

## A Journey to Christmas – Sunday Dec 24 a.m.

It's almost here, isn't it! Christmas is tomorrow - who here loves waiting for Christmas? The season of celebration, anticipation and longing? Every year we begin this journey towards Christmas in our lives. Whether it be with traditions, parties, gifts, shopping, or even going to church. We are in a season of preparedness. I have to, we got to, did you, how much ... it can be busy and overwhelming. And we can forget about the important things.

There was a store owner who was doing some last minute Christmas shopping with his young son when he saw his friend who also happened to be another store owner. The two of them exchanged greetings and spoke with each other about what a financially profitable season it had been for their respective stores. The small boy overheard his father say, "This has been the best Christmas ever."

As they said goodbye and went on their way, the father and son continued their shopping, but the father noticed his son had become very quiet. He inquired as to his son's silence, and his son replied, "Dad, you just told Mr. Johnson that this was the best Christmas ever."

His dad replied, "I did, son. The shopping season is going great, and people are really spending."

"O.K." the son replied, "It's just that I always thought the first Christmas was the best one."

The first Christmas ... it would change the world. Today we are continuing our series on the STAR a Journey to Christmas.

(Light Candle 1) We began this Star Series with a journey of hope. And as we look back on that, we see the thread of hope past, present, and future: Through many years and centuries of history, hope burned for a Saviour. Sometimes that hope flickered. Sometimes it barely glowed like an ember as time passed and the people waited and waited and waited.

The story we are talking about today was part of a bigger story, God had promised he would send a Messiah, a Saviour, the promised one, and many had been waiting ... until a girl named Mary received a visit.

The people of Israel in the Old Testament waited thousands of years for the coming of Jesus. That's a lot of waiting! Prophets foretold the coming of the Messiah long before Jesus was born. The prophet Isaiah wrote in Isaiah 4:14, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel" This verse tells of Jesus's birth. But it was written hundreds of years before He was actually born. And it must have been hard for the people of Israel to wait. And think of Mary—an angel told her she was going to give birth to Jesus, but she had to wait and put her hope in the promise of God for nine months until Jesus was born. The Son of God, the promised one – God had not forgotten His

promise, He was still there and His plan was unfolding – A saviour– Jesus, the Hope of the world was coming! ... and things were about to change!

It's amazing how hope can change your perspective!

The school system in a large city had a program to help children keep up with their school work during stays in the city's hospitals. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a routine call asking her to visit a child. She took the child's name and room number and talked briefly with the child's regular class teacher. "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now," the regular teacher said, "and I'd be grateful if you could help him understand them so he doesn't fall too far behind."

The hospital program teacher went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the boy, she stammered as she told him, "I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs." When she left she felt she hadn't accomplished much.

But the next day, a nurse asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. "No, no," said the nurse. "You don't know what I mean. We've been worried about that little boy, but ever since yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

Two weeks later the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until the teacher arrived. Everything changed when he came to a simple realization. He expressed it this way: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?"

The song O Holy night has this line in it "the thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn." It's interesting how the idea of hope is seen as a glimmer of light in the dark. Isaiah 9:2 talks about how "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." We all go through dark times, hard times, and it's easy to lose hope. We feel lost or overwhelmed or forgotten.

During the Second World War the US Army was forced to retreat from the Philippines. Some of their soldiers were left behind, and became prisoners of the Japanese. The men called themselves "ghosts", souls unseen by their nation, and on the infamous Bataan Death March were forced to walk over 70 miles, knowing that those who were slow or weak would be bayoneted by their captors or die from dysentery and lack of water. Those who made it through the march spent the next three years in a hellish prisoner-of-war camp. By early 1945, 513 men were still alive at the Cabanatuan prison camp, but they were giving up hope. The US Army was on its way back, but the POW's had heard the frightening news that prisoners were being executed as the Japanese retreated from the advancing U.S. Army.

Their wavering hope was however met by one of the most magnificent rescues of wartime history. In an astonishing feat 120 US Army soldiers and 200 Filipino guerrillas outflanked 8000 Japanese soldiers to rescue the POW's.

Alvie Robbins was one of the rescuers. He describes how he found a prisoner muttering in a darkened corner of his barracks, tears coursing down his face.

"I thought we'd been forgotten," the prisoner said.

"No, you're not forgotten," Robbins said softly. "You're heroes. We've come for you."

Often in life we can start to give up hope, to feel that God has forgotten us, abandoned us to dark and hurtful experiences. But Jesus' birth was fulfilling the prophecy that would ultimately lead to the cross. And the cross of Christ reminds us, "No, you're not forgotten, the resurrection gives us the assurance that someday we too will see our rescuer face to face and be liberated from the distresses of this life. When he returns we too will hear him say, "I've come for you."

God's promise was fulfilled in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Today we place our hope in the fact that Jesus came, died for our sins, and is alive. He is the ongoing source of our hope.

And we live in the future hope that Jesus will come again to complete the story of redemption in our world and in our own lives. The story is not over yet. And even when darkness rages and deepens around us, we can hold onto hope that Christ will complete His ultimate work. All will be made right.

Our hope this Christmas season is not a hope for something a little nicer or slightly more exciting than last year. It is a much deeper hope for the desperate of spirit. Our very lives are on the line, and we put our desperate hope in the only thing, the only person, that can save us.

Do you feel like you are hanging on by the last threads of hope? The good news of the journey of hope is that just like on that first Christmas Eve, when the darkness seems deepest, God is about to show up. God was there, he was aware and He had a plan. JESUS

Today as we celebrate Christmas Eve, let's place our hope in the God who never changes, whose story is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Our hope in Him will be fulfilled.

(Light Candle 2) The second week of Advent led us on a journey of love. Again, this story is one that spans eternity since God is love. But on this journey we have seen the same threads of past, present, and future:

As long as God is, there has been and is love. It is His nature and being. It fueled His creation. It drove Him to make a way to restore humanity to relationship with Himself. And at a specific point in past history, motivated by intense love, God sent His Son among us. Jesus is Love!

This week as we follow the star, we find that it signals the brightest love, the love that never gives up, the love that conquered sin and death, the love that is with us forever, wherever we go. It's God's perfect love sent to the world through His Son, Jesus.

But the love story didn't start at Christmas. The whole history of our world, the story of the Bible, is a love story from the first day of creation. It is the story of God's love for His people and His plan of redemption to bring us back into relationship with Him.

One of the best-known verses of the Bible says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

And did you know that Psalm 119 says God loved you before you were even born?

Nothing that you do, nothing that you think, nothing that happens in your world can shake God's love for you. The Bible tells us in Romans 8:38–39, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" That's great news because it means we can't lose His love. He doesn't love us because we are worthy of love; He loves us because He *is* love.

Once, there was a man who worked very hard just to keep food on the table for his family. This particular year a few days before Christmas, he punished his 5 year old daughter after learning that she had used up the family's only roll of expensive gold wrapping paper.

As money was tight, he became even more upset when on Christmas Eve he saw that the child had used all of the expensive gold paper to decorate one shoebox she had put under the Christmas tree. He also was concerned about where she had gotten money to buy what was in the shoebox.

Nevertheless, the next morning the little girl, filled with excitement, brought the gift to her father and said, "This is for you, Daddy!"

As he opened the box, the father was embarrassed by his earlier overreaction, now regretting how he had punished her.

But when he opened the shoebox, he found it was empty and again his anger flared. "Don't you know, young lady," he said harshly, "when you give someone a present, there's supposed to be something inside the package!"

The little girl looked up at him with sad tears rolling from her eyes and whispered: "Daddy, it's not empty. I blew kisses into it until it was all full."

The father was crushed. He fell on his knees and put his arms around his precious little girl. He begged her to forgive him for his unnecessary anger.

An accident took the life of the child only a short time later. It is told that the father kept this little gold box by his bed for all the years of his life. Whenever he was discouraged or faced difficult problems, he would open the box, take out an imaginary kiss, and remember the love of this beautiful child who had put it there.

Sometimes it's the simplest expression of love that can mean the most. A simple gesture of Love and caring can reach us when we need it the most and remind us that we are loved. Whenever we are discouraged or face difficult problems, open your Bible and read God's love letter to you, take time to talk to Jesus and open your heart to let his love guide you through the hard times.

Love fuels our relationship with God. It is our motivation, and we live out the love of God in us by loving others. And we look forward to the future day when God's love story is complete and we will live for eternity with Him. This will be life fulfilled in perfect love.

These elements are summed up in 1 John 4:9–11, 16. , which says, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. . . . And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them"

Today as we continue on the journey of love, let's bask in the amazing love of God, who gave up everything to be with us and show His love for us. His love is real, and it is here.

(Light Candle 3) As we continue to follow the star toward Christmas, it leads us to focus on a journey of joy. Joy can be the fuel that brightens our journey! But joy is often misunderstood and confused with happiness. They're similar but not exactly the same. Max Lucado shares a great story in his book "In the eye of the storm."

"CHIPPIE THE PARAKEET NEVER saw it coming. One second he was joyfully singing perched in his cage. The next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over. The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said 'hello' when 'sssopp!' Chippie got sucked in.

"The bird owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie-- still alive, but stunned. Since the bird was covered with dust and soot, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held Chippie under the

running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do ... she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air.

"Poor Chippie never knew what hit him.

"A few days after the trauma, the reporter who'd initially written about the event contacted Chippie's owner to see how the bird was recovering.

'Well,' she replied, 'Chippie doesn't sing much anymore he just sits and stares.'

"It's hard not to see why. Sucked in, washed up, and blown over . . . that's enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart.

Can you relate to Chippie? Most of us can at some point in our lives. One minute you're seated in familiar territory with a song on your lips, then . . . You lose your job. The rejection letter arrives. Your friend moves away. The doctor calls. The divorce papers are delivered. The check bounces. A policeman knocks on your door.

"Sshopp! You're sucked into a dark cavern of doubts, doused with the cold water of reality, and stung with the hot air of empty promises.

"The life that had been so calm is now so stormy. You're hail stormed by demands. Assailed by doubts; Pummeled by questions. And somewhere in the trauma, you lose your joy. Somewhere in the storm, you lose your song. And we let our circumstances dictate the attitude of our heart.

A couple of weeks ago I was teaching about Joy with the kids downstairs and trying to explain this concept of JOY when you are happy or sad. And as we talked about it some of the kids started to understand, but there was this one 3rd grader who just couldn't believe it was possible! Have you ever tried to argue with an 8 year old? His mind was set, that this just couldn't be real.

While happiness depends on our circumstances, joy goes beyond what is happening to us and around us. It is a deeper sense that God is good, He loves us, and He is in control. It's a sense that everything will be okay even if it's not at the moment. So sometimes we can feel joy even when we are sad.

How do you do that when you aren't feeling joyful?

Choosing thankfulness is one path to joy. It's the choice to focus on God's goodness and trust Him in the midst of whatever we are going through.

And while thankfulness seems like a natural way to experience joy, the crazy thing is that joy also regularly shows up in situations where it may be least expected.

In the New Testament book of James 1:2, the Bible says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds”. Trials are hard times or challenges in life, and we don’t usually think of them as joyful. But joy comes in when we know that even though things may be hard now, God is working in our lives for a greater purpose. Remembering things God has given us to be thankful for can help us feel joy.

Joy also seems to show up with fear sometimes. Have you ever noticed that just about every time an angel shows up in Scripture, the first words out of the angel’s mouth are “Do not be afraid.” The phrase is so common in the Bible, you might think it was a heavenly language for “hello.” I mean, how would you feel if a bright, powerful angel showed up out of nowhere?

In the Christmas story, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds all heard that message. But despite the fact that these people felt fear at the arrival of angels, the heart of the messages they heard was full of joy.

We know from the angel’s announcement on that first Christmas that the birth of Christ was a joyful event. Luke 2:9–12 tells us...

“An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger’”

The good news of great joy was that Jesus, the Saviour of the world, was born. This joyous event broke through the darkness and dispelled the fears of those shepherds, just as it replaces our own fear in the midst of darkness.

The joy for us today, is that the message of good news is also for us, here, now, today. Jesus offers us the same salvation and life that He came to give through His birth, death, and resurrection. It is the source of the greatest joy possible.

And while we still live in a world where joy and pain coexist, God’s promise is that our joy will be made complete in the future when Jesus comes again. It fuels us along the way, standing as a stark contrast to the death and despair of our broken world.

Today as we continue on the journey of joy, let’s rejoice with the angel who announced the arrival of the long-awaited Saviour. Joy leads us to worship, and joy is sparked by and drawn from a worship filled life as we tune our spirits to God’s.

(Light Candle 4) Finally, as you know from last week the Star leads us on a Journey of Peace, Because Jesus is Peace.

There once was a King who offered a prize to the artist who would paint the best picture of peace. Many artists tried. The King looked at all the pictures, but there were only two he really liked and he had to choose between them. One picture was of a calm lake. The lake was a perfect mirror for peaceful towering mountains were all around it. Overhead was a blue sky with fluffy white clouds. All who saw this picture thought that it was a perfect picture of peace. The other picture had mountains too. But these were rugged and bare. Above was an angry sky from which rain fell, in which lightning played. Down the side of the mountain tumbled a foaming waterfall. This did not look peaceful at all. But when the King looked closer, he saw behind the waterfall a tiny bush growing in a crack in the rock. In the bush a mother bird had built her nest. There, in the midst of the rush of angry water, sat the mother bird on her nest ... perfectly at peace.

The King chose the second picture. His daughter asked him why?

Because," explained the King, "peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. Peace means to be in the midst of all those things and still be calm in your heart. That is the real meaning of peace."

How do you picture that night Jesus was born? So many Christmas card images and song lyrics make us think of it as a "silent night"—a peaceful moment when all was calm and all was bright. But if there was a moment of calm and still on that first Christmas, it was probably a very short moment.

Think about it, how many of you were born in a hospital? Were any of you born in a house? Okay, now who was born in a barn? Mary gave birth in an animal stable, basically a barn but probably not as nice as the farmers' barns we're used to seeing today. Or it could have been the bottom floor of a house where the animals were brought in to be kept safe, because that's what people did during those days. There were probably many animals nearby, like cows and donkeys. And the city of Bethlehem was overflowing with tons of people who had arrived for the census after traveling many dusty miles on rough, dangerous roads. It was so crowded that Mary and Joseph couldn't find a room, so they had to stay in the stable. That probably wasn't very comfortable. Then there was childbirth, not the most peaceful event! Then Shepherds started arriving to visit the new baby within hours of His birth. And don't forget the angels singing and the shepherds sharing the good news, And while the wisemen were not there on that first night, they too, began a journey that would lead them to Christ – the King!

There was a lot going on that first Christmas, just like there's a lot going on here on earth this Christmas. There was noise and hurt and pain and struggle and fear that first Christmas. But there was also great joy and deep peace because Christ had finally come—and somehow those who experienced it knew something amazing had just happened.

Peace is so elusive in our local news and world events; sometimes in our family relationships or even in our own minds. Everywhere we look there are indications of a desperate need for peace.

Yet God's peace is laid out throughout the story line of eternity. There in the past is the arrival of the Prince of Peace in that manger. This is what we celebrate today. Peace has come. Peace is here!

And fortunately for us, peace remains. Jesus left us the gift of His peace through His Spirit—a peace that transcends our full understanding and worst circumstances, a peace that guards and restores our hearts and minds.

As we look to the future, we still expectantly wait, knowing that when He comes again, He will bring ultimate peace for all the world. Peace among nations. Peace among enemies. Peace to reign over and within every heart.

As we followed the star on a journey of peace, we realize that it is not a journey away from the pain and suffering of our lives. Think of the state of the world on that first Christmas—there was noise and hurt and pain and struggle and fear! And yet the Prince of Peace came in the midst of it. Our journey of peace this season does not take us away from the realities of life; it's a journey of peace in the midst of life's challenges.

Jesus's own life was filled with hardship, and He knew that His followers would not be immune from it. And so He gave them the gift of peace: In John 14:27 he tells his disciples "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you, I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid"

In a world that desperately needs peace, God promises that His peace that is beyond understanding will be with us as well. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:7, "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"

Today as we continue on the journey of peace, let's rest in the fact that in a world filled with violence, noise, and pain, God offers us His deep and lasting peace. And the peace He brings, which comforts us in the midst of our lives, will one day be complete in our hearts and in our world.

Hope. Love. Joy. Peace. JESUS

(LIGHT Candle 5) We have followed the star, and now we have arrived. Today we light a candle for Christ.

Jesus birth fulfilled prophecy. It was the beginning of the end and darkness stood no chance in the light of the love and mercy sent down in the form of a tiny baby who would save the world.

I want you to take a moment and close your eyes and picture that first Christmas in your mind, while I read these words from the song: When Love was born

Starlight shines, the night is still

Shepherds watch from a hill

I close my eyes, see the night

When love was born

Perfect child gently waits

A mother bends to kiss God's face

Close your eyes, see the night

When love was born

Angels fill the midnight sky, they sing

Hallelujah, He is Christ, our King

Emmanuel, Prince of peace

Loves come down for you and me

Heaven's gift, the holy spark

To light the way inside our hearts

Bethlehem, through your small door

Came the hope we've waited for

The world was changed forevermore

When love was born

I close my eyes, I see the night

When love was born

This morning we are gathered here together and the journey of hope, love, joy, and peace has led us to the same place—a manger in Bethlehem where the source of all good gifts lies. Jesus, the Son of God, is our hope, love, joy, and peace!

The star marked Jesus's arrival, but He is the true light of the world! Later in Jesus's life, He taught His disciples that He had come as the light of the world. As John 8:12 explains, Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"

Today, on the verge of Christmas, and looking forward into the days to come, we follow Jesus, who leads us and gives the light of life. No matter how dark your life seems today, no matter where you find yourself, no matter what pain or sadness you feel, the true star's light still shines for you. It is God's invitation to come and experience His story— from past, in the present, and future. Let us pray.

### **Prayer**