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..... *Covenant Chicago's 2016 Advent*

—≡≡≡ **devotional** ≡≡≡—
GUIDE



Introduction

Advent marks the beginning of a new church year. The word “advent” means “coming” and denotes the four-week period before Christmas when the church remembers Jesus’ first coming and looks forward to his return.

Advent marks the beginning of a new church year. Advent means “coming” and it’s the name of the the four-week period before Christmas when the church remembers Jesus’ first coming and looks forward to his return.

Advent celebrates the mystery of God’s incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ. As John says in his Gospel, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, Who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1.14).

The mood of Advent is that of longing, of expectation, and of waiting. Advent is a time when we yearn for Jesus as the world’s anointed King to come back and make it right. The cry of Advent is the cry of those who have experienced the tyranny of sin and injustice in a world under curse, and yet who have hope of deliverance by a God who hears their cries. It is a time of repentance and a time of faith as we prepare for God to reorder His creation and redeem His people. We join the Apostle John in praying, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22.20).

We have put together the following Advent guide to help you as individuals, small groups, and families to enter into the story of the Gospel in new and deep ways. We know that finding time with others even to share over a meal, let alone to do a devotional, can be difficult. With that in mind, this guide has only three readings per week. Each week has an overarching theme, which the three devotionals that week develop. Each devotional has a Scripture reading, short reflection, and a couple questions to ponder and discuss. To this, you could add prayer, singing, and lighting

an Advent wreath. Hymns for Advent are included at the end, and a brief liturgy to use with the Advent wreath is included within each week.

May Christ grant us all a blessed Advent and Christmas!

The Pastoral Staff at Covenant



WEEK 1

November 27—December 3

The Advent Longed For

Advent Wreath: The Candle of Hope

Reader: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

Reader: Jesus is the light of the world. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (*while first candle is lit*): We light the first candle as a sign of hope in the Christ who came and who will come again.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

During the first week of Advent, we remember that the story of Jesus' coming is part of the big story God is writing, the true story of the world. Our Scripture readings show us three grand moments in the overall arc of God's work in our world: creation, fall, and new creation. They remind us that God has not left our world alone as it is, but has given us Hope (1 Peter 1.3).

Day One: A Very Good Beginning

read Genesis 1.28-31

When God spoke the world into existence, he reserved the climax of his creative activity for forming something very special: humanity, man and woman, in his image. When you look into a mirror what do you see? You see your image. An image is a reflection of someone or something. Well, God made us in his image. He made us to create and care for the world in such a way that we would reflect his own creativity and care. When God finished forming us, he took a look at all he had done and saw that it was “very good.” Everything was just as he wanted it. He was proud of his creation and delighted in it.

Why do you think God created us and this place?

How does the way in which God made us inform how we should think about our work, our play, our relationships, our bodies, minds and spirits?

Day Two: The Fall of People and the World *read Genesis 3.1-24*

Despite God's goodness to them, the first ones to bear God's image cut themselves loose from God's word. Not believing that God had their best in mind, they rebelled against their king. This sad event was the first sin, and it forever changed the world we know and live in. The result for all creation was death: broken relationships with work, with the world, with others, with ourselves, and with God. Yet hidden in that curse was a promise of provision and redemption for the image-bearers.

How do we experience that things in our world are not the way they are supposed to be?

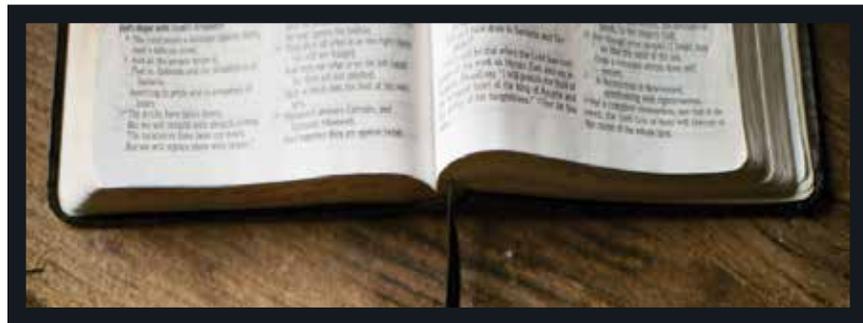
What is our hope that things one day will be the way they are supposed to be, restored to the original “very good?”

Day Three: A Very Good Ending *read Revelation 21.1-8; 22.1-5*

The story of the Bible finishes where it began: heaven and earth, God dwelling with his image-bearers, no curse, even the tree of life! But some things are different. Revelation 21-22 depicts a heaven and earth that is a new heaven and earth. And it includes someone called “the Lamb.” The snapshots of Revelation are given to us to whet our appetite for something more than we find in ourselves and in our world at the present. Obviously, God has big plans for us and the rest of the creation!

When we fast-forward from the beginning to the end, why is it that we see the “Lamb” appear on the scene? Who is the Lamb?

During this Advent, as we think about the coming of Lamb, what longings are you depending on Him to satisfy?



WEEK 2

December 4—December 10

The Advent Foreshadowed

Advent Wreath: The Candle of Love

Reader: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

Reader: Jesus is the light of the world. In him was life, and the light was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (while first candle is lit): We light the first candle as a sign of hope in the Christ who came and who will come again.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (while second candle is lit): We light the second candle as a sign of the love of Christ who bore our darkness so that we could see His light.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

During the second week of Advent, we remember that from ancient times God gave us pictures of WHO would be coming to put the world to rights. According to the promise God made in Genesis 3, the one who would win victory for us and set things right in the world was an offspring of Eve, in other words, a human. Our Scripture readings this week show us special “types” or patterns of roles that God called particular humans to play in order to care for humanity and work toward redeeming us. The three types of the Coming One we will look at are the prophet, the priest, and the king. They point to the ultimate way God would manifest his Love among us (1 John 4.8-9).

Day One: Prophet

read Deut 18.15-22

At the beginning of their history, God's people Israel were enslaved and oppressed. God heard their cry for help and raised up a prophet to deliver his people. That prophet was Moses. Moses spoke on behalf of God to his people and also to their enemies. He led them into freedom and then through very difficult wilderness years, and he gave the people God's covenantal law for them, a provisional picture of how life was supposed to be. But at the end of Moses' life, he knew that God was not finished with his people. They needed a greater deliverance, as did all the other nations of the world. So he told the people that they should expect "a prophet like me," a prophet who would do things similar to what Moses did, but even greater things. When he came, the people should listen to him. Many generations later, the people asked John the Baptist if he was that prophet (John 1.21). He said, No, but that the Prophet was coming soon. The Apostle Peter later announced that the prophet who fulfilled the pattern Moses established was Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 3.22).

Why do we need God to send us a prophet "like Moses?"

How is Jesus the prophet you need?

Day Two: Priest

read Leviticus 16.1-5, 20-22

The thing that made God's people Israel different was not that they were better than other peoples; it was that God had chosen to live among them, as a starting place for his big plan to one day fill the world with his presence. God manifested his presence among Israel in a very tangible way -- by having a glorious cloud settle over a tent, making it a Holy Place. What would it have been like to have God living in your midst in that way?! It would have been very encouraging to see that God was so committed to his people. But it also would have been a bit terrifying to know that such a holy God was living with people who couldn't even keep the most basic laws Moses had given them. But from the beginning God made provision for all the ways his people would fail to live in his image. This provision was the

sacrificial system and also priests to administer it. The people didn't just need a prophet to proclaim God's word; they also needed priests to mediate peace between a holy God and an unholy people who disregarded God's word. Our Scripture reading today describes some of the many procedures for how Aaron, the first in a line of high priests, was to make atonement. Many generations later, the New Testament told us God provided Jesus to be the ultimate high priest for all people: "Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." (Hebrews 2.17)

Why do we need God to send us a high priest?

How is Jesus the high priest you need?

Day Three: King

read 2 Samuel 7.1-17

The greatest king of Israel in the Old Testament was David. King David led God's people in victory over their enemies, but one of the greatest things David wanted to do was to build a glorious house, a temple, in place of the tent for God to manifest his presence. But God stopped David to say that it's not David, but God who is the real house builder. God will make of David a royal household that will last forever, and it will be David's royal son who, in turn, will build a house for God's name. God is the ultimate king, and yet he remains intent on ruling the world through human agency. David's son, Solomon, ruled on David's throne and built a great temple for God. But many generations later, it was another son of David who announced, "Something greater than Solomon is here" (Luke 11.31). That son of David is building a new temple to God made of "living stones" (Ephesians 2.21; 1 Peter 2.5).

Why do we need God to send us a king?

How is Jesus the king you need?



WEEK 3

December 11–17

The Advent Prophesied

Advent Wreath: The Candle of Joy

Reader: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader: Jesus is the light of the world. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (*while first candle is lit*): We light the first candle as a sign of hope in the Christ who came and who will come again.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (*while second candle is lit*): We light the second candle as a sign of the love of Christ who bore our darkness so that we could see His light.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (*while third candle is lit*): We light the third candle as a sign of the joy that Christ gives through His saving grace.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

During the third week of Advent, our Scripture readings come from the prophet Isaiah. God called Isaiah to prophesy at a time when God's people were largely unfaithful to him and when they as a nation were under threat of destruction from foreign powers. Isaiah records a series of visions that showed God would one day judge the fallen world in justice and make everything right again. In particular, Isaiah speaks of God doing this through an anointed ruler in David's royal line, who would bring both judgement and salvation to create "new heavens and a new earth" (Isaiah 65.17). The advent of this ruler is "good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2.11).

Day One: Joy at the Coming Light

read Isaiah 9.1-7

The words of the Prophet Isaiah shine like light into the darkness. They promise that the darkness will not win the day, but God will. Isaiah says this is cause for great joy! And it is all pinned to a certain figure, a child, a son, upon whose shoulders rests the fate of the world. What a big responsibility! But Isaiah assures us we can be glad at this news, because this son of David was born as someone very special. Just read the names on his birth announcement: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace!

Even though our decorative manger scenes can be quite nice, the real Christmas story is not set in a scene of joy and beauty, but a scene of gloom, anguish, contempt, and darkness. Do you know what it is like to have walked in darkness for a long time?

What could give you, and the world, true joy?

Day Two: Peace Made by the Coming Ruler *read Isaiah 11.1-10*

In the first verse of our reading today, Isaiah pictures a barren landscape. In the middle of it is a stump, the sad reminder of what once was a great tree. He calls it the stump of Jesse, who was the father of old King David. Is there any hope for the house of David? Yes! In that humbled land of waste something surprising happens: a shoot pops up from the stump of Jesse. It's a new king! A king, with origins humble and desperate, whose reign will transform the landscape into the most unbelievable place of vitality, justice, and peace.

What would true peace look like in our world? In your life?

What is it about King Jesus' rule that changes the landscape?

Day Three: Prepare for the Coming Glory *read Isaiah 40.1-11*

Have you ever prepared for someone to visit you? Maybe you spent time tidying up your house, or arranging flowers, or planning meals and activities. When we prepare for someone's visit, we show them that they are important to us. Isaiah says that the world is going to receive the most important visitor it ever could: "Behold, the Lord God comes with might!" And so Isaiah tells us to prepare. In wonderful imagery, Isaiah says that even the valleys should be lifted up and the mountains be made level to prepare a smooth way for God to come and visit us. Generations later, John the Baptist, who witnessed the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, is said to have fulfilled what Isaiah spoke of in preparing the way of the Lord.

How can we prepare for the coming of God?

What will the visit of God mean for our world?





WEEK 4

December 18–24

The Advent Fulfilled

Advent Wreath: The Candle of Peace

Reader: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

Reader: Jesus is the light of the world. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (while first candle is lit): We light the first candle as a sign of hope in the Christ who came and who will come again.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (while second candle is lit): We light the second candle as a sign of the love of Christ who bore our darkness so that we could see His light.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (while third candle is lit): We light the third candle as a sign of the joy that Christ gives through His saving grace.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (while fourth candle is lit): We light the fourth candle as a sign of the peace that Christ our King gives to the world.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

During the last week of Advent, our Scripture readings come from the Advent narratives in the Gospels. It is remarkable that the advent of God into the world can be described in terms so varied, ranging from those of a human birth amidst livestock and shepherds to those of the highest, divine Word. The humility and glory of God's Advent hints that He indeed came to reconcile heaven and earth (Colossians 1.19-20) and be our peace (Ephesians 2.14).

Note: The third reading for this week is intended for Christmas Day, on which also the last candle of the Advent Wreath, the Christ Candle, is lit.

Day One: Advent Foretold

read Luke 1.26-38

The four Gospels each begin a different way. Matthew starts with a genealogy of Jesus, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Mark begins with the ministry of John the Baptist. Luke begins with a foretelling of the birth of John the Baptist. John starts with glorious prose about the Word. The four accounts together show us that there are many entry points to Jesus. This is as it should be, for it is in Jesus that all the longings, shadows, prophecies, and hopes are met. In our reading today from Luke, we hear the angel tell Mary that she, a virgin, will have a child (!) and that this child will reign on David's throne forever (!). It must have seemed out of the blue for Mary, but looking across the pages of Scripture, we see that this is the one way God had it planned back when he spoke about the offspring of Eve in the Garden. This is the way God had it planned to make things right and make a new heavens and a new earth.

What indications does this passage give that the Advent of Christ is at God's initiative? Why is this point so important?

What does the angel tell Mary about her son? In light of the Old Testament passages we have read this Advent, how is Jesus the climax of God's big plans for our world?

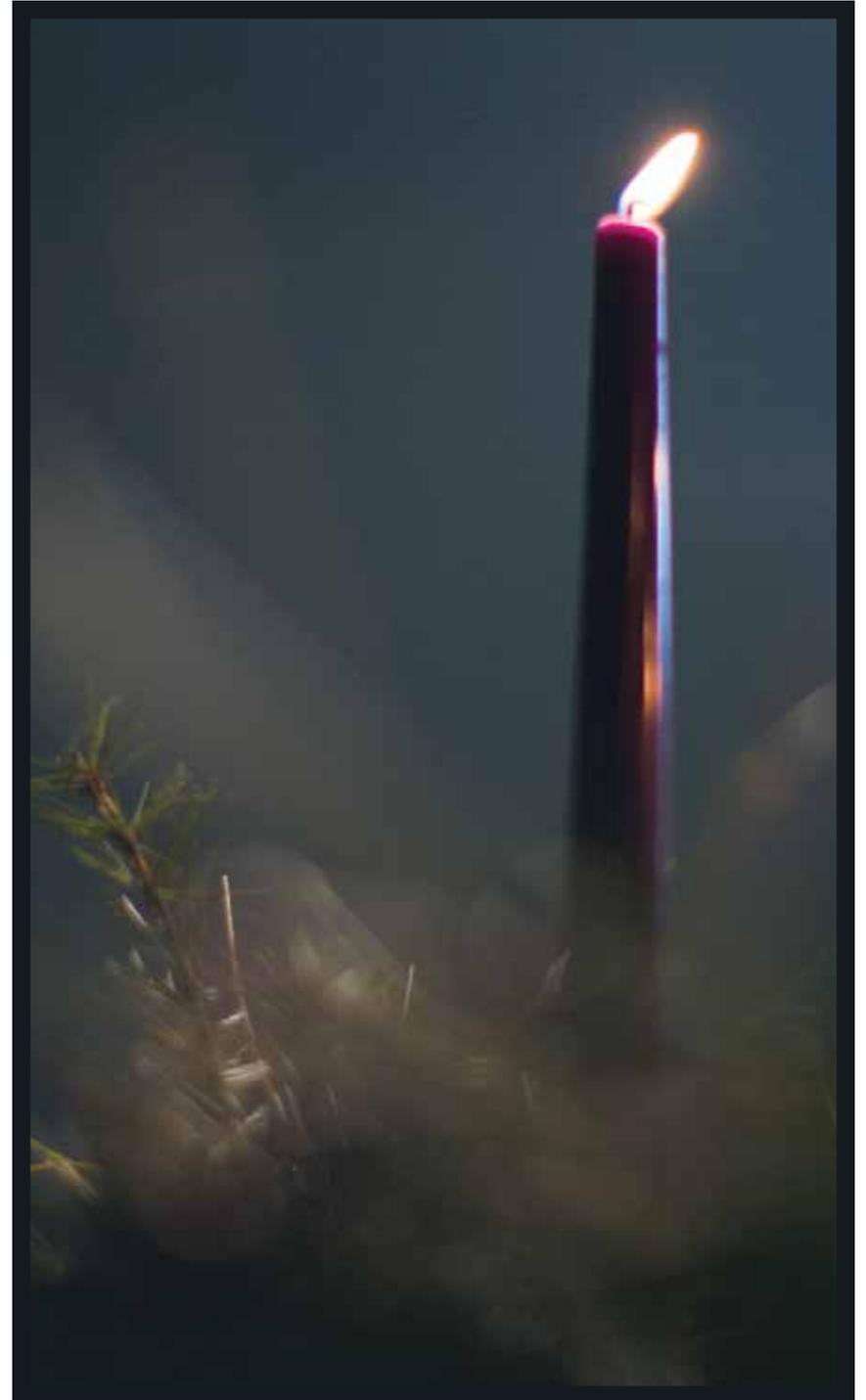
Day Two: Advent Celebrated

read Luke 2.1-21

The birth of a child is cause for great excitement! A name is given, announcements are issued, and family and friends come to see. The birth of God's Son was no different. You can imagine the sense of God's excitement when he dispatched one of his angels to herald the birth announcement! And who should be the first to hear? The king in Jerusalem, or maybe the rulers of the nations? No, shepherds who happened to be tending flocks nearby. It is shepherds around whom the glory of the Lord first shines and who first hear that a Savior, Christ the Lord, has been born. And where should they find him? In a manger for livestock, in a nearby no-name town. We might find the pomp and circumstance lacking, but the host of heaven certainly doesn't, who exclaims, "Glory to God in the highest!"

What are the details that Luke gives surrounding the birth of the Messiah? How do they set the scene for God's coming into the world?

The shepherds are so excited at the birth that they can't help but spread the word. Why was this birth so important to them?





DECEMBER 25

Christmas Day

Advent Wreath: The Christ Candle

Reader: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

Reader: Jesus is the light of the world. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (while first candle is lit): We light the first candle as a sign of hope in the Christ who came and who will come again.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (while second candle is lit): We light the second candle as a sign of the love of Christ who bore our darkness so that we could see His light.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (while third candle is lit): We light the third candle as a sign of the joy that Christ gives through His saving grace.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (while fourth candle is lit): We light the fourth candle as a sign of the peace that Christ our King gives to the world.

All: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Reader (while fifth candle is lit): We light the Christ candle because Jesus, the light of the world, was born today.

All: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men.

Christmas Day: The Christ is Born

read John 1.1-14

When John set the stage for Jesus' coming, he reached back to the very beginning. His opening words, "in the beginning," echo Genesis 1 when God's Word spoke creation into a very good existence. John wants us to know that the way by which God first created is the same way by which he recreates: his Word! The first creation was a creation out of nothing. The new creation takes place by the Word entering creation itself to bring about a "new birth."

Why did the Word become flesh?

How does the incarnation of the divine Word inform our longing, hopes, work, relationships, bodies, minds, and spirits?



Hymns for Advent

O COME, O COME EMMANUEL

Words: John Neale; Music: Thomas Helmore

1. O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

2. O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory over the grave.

Refrain

3. O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

Refrain

4. O come, Thou Key of David, come,
And open wide our heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.

Refrain

5. O come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,
And be Thyself our King of Peace.

Refrain

O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

Word: John Neal; Music: Thomas Helmore

1. 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.
2. 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!
3. How silently, how silently,
The wondrous Gift is giv'n;
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His Heav'n.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.
4. O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel!

HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING

Words: Charles Wesley; Music: Felix Mendelssohn

1. Hark! The herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With th’angelic host proclaim,
“Christ is born in Bethlehem!”

*Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King!”*

2. Christ, by highest Heav’n adored;
Christ the everlasting Lord;
Late in time, behold Him come,
Offspring of a virgin’s womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail th’incarnate Deity,
Pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus our Emmanuel.

Refrain

3. Hail the heav’n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Ris’n with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die.
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.

Refrain

JOY TO THE WORLD

Words: Isaac Watts; Music: Lowell Mason

1. Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.
2. Joy to the world, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.
3. No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.
4. He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.

Special thanks to David Helm, whose Big Picture Devotional inspired the format and also a few phrases in this booklet.