



Under Bethlehem's  
Star

Advent Reflections on  
Hope, Peace, Joy  
and Love

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# Introduction

It's the most wonderful time of the year!

Decorating, cooking, shopping, and parties! But in the midst of all the hustle and bustle how do we find time for God? Better still, how can we make the Christmas story come alive? Especially when we've heard it so many times and see it everywhere.

The season evokes in each of us feelings hope, peace, joy and love. Join us as we explore each of these virtues and every aspect of the Christmas story from the animals, to the road that led to the manger.

Let's make this Advent one of prayer and reflection as we journey  
*"Under Bethlehem's Star". -Maggie Ness*

*Note: All written content has been reviewed by our Catholic spiritual director Michael Donaldson to cross check that all statements are align with the teachings and tenants of the Roman Catholic Church. Our cover photo is purchased from Getty images. This journal can be printed and reproduced freely. This journal is not for sale or profit. Find more great tools of faith all free at [heartofmarywf.com](http://heartofmarywf.com) or listen to our daily podcast on Laudate the #1 Catholic App.*





# Advent and Christmas Writing Team

Our writers generously donate their time and talent here at Heart of Mary Women's fellowship ministry. We are blessed to join hearts no matter the distance between us.

Let's get started: print your journal, create a study space with lots of pens and markers and of course your bible.

May God touch your hearts as you dive in to this daily bible study and may the richness of the Advent season shine through you as a beacon of hope, joy, peace and love for all to see. much love, HOMWF

Emily Naylor



Monique Ocampo



Maggie Ness



Tiffany Wulkopf



## Monday 12/3

### Star

#### **John 1:5, Isaiah 49:6**

Light pierced the darkness on that cold winter night in Bethlehem, the darkest night of the year. It always gets darkest just before dawn, and the world had been groaning in anticipation of a Savior. Imagine the light of that star, visible to all who had eyes to see it, and the hope that it brought. Hope means waiting for the light to come and trusting that, as St. Francis so simply put it, *"All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light from a single flame."* It doesn't make sense, darkness should be so heavy and all-consuming that a tiny flicker of a flame should not be able to survive in it. And yet, it casts its light. Just like the tiny breath of a newborn babe in a manger was one day able to cast out the darkness once and for all.

I have a dear friend who lived near me for a season of our lives. She loves candles, and had little votives strewn all throughout her small apartment. Many times she would light one in prayer for someone, and many a night I got a text on my phone with a picture of a flame burning in hope for my particular intention. My friend extended her light and the light of Christ to me in the many moments of darkness I was experiencing at that time in my life. She sometimes even literally handed me light through these candles. She was a beacon of hope to me, a star in the night of Bethlehem. Now that she lives far away, she is still this light to me, shining it's rays from far off like the star did to the Magi, beckoning them to follow it to unfamiliar lands in search of hope.

I believe my friend was able to shower me with so much hope because she has also known times of darkness in her own life. She has learned what it truly means to search for Christ's light when everything seems dark. This has given her soul the ability to always try to find that light in any situation or person, no matter how feeble of a flame it may be.

Faith and hope is what brings these feeble sparks into a roaring flame. Do you know what needs to happen for a candle to light? First, the wick has to be bent upwards - we need someone to help us look up from our own hopelessness and see Christ. Then the flame needs to be brought close to the wick and enough wax melted away for the wick to catch flame. Do we allow Christ's light to come close, long enough to start to burn away the cold wax that we seal and protect our hearts with?

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We are called to be these lights in each other's darkness, to extend our own light and help light the hearts of others. We will then shine like stars in the overwhelming darkness of our own world today, beacons of light and hope.

The light doesn't come from us, but comes from the source of Light itself. The star in Bethlehem wasn't there to gain its own glory in its beautiful shimmer, but it was there to point to something much deeper and grander. It was there to lead us to Hope, to point to Christ always present in our midst, a north star for our souls. And we are always under that star in Bethlehem - its light will never dim.

Reflection questions: Do you have someone in your life who has shown you the light of hope during a hard time in your life? How are you called to be that light to someone else?

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**Tuesday 12/4**

## **Road to Bethlehem**

**Psalm 119:105, John 14:6, Job 23:11**

Now that we've seen the star in Bethlehem, let's journey to see what's underneath it. To get there, we have to take the Road to Bethlehem, being lit by the warm glow of this celestial light. What stories could this road tell us? What twists and turns? It has carried kings of this world and the next. It has heard the hopeful prayers of a mother carrying the Savior, as well as the cries of countless mothers whose children were taken away from them a short time later.

Zoom out even further and see the entire road from Nazareth to Bethlehem - full of deserts, rivers, big cities, and mountains. Christ walked every type of path in life. He got his feet dusty with the earth, down low. This road He was carried on as a babe in the womb was the beginning of our hope, of our salvation, for the same Road to Bethlehem would eventually turn into the Road to Calvary. Both times they were walked with His mother, who hoped in God's promises each time, even when the path was hard.

Later in Scripture we will hear a voice crying out in the wilderness to *"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight His paths."* (Mark 1:3) But what happens when the path the Lord leads us on is not straight? What happens when the road is full of twists and turns and suffering? We can either choose to lose sight of our destination, to leave the path, or we can hope in His promise that He will eventually *"guide our feet into the way of peace."* (Canticle of Zechariah; Luke 1:79)

This shows us that hope is ultimately a verb, not a noun or a feeling - we must keep putting one foot in front of the other. The Road to Bethlehem is a path of obedience, sacrifice, surrender, joy, and most of all, hope. It's a road of hope and a path to peace, whether in this life or the next.

I have witnessed many strong women in my life for whom the Road to Bethlehem simultaneously became the Road to Calvary, who lost their children to miscarriage. If you have also felt this weight, dear sisters, I feel with you and I grieve with you. It's a club I never wanted to join, but this band of mothers has walked the path with me and shown me the hope of God's promises. They showed me how to walk with our Mother, asking her to help us surrender our children to the Lord. They showed me to hope in the Lord's promise that we will one day see our babies again, and that until then He is holding on to them tightly for us. They

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showed me how to hope in the desert, that amongst the twists and turns the Lord is still somehow good, and every path will lead to Him if we choose to let it. They also showed me that sometimes it's ok to be led on the path if you don't have the energy to take one more step, like Mary was led by Joseph and later by the other women disciples.

Let's walk this path to the manger together, dear sisters, and hope in His promises.

Reflection questions: What does your Road to Bethlehem look like right now? In what situation in your life can you practice hope by putting one foot in front of the other?

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## Wednesday 12/5

### Oxen

#### Matthew 11:28-30

Our path finally takes us to the manger itself, where all of the star's rays seem to be pointing to. Take a moment to steady your feet and take a breath before you peek into the cave. There are animals around the manger, do you see the ox keeping guard with his gentle strength?

Oxen were vital to agriculture in Jewish Biblical times, it's how they ploughed and ground their grain. They were also very important spiritually, for they were one of the animals used in ritual sacrifices to Yahweh.

One of the most well known Bible verses tells us to take on Jesus' yoke, for it is easy and light. I never understood that, until I heard it explained in the following way. I always picture a yoke as something you put across your own shoulders, to help balance out two heavy things on either side. Yet in Biblical times, the yoke was for TWO oxen, not one, and it's what kept them together and helped them pull the plow. When Jesus asks us to take on His yoke, He's asking us to get into the yoke WITH Him, next to Him. In the manger, Jesus took on the yoke of our flesh, alongside us. We can walk through our lives next to Him, pulling our individual plows together that will harvest grace and bear fruit. It is easy and light only when we are with Him - it gets heavy and unsuccessful when we try to do it on our own. This is great hope indeed, that He is always with us in every situation. There is hope in His presence.

As I mentioned yesterday, we hope by putting one foot in front of the other, like the ox in the plow. You can feel heavy burdened but still have hope in Christ, walking alongside Him much like Simon of Cyrene on the Way of the Cross.

I recently had the opportunity to listen to a mother and son share their very powerful testimony about how the son was miraculously healed through the intercession of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati. This mother blew me away with her story of trust and hope. She shared how on their way to the hospital the night of her son's accident, she prayed that "*Christ would get there first,*" and He did in the person of the hospital chaplain, praying over her son when they got there. She continued to trust and hope in God's presence in the days of darkness and uncertainty that followed, after being told her son would most likely not survive. She did not give up hope that her God was bigger than the doctor's statistics, and prayed a prayer of incredible surrender



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- asking for whatever version of her son was God's will, whether that was healing him completely or living permanently disabled or bringing him home to heaven. I believe it was this surrender, this getting into the yoke with Jesus, that opened up the channels of grace for the powerful miracle of complete healing that followed. She knew He would be with them no matter what the outcome was, and just kept putting one foot in front of the other each day, actively hoping and walking with Jesus. Her parting words to the group of us listening to her were, "*He doesn't promise it will be easy, but that He is always with us.*" (For their full story, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4JPnDZWQoo>)

So nestle down by the manger next to the oxen, laying down your plows and yokes and burdens of self-sufficiency. Snuggle up next to Christ and His own mother, and let them give you rest and hope.

Reflection questions: What are you trying to do on your own right now? What insurmountable burden do you have, that you can bring to Jesus and allow Him to carry with you? Do you need Him to give you more hope in the promise of His presence?

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**Thursday 12/6**

## **Sheep**

**Matthew 18:12-13, Micah 2:12**

Now look past the ox and see another animal present by the manger, a sheep. Sheep represent God's people, and God is often depicted as a shepherd. They were another animal used for ritual Jewish sacrifices. Christ is ultimately both the Good Shepherd and the sacrificial Passover lamb who lays down His life for the flock.

Sheep are actually the animal most referenced to in Scripture!

Was this sheep laying next to Jesus the one who ran off but had been found? Or had he always been a loyal member of the fold? The answer is it doesn't matter - we are all welcome at the manger. There is always hope that there is a place for us. There is always hope in Christ's mercy. This is the message of the manger - that our Shepherd left the comfort of heaven to come running after us, in search of us, taking on our smelly sheep smell amongst the hay.

Another one of my dearest friends is a constant reminder to me of the hope in Christ's mercy. She has always known she is a sheep, no matter how much she has sinned or run away. She has always trusted that the Shepherd will find her. It isn't an excuse to run off and sin as much as we like, but in our moments of weakness it's a hope and a trust that He is there, ready to pick us up and strengthen us with grace. It has always been a lesson for me, as I tend to fear Christ's justice more than hope in His mercy.

My friend had to find this hope the most during her own manger story of sorts, being a single mom. Just because she had to wear her sin publicly, doesn't mean she was any more sinful than you and me who get to hide our sins internally. If anything, she is now even more of an authentic beacon of Christ's mercy because she had to wear her sin out loud. The world now gets to see that her precious son knocks the breath out of her sin and anchors her to hope. It might even be the exact way He chose to bring her home, by redeeming her sin and turning it into something beautiful.

There were some people you'd expect to be by her manger that weren't - most of them fellow sheep and followers of Christ, part of the 99 who had never gone astray. Yet these sheep forgot that the original manger also contained a child and a mother that were thought by many back home to be shameful, the product of untimely conception either with Joseph or another man.

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They forgot to rejoice.

Because I can tell you that at both mangers, there was much rejoicing. Sheep were brought home and Hope was born. So be one of the sheep who rejoice with Christ, because we are all in need of being found one way or another.

Reflection questions: Who do you identify more with, the sheep who ran away or one of the 99 who stayed? What area of your life do you need more hope and rejoicing in Christ's mercy? Open your eyes this Advent and rejoice at the manger.

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**Friday 12/7**

## **Manger**

**John 6:35, 2 Corinthians 8:9**

The name Bethlehem means "*House of Bread*" in Hebrew - and the manger was the eating trough for the animals. How long had you been waiting, little manger, to hold the Bread of Life, the food for the world, the true food of Heaven?

Hope makes a space. Because in order to be filled, you first have to be emptied. This little manger hoped in its littleness that it would one day be used to hold something great. In the same way, the least among us can hold Christ the most, because they have made a space for Him.

Christ welcomed everyone to gather around the manger, especially the poor and the lowly. He did not sit on a throne of gold but in a manger of wood and hay. To find Him, you had to travel to the lowest part of society. You can still only truly find Him through humility. Do we reverence the presence of Christ in the poor, in the homeless man, the same way we reverence His presence in the tabernacle?

I have been privileged to find Christ in the poor, especially during my time in Haiti. Their radical hospitality, as with most cultures that lack material goods but are rich in love, means that they will welcome you to their homes and offer you a seat and a meal even if they have absolutely nothing. And they will insist, even if you try to decline. To them, one of the greatest honors is to show hospitality.

One of the many, many people I came to know and love was an elderly woman named Madamn Morijen. She lived at the top of a small mountain, in a two-room hut made out of clay and thatched banana leaves. She couldn't make the journey up and down the mountain anymore, and so depended on people to bring her food and company. To pass the time, her wooden Rosary never left her hand, always clicking away bead after bead. She radically hoped in her littleness that Christ was close to her. She loved to welcome groups of missionaries to her home, and although we had to walk high to get to her, it was really an act of bowing low. This woman who had absolutely nothing would fill us with her wisdom, her love, and her prayers. She truly made a space for Christ, and fed everyone with Him who walked in her door. She was a manger to us in the flesh.

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We are all called to be manglers to one another, to make a space for Christ to dwell in our hearts and to let Him feed others through us, whether physically or spiritually. Hope makes a space at the table of the manger. So let's gather around.

Reflection questions: Where do you need to become "little" and make more room for Christ? Do you hope that He can work through your littleness, and turn you into a manger for others? What do you think it means that hope makes a space?

To Jesus through Mary *Emily Naylor*

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## Monday 12/10

### Camel

#### Mark 10:25

We've all heard that verse about how it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. According to history, however, there actually was a gate to Jerusalem that people called *"the eye of the needle"* because it was a narrow passageway.

This Bible verse isn't just something that calls for those who are rich to be more generous. The verse calls for people to be humble. Being humble is the first step towards peace. As C.S. Lewis said: *"Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less."*

We don't know for sure when exactly the Wise Men arrived in Jerusalem. But if any of you watched The Nativity Story, you would know that these astronomers from Babylon took a lot of stuff with them. If they passed through this narrow gate, they would've had to unload things off of their camels and then reload their camels once they passed through.

If you're traveling for the holidays or even planning what your holidays will be like, make sure to consider everyone with love and care. Don't make it about yourself or whatever is on your Christmas wish list. Most of all, put God first. Remember that during this time of year, we are preparing our minds and souls to make room for Him.

Unburden yourself of whatever worries you have for this time of year. I know that we live in very divisive times, but it helps to remember that times weren't easy for Joseph and Mary, either. And even though the Wise Men were well off, they weren't on an easy journey, either. To be humble is to acknowledge that we are all struggling together.

Reflection questions: How often do you think of yourself first? What are some ways you can think of others more often beyond thoughts and prayers?

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**Tuesday 12/11**

## **Swaddling clothes**

### **Luke 2:8-12**

One thing I notice about babies is that they move around a lot, even before they start crawling. They squirm and stretch and dance around, exploring the world they came into. To keep babies warm, moms will wrap their children up in what I call a nice little blanket burrito. I can only imagine that it gets harder to wrap up these babies as they get older.

Still, the imagery of being wrapped up in a mother's love is always a calming, peaceful idea. I ask Mary to wrap me up in her mantle every night, since I often struggle with falling asleep. I also like to wrap myself up in a blanket burrito because I hate feeling cold.

There are many times in life, especially in this Advent season, where we feel very fussy. Or we have to deal with fussy children. The smallest things feel like the biggest deal. When we feel like making mountains out of molehills, we need to ask Mary to wrap us in her mantle and give us peace.

It's very hard for us to be comfortable and comfort doesn't last long. What can last, though, is a sense of inner peace. We can always take ourselves back to the time of the Nativity and reflect on the peace. The small scene feels serene, but it helps to understand the context. The little cave was anything but cozy. It was used as a stable, which meant it was filled with animals and probably smelled. The town of Bethlehem was crowded with many other people and we have no idea how cold it was that night.

Having peace in our lives doesn't mean that we feel peaceful all the time. We just have something stable to hold onto in times of trouble. That's why in times of trouble, to quote the Beatles, Mother Mary will say "Let it be" and wrap us in her mantle.

*"Mother Mary, keep me under your mantle and help me to prepare for the day when I will meet your Son."*

*Sr. Theresa Aletheia Noble, FSP*

Reflection question: What are some ways that you maintain peace during troubled times?

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## Wednesday 12/12

### Donkey

#### Jeremiah 1:5

One lesser known Christmas animated movie is a short film called The Small One. It's a very simple story of a boy trying to sell his donkey in the marketplace. The problem is that nobody wants to buy an old, scrawny donkey except for a tanner. It's not until the end of the movie that a kind man buys him, needing a gentle donkey that can carry his wife to Bethlehem. The moral of the short film is *"There's a place for each small one."*

Each of us was created with a purpose no matter how old or how young, or whatever other label people like to use as a liability. We can find peace within ourselves when we realize that we were given a purpose in this life. We may not know what it is yet, but it's never too late to ask God to help us find it.

I am chasing this dream of sharing my stories with the world. It takes a lot of hard work and gets frustrating at times. What keeps me going is just this tug in my gut that tells me that I need to write. I'm not writing for myself, either. I write to glorify Him through the stories I tell. In the worst of times, God always inspires me to keep going. Grounding myself in Him and the purpose He gave me, gives me peace.

Reflection question: What do you think is *your* purpose in life? How are you fulfilling it right now?

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**Thursday 12/13**

## **Herod who threatens peace**

### **Matthew 2:13-18**

From what I have read about this particular Herod outside of the Bible, he was a very paranoid man. Not only did he order for the deaths of every boy under the age of two in Bethlehem, but he had two of his sons and his favorite wife executed because he heard a rumor that they were plotting against him.

We have all probably known or have heard of paranoid people in our lives. The fear and hate these people spread might stem from hardship or from selfishness. It's easy to be afraid when we are constantly bombarded with news about shootings and political scandals. We have no idea who we can really trust. It's a temptation to buy into any conspiracy theory we may hear from the news or on the radio. But we can't let all this paranoia get to us.

When I look at the lives of the saints, one thing I quickly learn is that there's nothing new under the sun. Saints have always lived in times such as the one we live in. Many of them have had some kind of hardship, whether it was externally or internally. Maximilian Kolbe and Edith Stein were prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp. Saint Catherine of Siena lived in a time when the Church was literally divided. Many of the saints died for their faith.

The biggest difference between all these amazing saints and Herod is that the saints were courageous. Having courage means to do good and being good no matter what the circumstances are. As long as we remember to love God and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, we will have a solid foundation for our inner peace. Sisters in Christ, if you feel afraid or inadequate or paranoid, remember that God's truth is louder and stronger than the fears that the world spreads. Ask God to help you be strong and courageous.

Reflection questions: What are you most afraid of? How do you deal with paranoia?

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Friday 12/14

## **Gifts**

### **Matthew 2:11**

We have all heard the story of the gifts that the Wise Men gave to Jesus. However, the gifts that Jesus received weren't just valuable because they cost a lot of money. There is a deeper meaning. The gold, frankincense, and myrrh represent the roles that Jesus will grow into. The gold acknowledges that Jesus is the King of Kings. Frankincense is used by the temple priests, signifying that Jesus will become greater than the high priests of Jerusalem. The myrrh is a burial ointment and (depending on whether or not myrrh has an expiration date) one can speculate that this myrrh that Jesus received upon his birth was used when he was buried decades later.

In the eyes of the world, we may seem insignificant, but God knows our true value. We are priceless to Him, sisters in Christ. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. I have to remind myself of this often, especially since I deal with anxiety and feelings of inadequacy. I have to constantly affirm to myself that I am more than enough because God created me. As crazy as it may sound to you, we are worth all the gold, frankincense, and myrrh in the world and then some.

What kind of gifts do you have? It may not seem extraordinary to you, but if there is anything Saint Therese taught me, it's that the smallest of gifts can be used to glorify the Lord. Saint Therese didn't live a life of grand adventures like she dreamed. She wrote plays and poems, but most of her life was spent with her family and her sisters in the convent. In spite of that, she has been regarded as a favorite saint for many Catholics, myself included.

And if you don't believe Saint Therese, watch *It's a Wonderful Life* sometime. George Bailey had a dream of traveling the world and he didn't think he contributed anything good to the world. However, when he gets a look at what the world would've been if he was never born, he quickly realizes that his seemingly ordinary life gained him a community of friends and people who are willing to go out of their way to help him in his time of need.



Under Bethlehem's Star

Today, reflect on the gifts that God has given you and see how you can give back to Him this time of year.

To Jesus through Mary-*Monique Ocampo*

My God given Gifts

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How can I Give back to God?

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Monday 12/17

## Cave

### 1 King 9:3-5

Jesus woke me up this morning at 4:30. My whole house is sleeping, I'm wide awake. While laying in bed the thought crossed my mind that I was being invited to pray. The movements of the Lord are so simple. I wasn't the least bit tired. So I got up, made coffee and sat down with my bible study. The reflection at the end for this particular day asked us to focus on a time when you have been really touched by certain people, and to thank God for those moments. So I began the mental exercise one by one recalling friends, then family members, then my husband and my daughter. Finally, I rested on the time in my life where loneliness was so overwhelming it crowded around me like thick briars, and I remembered that during that season of life only God could touch me. He was the only one that could. I felt Him almost tangibly. Then I recalled a scripture that He put on my heart.

I was in adoration one day weeping. I was running a struggling ministry. I was constantly being told by people that what I sought in a husband was unattainable. The ministry focused on masculinity and femininity, so these 2 things were always connected in my heart. There was a constant fear that I was getting something wrong between the two sexes, that I misunderstood God's plan for man and woman. Then Jesus just whispered to my heart 1 Kings 9....I flipped open my bible and my eyes landed on 1 Kings 9: 3-5,

This is dripping with symbolism. Consecrated this house means ME-- He's consecrated me, through baptism and confirmation! The royal throne he was talking about is my heart and soul. Its royal because that's where God dwells. Israel is the chosen people of God--so when I read the last line what it said to me was, *"I will not fail you a man to be with you where I dwell--you are my chosen!"* I love symbolism. It's romantic to me that's why he talks to me that way, He isn't trying to be cryptic.

WOW! DID HE DELIVER. My husband overwhelmingly fits this description!! He was worth the wait.

As a child-- a young child --- a year old or so, my mother told me that the neighbors called me Little Maggie Sunshine. I used to sit in the driveway and smile and wave to people. But somewhere in the adolescence years a darkness settled in my spirit. A certain melancholy overthrew all my joy. I have spent years in search of that joy. My daughters middle name is Joy. That came to both my husband and I in prayer. She too likes

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to sit on the porch around 3PM when the kids are getting off the bus just to smile and wave at them, and then again around 5PM when everyone is coming home from work. She's 9 months old. To her each one is exciting and important. She reminds me of who I was created to be. Who I was before I allowed sin and life's disappointments to rob me of my joy.

As I sat that morning thanking God for the healing that Christ has done in my life, each image where He touched my wounded heart, I wept uninhibited tears of joy. I listened to Matt Maher's song "*Sing over your Children.*" I highly recommend this as a meditation. The song begins with this child-like quirky music. I can't even name the instrument. Then the words pierce my soul...."*out of the depths You cry come and be satisfied--Father you sing over children--let us see through your eyes we are Your great delight-- Father you sing over Your children.*"

When we read the Christmas story and are picturing all the scenes most of us think of the stable. But Christ was born in a cave! A notch in the mountainous region of Bethlehem. It was dirty, hidden, dark, cold and yet this is where He chose to make His debut in the world. God came into the parts of my life that were dirty from sin. He came to the places where I was hiding. He entered my cold closed off spirit that was dark fearful of being seen. And wherever Christ goes, light follows, warmth follows and so does security.

Jesus gave me the gift of joy as a child. And when it was lost he gave me my daughter Maranatha Joy, in the form of a child. Her name means, "*the joy of the Lord's coming.*" It is a reminder of His presence. He puts desires in our hearts and brings them to fruition. I could only hope for a husband so like Christ in my life because Christ was so present in my life. From the depths of my cave-like heart Christ calls. He satisfies my inmost longings. That is the joy!! God in us, God with us--Emmanuel.

Reflection: Today take a few moments and recall the times in your life when God has touched you. If you can't, ask him to touch you. Ask Him to show you! He will. He loves you.

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Tuesday 12/18

## Wiseman

### Romans 5:3

*"So how have you suffered!?"* My professor asked. The look on her face was serious but also amused. It was part of our grade in my Philosophy of the Human Person class to go and have a serious conversation with the professor. I really liked this professor, but she was tough and intimidating. There were over 90 people in this class, but this one meeting was just she and I. There could be no hiding. I don't remember what we'd been talking about, but I remembered that question. I just stared at her. I had slowly decided that I trusted her, so I opened my mouth. What came out was this, *"My dad killed himself."* She smiled, not in an inappropriate way, but in way that she was satisfied with herself and her student. What she said next has impacted my life more than most conversations I can recall. *"If you want to find someone who's wise, look for someone who has suffered."* No one had ever given me such a compliment on the heels of such news. In fact, she didn't feel sorry for me at all, as most do. She knew what the saints know all too well. Suffering has a way of pulling us straight into the heart of God. And in her eyes, at least in that moment, that's where I was too. This conversation gave me permission to live in that space. Through suffering I came to know the joy of the Lord.

When I was in college I became friends with a woman that was so beautifully wise. She had suffered. My suffering was emotional, but hers was both emotional and physical. We travelled together once and an old injury of hers flared up. It was a pretty bad injury. She just kept saying that it was a reminder, that she was suffering for someone and that it would be healed. Everyone thought she was nuts. I remember giving her the, *"Sometimes healing comes through doctors hands..."* speech. She would just smile and say, *"it's just a reminder."* She was healed. I had seen her go pale and almost pass out on more than one occasion because of how painful this particular injury was for her. IT WAS HEALED. She was so wise. Her security and strength were in the Lord. She knew all too well His promises, His voice, His ways. She never ceased searching for Him. She was never disappointed. Her hearty laugh and attractive personality came from that place of joy, that was learned through great suffering.

## Under Bethlehem's Star

When we read the Christmas story, we read about the visit of the Wise Men. What a mysterious event. Take a moment and pretend you've never heard this story. Three men from very far away, possibly hundreds of miles, see a star in the sky and are so moved by its rising they go in search of a child. How did they know to look for a child? How did they know to be looking for the star? How did they know they would find him? When they found him, how did they know what to give him? Or better, to worship him? Such a mysterious encounter. Don't you think people thought they were nuts? My guess is that they were ridiculed, at least by some. It took a great amount of trust to make such a journey through the night, during a time when the roads were hardly safe. You better believe these men suffered for this belief. They must have been men of prayer, men of waiting. They knew from the depths of their hearts the Truth. That kind of confidence, that kind of JOY, can only come from above.

Joy moves us. Yet so many of us want the joy without the suffering. The world we live in today tells us to stay as far away from suffering as possible. People often say to me, *"I wish I had the relationship you had with the Lord."* This relationship came from years of extreme loneliness and profound emotional suffering. Then I tell them, you can't have my relationship with the Lord, but you can have your relationship with the Lord! It takes patience and trust and those two things will bring struggle. But, the fruit of that is JOY! A joy that surpasses all understanding. Joy that is still present when someone you love dies, or when another life tragedy pulls the rug out from underneath you.

The story of the Wise Men teach us to wait, to expect, to seek, and to worship! And from these come JOY. Don't be afraid to suffer. Suffering brings wisdom--wisdom teaches joy.

Reflection questions: What suffering are you experiencing in your life right now? Where is Jesus in it? Ask Jesus to give you the grace to wait for Joy.

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Wednesday 12/19

## **Donkey**

### **Philippians 4:4-5**

St. Francis used to refer to his body as 'brother ass.' C.S. Lewis loved this description. He writes, "*Ass is exquisitely right because no one in his senses can either revere or hate a donkey. It is a useful, sturdy, lazy, obstinate, patient, lovable and infuriating beast; deserving now a stick and now a carrot; both pathetically and absurdly beautiful. So the body.*" Yet, of all animals, this one was chosen for a specific and incredibly special purpose - to carry Mary and the child into Bethlehem!

We too are called to carry Christ to every corner of our lives, touching all those we meet. How do we do this? JOY! There is nothing more attractive in the world than joy. The book of Acts tells us that the early Christians were known by their love. That's another way of saying that they were known for their joy!

I think this is hardest to live out during the holiday season. I have a very type A personality and cannot stand being rushed, but that's almost always what ends up happening. I take things too seriously and miss out on Advent. It is so hard to make room for Jesus with the decorating, the shopping, and the parties, (not to mention the cooking, cleaning, and figuring out outfits). So how do we find the balance?

I was given a little insight while visiting Ars, France, the resting place of St. John Vianney. Behind the Church where his body is laid out, there is a yard with an old donkey. I love animals, so of course I walked over and called for the animal to come over. Lo and behold, he came over right away and allowed me to pet him and place my forehead on his nose. As I turned to leave, out of nowhere the creature head butted me SO hard I saw stars. Dazed and bruised, I looked back at the donkey, and all he could do was utter a "hee-haw." I left Ars with a big, colorful face and a funny story.

It wasn't until much later that I learned about how intelligent and social donkeys are. It is now my belief that this donkey was trying to rest his head on me the way I had on him, but, in his hurriedness to return the gesture, he ended up nearly knocking me out. The intention was good, the execution flawed. How often is that us? We are trying so hard to live our best life, but we just end up giving life a big 'hee-haw' and it all goes down hill.



Thursday 12/20

## Angel

**Matthew 28:2, Psalm 110:1**

*"Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly."*

*G.K. Chesterton*

One of my favorite angels in Scripture is the one we see at the Resurrection. In Matthew 28:2 we read, *"And behold there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it."* Did you catch that last part? Sometimes we have a tendency to read Scripture too seriously to notice what it's actually saying. Let's look at this passage again, but first let's place it into context: only days before, Jesus was arrested by a mob and crucified. The governor of Jerusalem, Pilate, is so worried about unrest in the area that he placed guards at Jesus' tomb after he had Him put to death. The apostles have fled; the Temple veil has been ripped in two (the veil was six inches thick by the way); even the dead have been raised from their tombs and are walking around. Can you imagine a more confusing and frightening time to be a follower of Jesus? Returning to the previous passage, we read that into this craziness an angel of the Lord "rolled back the stone, and sat upon it." He SAT upon it. This stone, this image of triumph for the enemy, the representation of God being shut away from a humanity who has rejected Him, is cast completely aside and turned into a stool for an angel. In the words of the Psalmist *"Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool"* (Psalm 110:1)

What does it take to approach God with this sort of jovial and trusting spirit in the midst of some of our worse trials? I think 2 simple things: Knowledge of who He is and His promises, and an ability to walk in that truth. The angel sits on the stone because he doesn't care what it represents or what message it's sending. God is here and that's all that matters.

Consider the nativity story: The angels appear to Shepherds and announce, *"Behold I bring good news of great joy! A Savior!!"* The angels know who He is, and for them it is the source of their joy. Whether He is lying in a cave under Roman guard or swaddled in a manger, He is God! That is worth celebrating. That is worth singing *"Glory to God in the Highest."* They know He always wins.



Friday 12/21

## Angel

### John 1:4-5

I once heard that Satan always hits us, when we are in a dark place, with a one - two punch. The first punch is convincing us of our own weakness, and the second one is mocking us for believing we are weak. Right now, I'm feeling really overwhelmed in motherhood. I have an 11 month old daughter and I am 20 weeks pregnant. While my daughter is the joy of my life, she is extremely mischievous and is into everything. I cannot do a thing while she is awake and she's transitioned down to one nap a day, at which time I nap too. So laundry, cleaning, cooking, and overall house maintenance do not get done. Not to mention, I'm climbing the walls with boredom, because one can only read "Farmyard Peek a Boo" so many times.

The one two punch for me is this: *"You thought you could be a good mom? Ha! You can't even handle one kid... and you've got another coming"*.

This temptation plays over and over in my head a billion times a day. I want to crawl up in a ball and cry. I am tempted to shut others out because I feel like a failure and hypocrite. THIS IS WHY WE PRAY!!!!

Prayer is what gives me the strength to rise each morning and say okay, one more day in this tough season. Let's do this Jesus. Some days are more graceful than others and I fail in some area of virtue daily, but I continue each morning to look for Him in my day - the Light in my darkness.

What are the areas in your life that feel the most dark?

The Gospel of John skips the Nativity story. Instead we get an entirely different lens through which to view the Incarnation - the image of light and darkness. Because of this image, when I think of the Christmas story I always think of Jesus being born just at the break of dawn - his very presence bringing the dawn. That image comforts me. No matter how bad things have been in my life, the loss of a parent, unspeakable loneliness, and all temptations against goodness, I remember this. Jesus brings the dawn.

Reflection: He is the light of the world and of our souls. Always look for Him when it is most dark. Rest assured He is on the horizon. To Jesus through Mary-*Maggie Ness*

## Christmas Eve

### Inn Keeper

#### Luke 2:7

Although we as Christians have been conditioned to think the innkeeper was a bit of a tyrant, one who turned away a pregnant woman in her time of need, he is not cited anywhere in scripture doing so. For all we know, he regrettably had to turn them away, although in researching him, it was mentioned that the innkeeper would've had a room himself and could have easily offered it to the caravan out of love for others but chose not to. Faced with adversity in a desperate need, Mary trudged on knowing her time had come to do God's work – for she was to give birth to our Lord and Savior.

I was once faced with an innkeeper of my own. Raised without religion or God, I had many misnomers within my understanding about who God was and what His purpose was in the life of people on earth. I was very ignorant in my understanding but once the internet was born and became the source of all information, I googled whether Jesus had siblings. I thirsted for more and wanted to investigate converting to Catholicism, but my innkeeper was there turning me away.

I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me – Proverbs 8:17

At this time in my life, I had no knowledge of a manger in which to reprieve and carry on God's work. Instead, I was left on the doorstep of the inn, yearning to be on the inside; to know what it was like to have warmth, comfort, food and drink. It took years before I got passed my innkeeper and learned of God's imminent love and grace for myself. Today, I still sit in the comfort of the inn, but understanding God's omnipresence, I too can carry on like Mary did and do God's work wherever I am called.



## Christmas Day

### Jesus

#### Isaiah 9:6

I was raised by an atheist mother, and adopted her views early on in my teenage years. I wasn't vehemently against God, as was she, I just didn't believe in any higher power other than myself. I was ignorant in thinking that when one prayed to God for strength, they were actually praying inwardly for their own self to give them strength and that, scientifically, the human body could conform to those specific needs if it was willed. I didn't realize I was in darkness until God showed me His brilliance.

I vividly recall sitting in my hospital bed, staring down at the face of my son, and studying his perfect little body parts. I let his long, tiny fingers wrap around mine, as I watched his chest rise and fall with his breath, and I listened intently at the little noises he would make while nursing. How could this wonder have come from within my own self? How could anything other than God create such perfection? And how could I possibly walk out of this hospital without thanking God for this precious gift? From the birth of my son, also came the birth of my relationship with God.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son – John 3:16

Today, Christmas day, as we celebrate the coming of Christ, I realize with Jesus' birth, the world was given the chance at salvation, and with my son's birth, I was given a second chance at salvation. Jesus revealed Himself to me through the tiny face of my firstborn. He encouraged me to look past what I thought I knew, and find the way, the truth, and the life. I believe the infant Jesus is inherently part of all newborns, as spun from God's own hand and woven together in a mother's womb, for God is with us.

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel which means God is with us  
– Matthew 1:23



Under Bethlehem's Star

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How has God revealed Himself to you from those around you?

How did you know it was Him speaking to you?

What are some of the ways you celebrate the Lord and thank Him for the gift of salvation on Christmas day?

How does this carry on throughout the year?

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**Wednesday 12/26**

**Mary**

**Isaiah 66:7**

Mary was immaculately conceived and therefore born without original sin. Because of this, she did not suffer through labor when delivering our Lord and Savior. The rest of us, unworthy of immaculate conception and born of original sin, experience childbirth in a very different way. Mary was entrusted by God to be the vessel for which to bring salvation to the world. Women are entrusted by God to bear His children, raise them in His name, and return them to His Kingdom. It is true that we, as women, are far from Mary's holiness, but do consider the great privilege God grants us to be uniquely designed to be mothers. We can do what man cannot do. St. John Paul II, in his letter to women written in 1995 states, "Thank you, women who are mothers! You have sheltered human beings within yourselves in a unique experience of joy and travail. This experience makes you become God's own smile upon the newborn child, the one who guides your child's first steps, who helps it to grow, and who is the anchor as the child makes its way along the journey of life."

Last month, I had the honor of witnessing a beautiful life come into this world. My amazing best friend fought courageously for hours against the unceasing pains of childbirth to do God's best work. In the final moments before her sweet son was born, I felt helpless knowing I was unable to take away her pain. But there she was, a physical paradigm as her most vulnerable self, yet the strongest person in the room. My heart swelled to look at her, a modern-day Mary, bringing another one of God's perfect creations into this world. And suddenly, in a moment of God's grace, He unchained her from the pain and gave her a perfect baby boy. She was now a mother.

Behold, children are a gift of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward – Psalm 127:3

With that privilege comes great responsibility that she has naturally embraced. She now proudly dons a mantle that will expand generously over her child, as our heavenly mother's mantle does for us. She will suffer pain when he does, as Mary did at the foot of the cross. She will worry when he is not in her line of vision, as Mary did when Jesus was lost in the temple. But first, she will relish in this time, under the star of Bethlehem, as she rocks her sweet baby, thanking God for this gift, the light of her world, just as Mary thanked God, for the light of the whole world.

### Under Bethlehem's Star

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As a woman, God gives us the privilege of bringing life into the world. What other privileges are granted as women?

If you put yourself under the star of Bethlehem the night of Jesus' birth, how would you imagine the scene? What is Mary's reaction when she sees Jesus for the time? What is Joseph's? How does this compare to your own birthing experiences?

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Thursday 12/27

## Joseph

### Matthew 1:24

Joseph is known for his goodness in accepting Mary, his betrothed, as his wife although she was with child. He went on to become Jesus' foster father and is the patron saint of many things including families, fathers, travelers and workers, because of the caring and compassionate way he took on these duties.

A dear friend of mine and his wife, newly into their marriage, were faced with difficulties in conceiving. After some time, and many negative tests, he and his wife decided to open themselves to God's call to adoption. In January 2015, their prayers were answered, and they were given the gift of a beautiful baby boy. My friend's transformation into fatherhood was a blessing to witness – it was graceful, full of gratitude, and had God's beauty written all over it.

And he knew her not, yet she bore her son, the firstborn. And he called him Jesus. – Matthew 1:25

He took to this child as I imagine Joseph did to Jesus in the manger; a child not of his own flesh and blood, but abundantly loved from the depths of his soul nonetheless. This love he gave was the embodiment of God's love. There was an overwhelming sense of pride, a new dedication to fulfill. He was now working to support a family and be a shining example for his son, a child which God had entrusted to him. He took on his new role as head of his family admirably and exemplified all the traits for which we have come to honor the man who raised Jesus Himself.

As Joseph, have you ever been faced with a situation in which you had to wholly trust the Lord? How did this strengthen your relationship with God?

Do you know someone who embodies the same care and compassion for which Joseph is known? How can we learn from someone with these traits?

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**Friday 12/28**

## **Shepherds**

### **Luke 2:8-10**

Within my faith community, I have come across many people who represent the traits of the shepherds at the nativity of Jesus, but there is one who fits in perfectly within this realm. The work she does is ultimately His, as she allows the Holy Spirit in to guide her hand in creating exquisite visual prayers. She is an iconographer and her icons, which are known in the art world as "windows into heaven," are created in a sacred space wherein her heart is continually joyful and reverent.

To shepherd is to guide or direct in a particular direction and this is what her icons do for the many who have the honor to venerate them. In her years of doing this line of work, she has offered herself as a loving servant to those around her, often calling upon the community to bring their petitions to her as she paints. These intentions are taken straight to heaven through the window and directly to Jesus, Mary, or one of heaven's many saints.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told - Luke 2:20

The shepherds are an important part of the nativity, for they were among the first who knew of the birth of Jesus and who witnessed for themselves God's promise for peace on earth. As they were doing their work by night, an angel appeared to them to bring them news of good tidings. Come and see what God has done! The shepherds visited the babe and then returned to their work, glorifying and praising God. She too remains steadfast in glory and praise of our Lord while she works and is a constant student of His will.

The shepherds at the Nativity are a foretelling of the greatness of the babe in the manger, as Jesus grew up to be the good shepherd of men. And, my friend the iconographer, open to what the angels reveal to her, has grown to be a willing servant of the Lord, just as she's been called.



Merry Christmas

We hope you enjoyed our bible study.  
Thank you for being a part of our little  
Holy family of God this Advent and  
Christmas season!

You are a blessing to us!

Much love

Heart of Mary Women's Fellowship

## Silent Night Holy Night

Silent night, holy night  
All is calm and all is bright  
Round yon virgin, mother and child  
Holy infant, so tender and mild  
Sleep in heavenly peace, ooh  
Sleep, sleep in heaven, heavenly peace

Silent night, holy night  
Shepherds quake at the sight  
Glories streams from heaven afar  
Heavenly hosts sing, alleluia

Christ the savior is born, he's born  
Christ the savior is born  
Round yon virgin, mother and child  
Holy infant, so tender and mild



Sleep in heavenly peace, oh  
Sleep in heavenly peace



O Little town of Bethlehem

O little town of Bethlehem  
How still we see thee lie  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
The silent stars go by  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
The everlasting Light  
The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in thee tonight

For Christ is born of Mary  
And gathered all above  
While mortals sleep, the angels keep  
Their watch of wondering love

O morning stars together  
Proclaim the holy birth  
And praises sing to God the King  
And Peace to men on earth

O holy Child of Bethlehem  
Descend to us, we pray  
Cast out our sin and enter in  
Be born to us today

We hear the Christmas angels  
The great glad tidings tell  
O come to us, abide with us Our Lord  
Emmanuel

## O Holy Night

O holy night the stars are brightly  
shining, It is the night of our dear Savior's  
birth

Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till He appeared and the soul felt its  
worth

A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices  
For yonder breaks a new glorious morn

Fall on your knees  
O hear the angels' voices  
O night divine  
O night when Christ was born  
O night divine o night

## O night divine

Truly He taught us to love one another;  
His law is Love and His gospel is Peace;

Chains shall he break, for the slave is our  
brother, And in his name all oppression  
shall cease,

Sweet hymns of joy in grateful Chorus  
raise we; Let all within us praise his Holy  
name!

Christ is the Lord, then ever! ever praise  
we His pow'r and glory, evermore  
proclaim!

His pow'r and glory, evermore proclaim!

Away in a Manger

Away in a manger  
No crib for a bed  
The little Lord Jesus  
Laid down His sweet head

The stars in the sky  
Looked down where He lay  
The little Lord Jesus  
Asleep on the hay

The cattle are lowing  
The Baby awakes  
The little Lord Jesus  
No crying He makes

I love Thee, Lord Jesus  
Look down from the sky  
And stay by my cradle  
Till morning is nigh

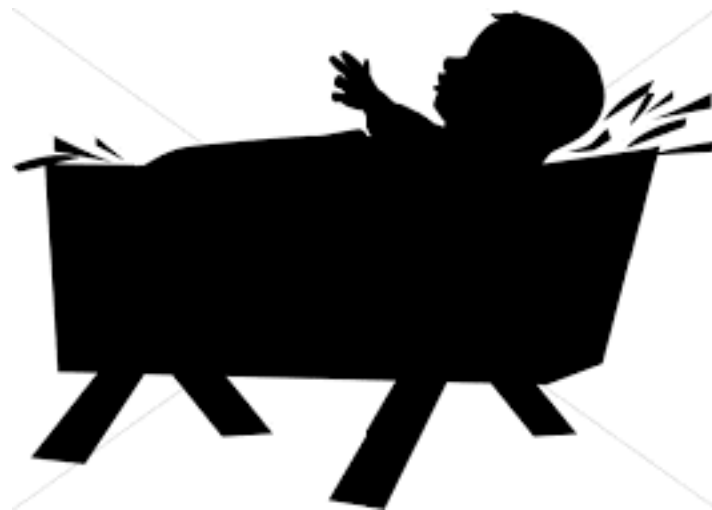
Be near me, Lord Jesus  
I ask Thee to stay  
Close by me forever  
And love me I pray

Bless all the dear children  
In Thy tender care  
And fate us for heaven  
To live with Thee there

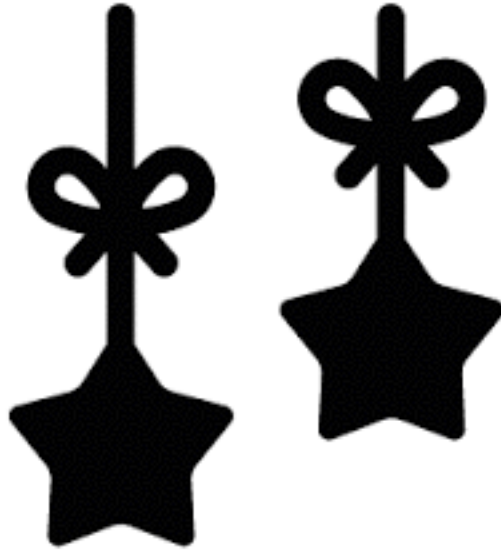
Away in a manger  
No crib for a bed

The little Lord Jesus  
Laid down His sweet head

The Lord of all creation  
Laid down His sweet head  
The Savior of the nation  
Laid down his sweet head







The End