silence, the first recorded word from heaven was to an old man doing his job. And Zechariah didn't believe the angel. He said, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man." So Gabriel tells him he won't be able to speak until it happens. Literally shut his mouth. For nine months.

Then the baby comes and the neighbors assume that he will be named after his dad, but Zechariah asks for a writing tablet and writes, "His name is John." At that exact moment, his mouth opens and he's able to speak again, so his first words are praise to God.

Where is Jesus?

Zechariah sings a song at this point, but it isn't even fully about his son, it's about the one who is on the way a few months later.

One Thought

Zechariah doubted what God was going to do, but it didn't cancel out the promise. If we have doubts ourselves, God is still faithful to see things through.



One Question

When is a time that you got good news and couldn't believe it?

Day 23

Mary's Yes

The Story

Read Luke 1:26-38, 46-55

Six months later, Gabriel goes to Nazareth, a village so small that you could walk from one side to the next pretty quickly. He goes and visits Mary, who is engaged to a carpenter named Joseph and was probably a teenager at the time.

In their world, an engagement was legally binding and pregnancy before the wedding meant shame and dishonor towards the whole family. Yet Gabriel tells her that she's going to have a son anyway, the Son of the Most High, and he will sit on David's throne forever.

Mary asks, "How will this be, since I'm a virgin?" Gabriel explains as much as he was able to, and Mary says, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

Then she goes to visit Elizabeth and sings to her in a very similar way as Hannah's song from 1 Samuel 2, the story of another woman who waited a long time for a son. Both of the songs talk about God bringing down the powerful, lifting up the humble, filling the hungry, and sending the rich away empty.

Where is Jesus?

Back on Day 2, God promised that a child born of a woman would crush the serpent's head. It was now thousands of years later and that woman was a teenager in Nazareth that said yes to the call.

One Thought

Mary was honest in her prayers and still believed that God's word would come to pass even though she didn't understand how it was possible. She praised him anyway.

One Question

What is the biggest yes you've ever said?

Day 24

Joseph Stays Around

The Story

Read Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant and he knows that the baby isn't his.

Breaking an engagement back then was a bigger deal than it is today because it required a formal divorce. Matthew says that Joseph was "faithful to the law" and also "did not want to expose her to public disgrace," so he plans to end it privately. Most men in this position would have tried to cover their backs and blamed it on the woman, because in his eyes, she was unfaithful.

Then an angel visits him in a dream and calls him "Joseph son of David," and tells him to take Mary home as his wife. So Joseph does. He marries her and the shame that she was carrying now becomes his shame too.

The angel told him to name the baby Jesus, Yeshua in Hebrew, which means "the Lord saves." By naming the child, Joseph was claiming that he was his own son, and being that Joseph was from the line of David, now Jesus legally was, too.

Where is Jesus?

The forever promise that we saw given to David on Day 13 runs up to this point, through Joseph's yes. Jesus is now David's heir because he decided to stick around.

One Thought

Some of the most faithful things you will ever do will be private. Nobody needs to know, except God.

One Question

Who stuck with you when it would have been easier to leave?



Day 25

No Room

The Story

Read Luke 2:1-7

Caesar Augustus was the most powerful man in the world at the time and he decided to count every person that lived inside his empire. So Joseph and a very pregnant Mary walk about ninety miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, which is where Joseph's family was from.

We usually have this picture in our minds of an innkeeper shutting the door on this family because there was no space available, but the Greek word is more like a guest room instead of an inn. Many scholars think that Joseph's relatives took them in, but the guest room was already full of other family in town for the census. A lot of the homes at the time had a lower level where the animals came inside at night, and it was in that space where the feeding trough was.

It isn't that they were rejected by their family or an innkeeper, but more like, the house was packed with family and they were squeezed in with the animals.

Where is Jesus?

Caesar thinks he's counting his kingdom, but little did he know that he sent the real king, Jesus, to the exact town that Micah named seven hundred years earlier (Day 11).

One Thought

When your plans get rerouted, it might mean that God is putting pieces in place for something much bigger.

One Question

What is the most crowded holiday you've ever had with your family?



Day 26

Christmas Eve

The Story

Read Luke 2:8-20

The first people to hear the news about the birth of Jesus weren't anyone that society would say is important. They're shepherds working the night shift, outdoors, in the fields near Bethlehem. This wouldn't have been the typical choice for a royal announcement, but that's often how God works.

The angel says, "I bring you good news...a Savior has been born to you." Then the army of angels responded with "on earth peace."

Those words had a specific importance in the Roman world: Good news, savior, peace, because they were what Rome said about Caesar. There was even one inscription from a few years before Jesus was born that calls Augustus' birthday the beginning of "good news" for the whole world, it was a "gospel" message.

So the angel takes the emperor's vocabulary here and uses it for a baby lying in a feeding trough, and he announces it to a group of shepherds.

Where is Jesus?

On Day 12 we were introduced to David, the shepherd from Bethlehem that nobody thought to call in for the selection of Israel's king. Now the forever king from his family gets announced to shepherds in those same fields.

One Thought

God has a way of taking what works in the "world" and reclaiming it for his kingdom purposes.

One Question

What is the best news you've ever gotten?



Day 27 God Moves In (Christmas Day)

The Story

Read John 1:1–14, then Revelation 21:1–5

John starts his Gospel with "In the beginning," the same first words as Genesis. He wants the reader to go all the way back to Day 1.

In the beginning, God built a home and moved in with his people. As we saw in the Garden, we lost what was given to us because of our own selfish desires. Then God camped with Israel in a tent in the desert. He promised them a forever king, a branch from a stump, a light in the dark, and a new heart.

Then after leaving the tent, and after four hundred years of silence, we learn that "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

He pitched his tent with us again, this time as a baby in someone else's room.

Now turn to the last few pages of the Bible. In Revelation 21, a voice from the throne says, "God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them." The story of Scripture doesn't end with us "going up to heaven" when we die, and leaving the earth behind. It ends with God moving in for good, heaven and earth in the same space again. The same way it was on page one, except now it covers the whole world.

Where is Jesus?

Today Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us." And Christmas isn't the end of the story. Jesus grows up, is crucified, rises from the dead, and promises that one day he will return to finish what he started. The waiting is the second part that Advent has always been about.

One Thought
Merry Christmas, my friends.



One Question
What is one thing from these 27 days that you want to remember next December?



If these 27 days helped you understand the story better, The Bible, Simplified does the same thing for the whole Bible.

Forty short chapters take you from Genesis to Revelation, so you can finally see how it all connects. I wish I had this book as I was growing up.

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