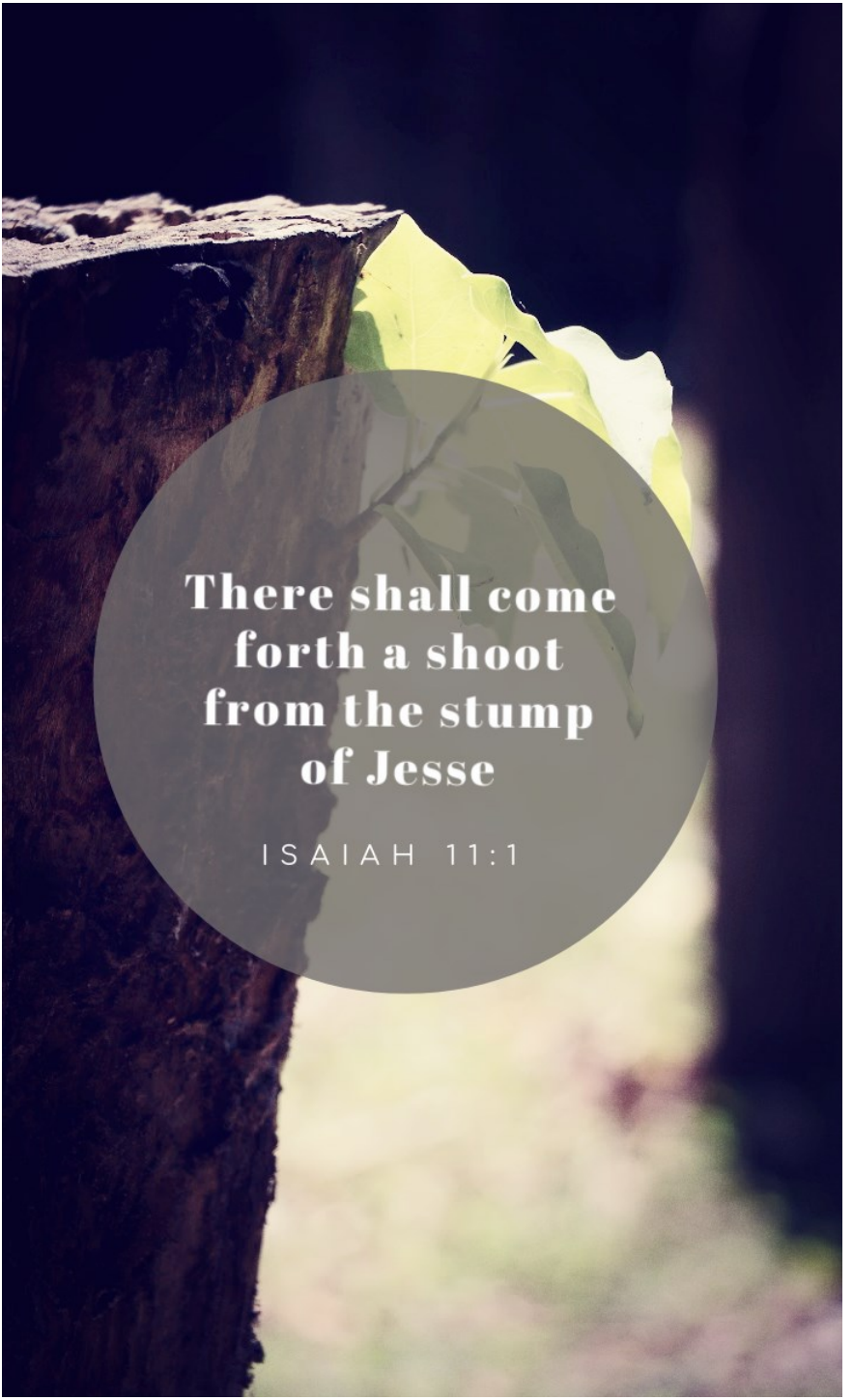

GRACE
BIBLE FELLOWSHIP CHURCH
THE
GREATEST
Story
EVER LIVED
ADVENT FAMILY DEVOTIONAL


There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse
ISAIAH 11:1

WEEK 1 /DAY 1

SCRIPTURE READING

- Isaiah 11:1-10
(COVERED in CHILDREN'S CHURCH)

Have you ever done a family tree for one of your classes at school? You might be surprised to know that the idea of family trees first came from the Church several hundreds of years ago. Churches would make wall paintings or stained glass windows of trees with names and events leading up to the birth of Jesus depicted on the branches. They would do this as a way of helping people better understand the story of the Bible leading up to Jesus. And they would call these, *Jesse Trees*.

So for centuries, families have been using the weeks before Christmas to rehearse together the storyline—the tragedies, the promises, the deep longings, the glimpses of hope—leading up to the coming of Jesus and the true life and hope that He brings into the world.

This week we start in on our own Jesse Tree journey by reading Isaiah's promise of One who would come from the fallen stump of Jesse, a shoot that would be armed with the power of God's Spirit to restore righteousness to God's people and peace in His beautiful creation.


And behold, it
was very good.
GENESIS 1:31

WEEK 1 /DAY 2

SCRIPTURE READING

- Genesis 1 (or from the *Jesus Story Book Bible—The Beginning: A Perfect Home*)

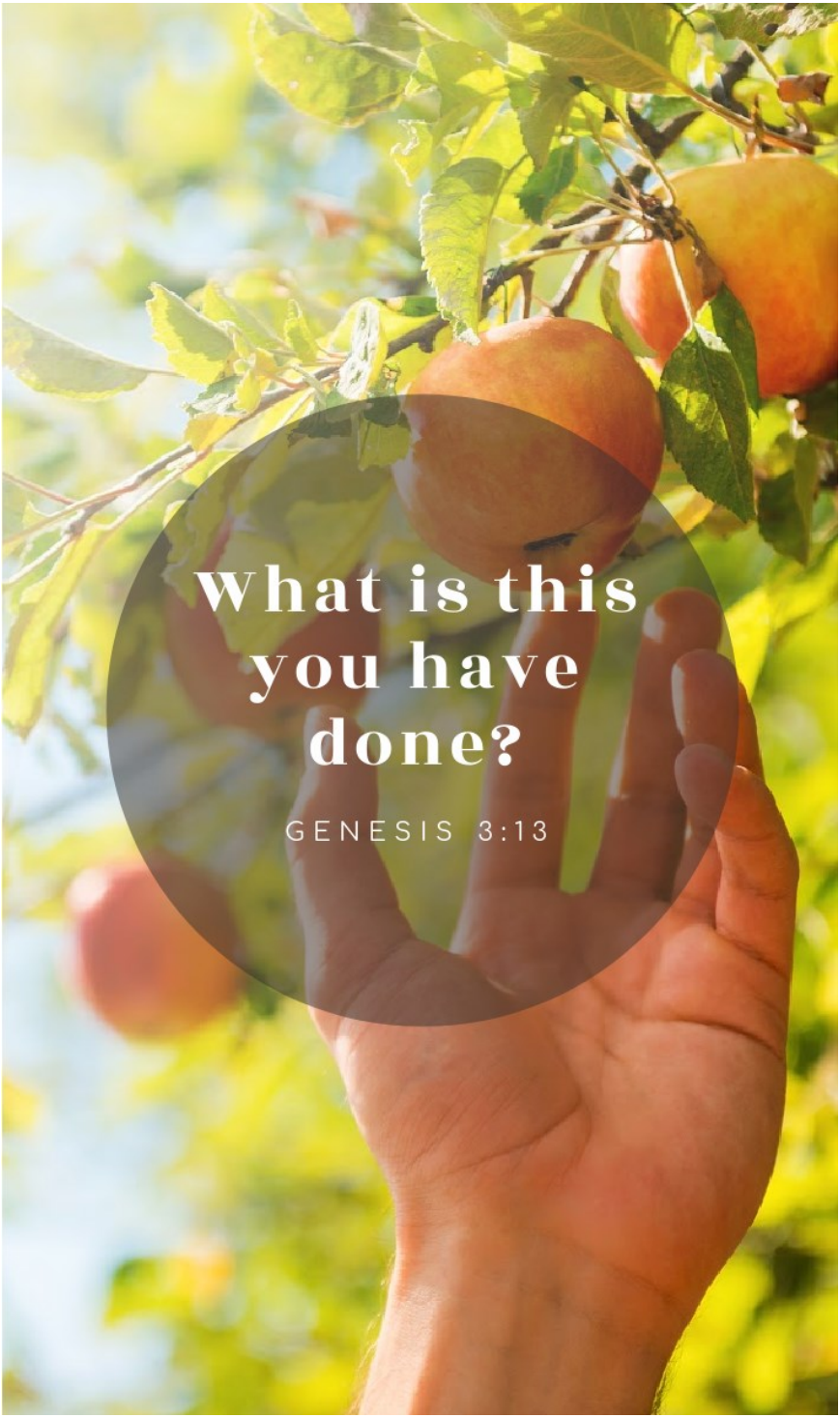
Have you ever tried jumping in to a movie or tv show that your brother or sister started without you? They're halfway through it, and you're trying to make sense of it, wondering who the characters are, how they know each other, why one of them seems to be running for their life or is really excited about news they've just heard. You ask questions, but your sister just says, "Shhhh!"

That's sorta what its like trying to understand the storyline of the Bible without reading the opening scenes. Its here in the beginning that we're introduced to the main characters—the gracious Builder and Life-giver, the servants called to fill up and care for their wonderful new home, the creatures and lights and plants that make this home the perfect place to live and worship. Its here in the beginning that we get a glimpse of the way things were always supposed to be...and the way things will one day be again! When we talk about Christian hope, this is essentially the picture of what we are hoping and waiting for. The coming of the king, the birth of Jesus, and His future return is all so exciting because He not only solved the problem of our sinfulness, but started the project of reclaiming and restoring our beautiful home...a project He fully intends to complete! That's why Christmas is a time for lighting up the darkness, singing carols of great anticipation, growing in our ability to wait faithfully, and tasting some of the joy that will one day be our unending experience in the beauty of creation and relationships restored!

DISCUSS

- Spend some time imagining together what it would have been like to enjoy the world in its original goodness. What would you most have enjoyed? What do you look forward to most?

TAKE IT FURTHER— bibleproject.com/explore/heaven-earth/


What is this you have done?
GENESIS 3:13

SCRIPTURE READING

- Genesis 3 (or from the *Jesus Story Book Bible—The Terrible Lie*)

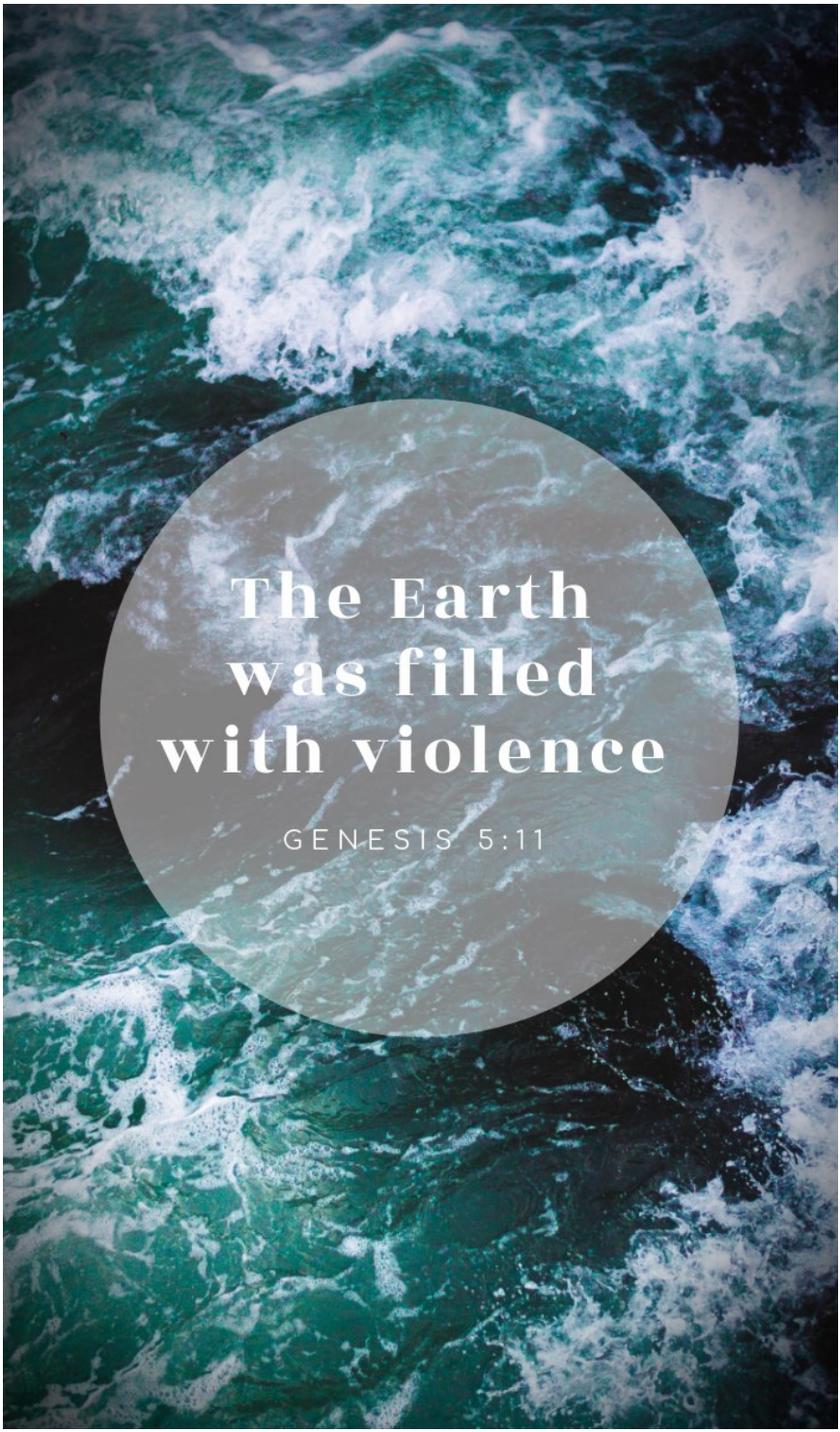
How could they have ever doubted that God only wanted the best for them? How could they possibly think that God was being selfish or unfair after providing them their perfect home, caring for their every need, showering them with blessing upon blessing? How could they not love Him back enough and throw that lying snake out of the garden...let alone keep their hands off the tree God asked them to avoid?

But that's what happened. Adam and Even listened to the snake when he questioned God's goodness and lied about His character. They obeyed his voice instead of their Creator's. They took sides with the enemy. And when they did, the power of evil was let loose, and everything they once loved and enjoyed was now broken— their perfect home, their joy and innocence with one another, and their intimacy with God Himself. And perhaps worst of all, that evil now had a place inside their own hearts. They would forever hear the voice of the snake and be tempted to listen, tempted to follow him down the paths of sin and death far away from the One who had lovingly given them life.

The only hope now was if that Creator would one day enter into the darkness, chase them down the roads of death, and deal with the evil they had unleashed...even if it would break Him along the way. Do you think He loved them enough to do that? Do you think He loves and cares enough to do that to rescue you, you who like Adam and Eve are tempted to doubt God's goodness, disobey His commands, and side with His enemies? Christmas provides a clue.

DISCUSS

- How have you chosen your own desires over God's this week? How have you been tempted to believe Satan's lies about God's goodness and love?


The Earth was filled with violence
GENESIS 5:11

WEEK 1 /DAY 4

SCRIPTURE READING

- Genesis 6:11-14, 7:11-8:3, 9:8-13 (or from the *Jesus Story Book Bible—A New Beginning*)

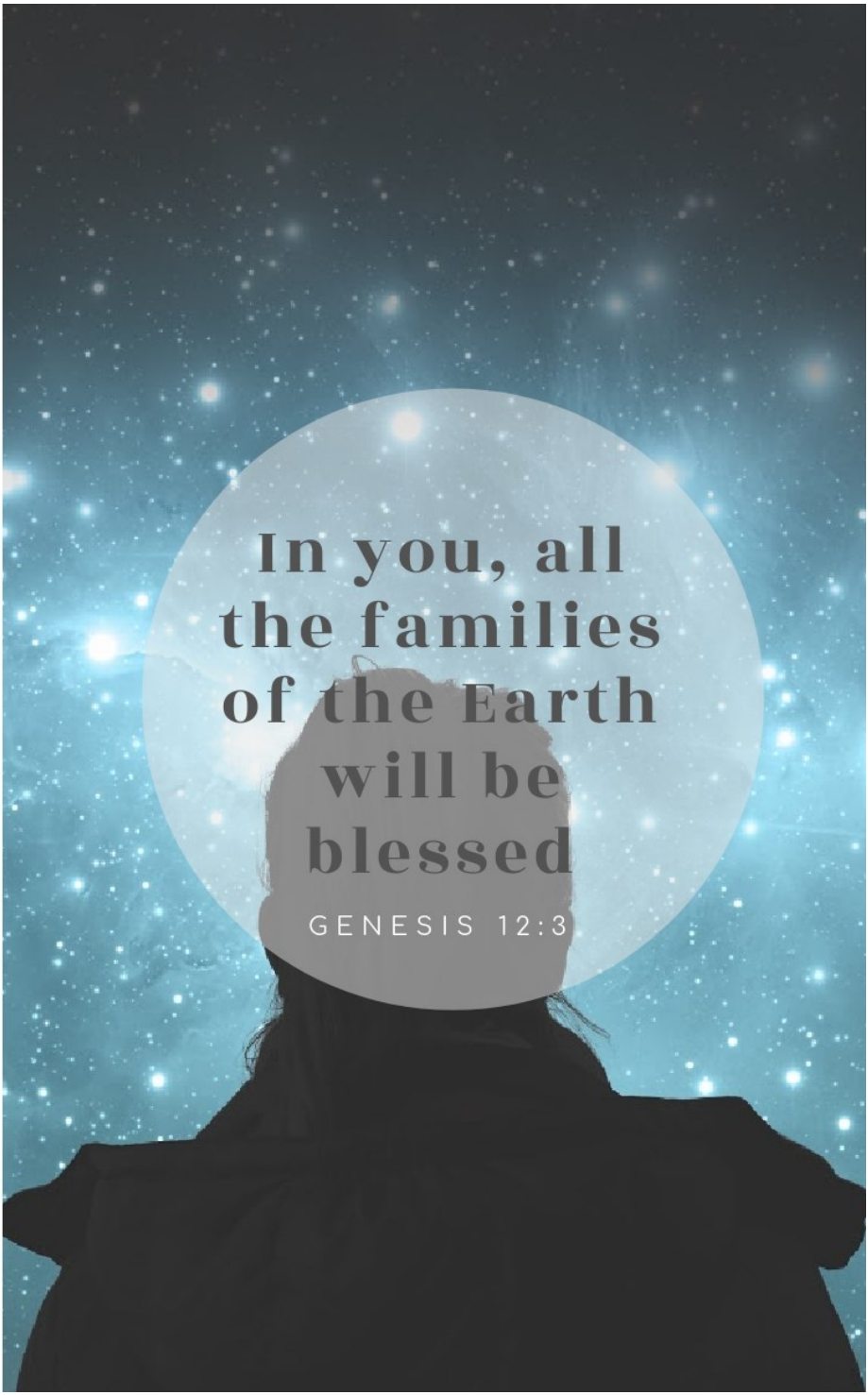
It couldn't be that bad right? What's the worst that could happen? All they did was listen to a talking snake and eat a piece of fruit. But actually, if you were to read all the passages between Genesis 3 and Genesis 6, you'd find that that sin was pretty devastating. After Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, chapter 4 tells the story of a man's jealousy that led him to murder his own brother. Chapter 6 tells of strange and perverse sexual sin. And by the time we come to today's passage, we read that the earth was filled with violence and that every intention of men and women's hearts was only evil all the time (6:5). Just like if you open a window on a winter's day you allow the cold air to fill the room, when evil is allowed in and given a place inside creation, it fills the air, consumes the hearts of men and women, and wreaks complete havoc throughout creation.

And instead of allowing His creation to remain in that state of perpetual violence and evil, God steps in and with a heavy and sad heart judges the people and the world He had made. He sends the flood to wipe the earth of sinful hearts and lives. And...at the end, he makes a promise never to do it again. We catch a glimpse in this story of God's resolve to deal with the problem of sin, to not allow sin to forever destroy His good creation. And we also get the promise, that even if sin were to wreak its havoc yet again, God would find another way to intervene and stop it.

DISCUSS

- What does this passage teach us about the problem of sin? What does it teach us about God's right judgement? How does it point us to the cross of Jesus?

- How does this passage challenge or convict you?


In you, all the families of the Earth will be blessed
GENESIS 12:3

SCRIPTURE READING

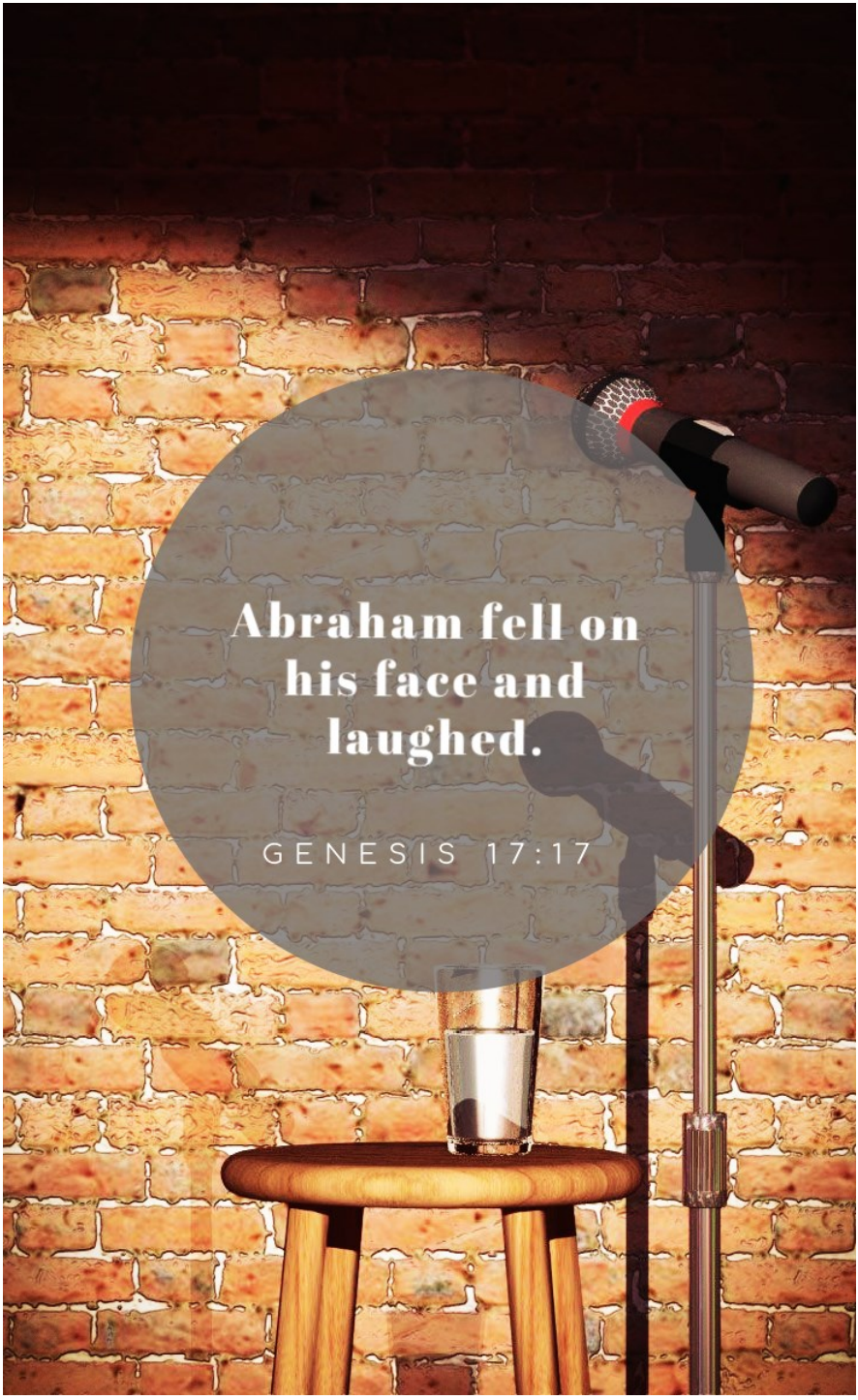
- Genesis 12:1-8

Where have we heard this before—God speaks to a man and woman, gives them a land in which to make their home, and tells them they will be fruitful and multiplied? What God is doing here with Abraham and Sarah in many ways resembles what he did with Adam and Eve back on page one. In some sense, we're starting anew. Sin and evil had tarnished God's beautiful creation. Death, violence, and disobedience were ruining the life he intended for His people to enjoy. Even after God rescues Noah and his family from the flood, there is soon a strange scene of drunkenness and perversion (Gen. 9:18-25). And then we come upon more pride and rebellion at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). What God begins with Abraham is a new story with a new people, called out from among the nations, given a new home and promised great blessing. AND...we hear God's promise to bless all the nations of the earth through Abraham children (12:3)! This is one of the most important verses for understanding the story of the Old Testament, even the storyline of the whole Bible. What God is doing with this family is ultimately about *all the families of the earth*. God is undertaking a plan to rescue all the peoples of the Earth from the curse of evil and the ruin of sin.

Centuries later, a young woman named Mary and a priest named Zechariah would both give thanks to God for remembering His mercy and the promises made to their forefather Abraham. (Luke 1) The promised blessing to all the nations through Abraham's seed was about to appear. The rescue mission was about to reach its climax.

DISCUSS

- How does Jesus fulfill the promise to Abraham? What does this promise and plan teach you about God?


Abraham fell on his face and laughed.
GENESIS 17:17

WEEK 1 /DAY 6

SCRIPTURE READING

- Genesis 17:1-8 & 15-17
(or from the *Jesus Story Book Bible—Son of Laughter*)

Can you imagine laughing at God after He's just made an incredible promise to you? That's a bold move by Abraham to say the least. But that laughter stands out in this passage and actually says quite a lot to us about God's promises.

First of all, it shows how wild the promise is to begin with. Abraham had long since given up dreams of a family. Its practically too good to be true. But the other side is, the promises of God can be difficult to believe and entrust our lives too. When you think about yesterday and today's passages, God asks tought stuff of Abraham. He asks him to leave his home, his place of comfort and security, and venture to some undisclosed location. He asks Abraham to essentially leave behind whatever "gods" (aka providers and protectors) his forefathers may have worshipped and enter into an exclusive covenant relationship with Him alone. These are some big asks! And they're rooted in God's promises...that make Abraham fall over in laughter.

Advent is a season for reflecting on God's incredible promises—promises to one day renew the face of the earth, restore the deep joy and longings of His people, resurrect dead and decayed bodies from the grave. These can be promises somewhat hard to believe in the midst of a dark and hurting world AND...these are promises that ask a good bit of us. They ask us to trust God alone for our hope. They ask us to live more sacrificially, not trying to gain every we want *now*, but living faithfully for the kingdom of Christ while we wait. They ask us to follow Jesus into purposes and plans that might not be our own.

DISCUSS

How is it going trusting and *living* according to promise? Is there a step of faith God might be asking of you in light of His promises?


TAKE
YOUR
ONLY SON
GENESIS 22:2

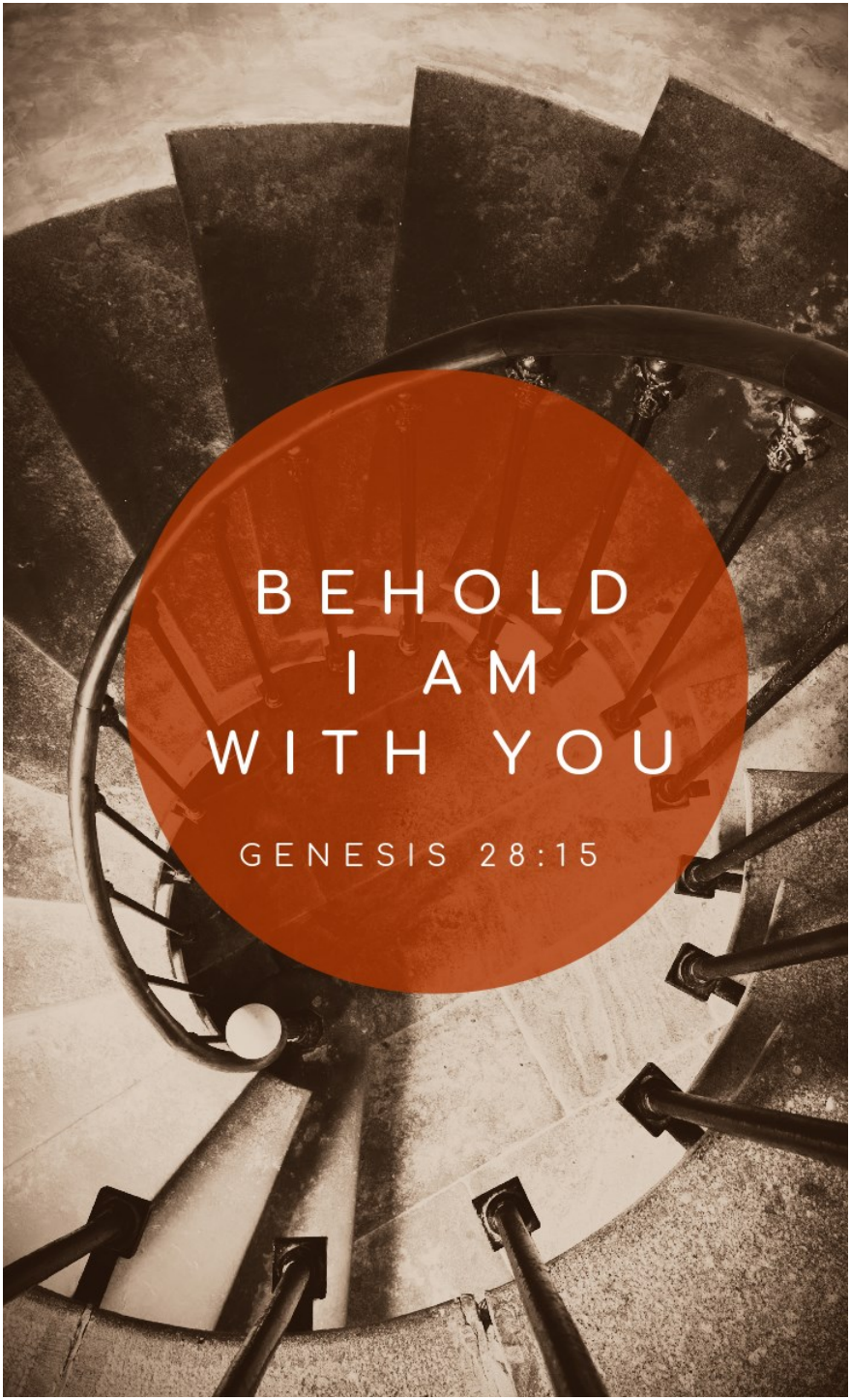
SCRIPTURE READING

- Genesis 22:1-14 (COVERED in CHILDREN'S CHURCH)

Sometimes Amy will walk into the room, cozy up next to me, look at me with her cutest smile...and say the words that cause me great distress —"How much to do you love me?" That's usually a pretty clear sign that she's either done something disappointing, like throw away the left-over sausage I'd been saving in the fridge, or she's about to ask me to do something she's knows I'm less than thrilled about.

You could say that the story in Genesis 22 is God's way of asking Abraham, how much do you love Me. And it's a really important question! Because remember, Abraham and his family have a crucial role to play in God's rescue mission. They're going to be His agents of blessing to all the families of the Earth. But that only works if their hearts are willing to serve God in love…if they're willing to love God even more than the treasures He gives them. God is promising to be gracious beyond measure to them, giving them healthy, abundant, and secure families and fruitful land (the two greatest treasures in the ancient world). Which is a good thing and possibly a dangerous thing. It's great because, who doesn't like treasure? But once you get your hands on treasure, can you ever take them off in service to God's purpose? Can you let it go? We already watched Adam and Eve fail miserably at that. They literally had paradise, but couldn't let go of the smallest portion to be obedient. What about Abraham?

What about you? You too have a vital role to play as God's ambassador (2 Cor. 5), His living witness (Acts 2), part of His royal priesthood to the unbelieving families of the Earth (1 Pet. 2). Do you love Him? The good news is that He has already proven His love to you. He has already taken His hands off *His* greatest treasure, His only Son, and given Him in love for you. That's why Christmas is good news—it is the proof that frees us to trust His love and commit ourselves in loving service and obedience for Him.


BEHOLD
I AM
WITH YOU
GENESIS 28:15

SCRIPTURE READING

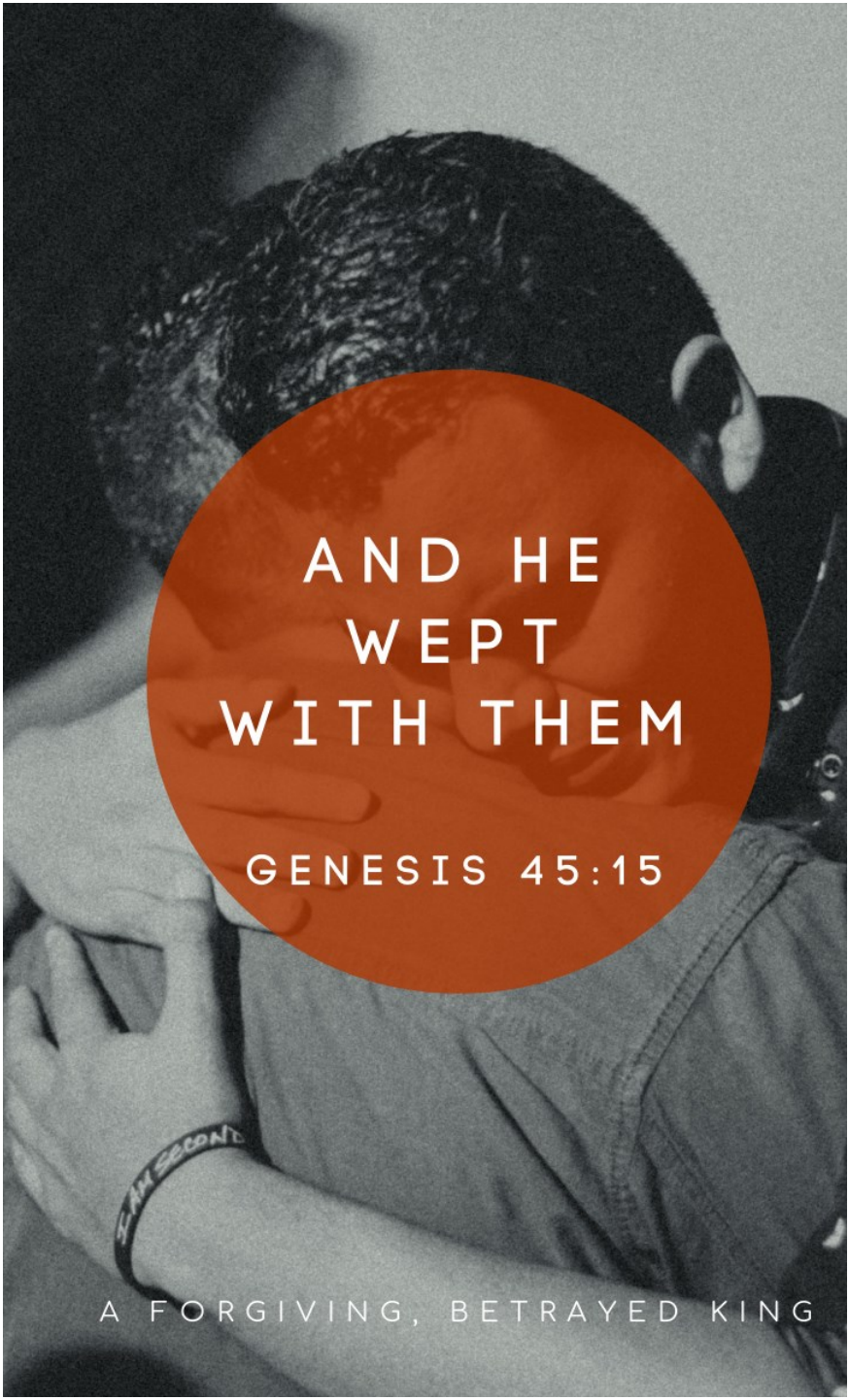
- Genesis 28:10-22

We pick up our story this week with Abraham's grandson Jacob., who's out on the run. He tricked his old, blind father (Isaac) into giving him the family blessing which was supposed to go to Esau, his older brother. Esau now wants him dead as a result. So Jacob flees home and sets out towards Haran. Things won't go so well for him there though. He'll actually be on the receiving end of some trickery and be exploited into hard labor for his uncle.

So here it is in between all that—death threats behind him, tough times ahead– that God meets him in a dream with promises and assurances of His presence. Jacob sees Heaven opened up and a flight of stairs reaching from Heaven to Earth. He sees angels (ministers of God's care and protection) ascending and descending the stairs. And God restates the promise made to Jacob's grandfather: I will give you this land on which you sleep. I will make your descendants like the sand of the dessert. Through your family, all the families of the earth will be blessed. And I will be present with you wherever you go. It's almost as if this little plot of land is becoming a new Eden—a place where God's people will be fruitful and multiplied, where God's blessings will spill over, where there will be a special "connection" between God's throne and man's home.

It actually has quite a few connections in our story. It resembles the day when Israel will, like Jacob, be a wanderer in the wilderness and God will build a tabernacle to be with them. It points forward to the day when the Son of God will take on flesh, descend from Heaven to Earth, tabernacle with God's people, and deliver them from their sins. And it points even further to when the city of God will one day descend from Heaven to a fully restored, new creation where tears and sadness will be no more and God's home will be forever be with those He loves!

DISCUSS—What does God's promise and His presence mean for you today?


AND HE
WEPT
WITH THEM
GENESIS 45:15
A FORGIVING, BETRAYED KING

WEEK 2/DAY 3

SCRIPTURE READING

- Genesis 37-46 (from the *Jesus Story Book Bible—The Forgiving Prince.* Or for a video reading of the Storybook Bible version .—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okpGag0VOuo)

Have you ever stopped to consider how the Bible's story line would have played out had Joseph not forgiven his brothers? After all, they did throw him in a pit, sell him to slave traders for 20 shekels of silver, and essentially ruin his life for the next several years. At best we might expect him to deny their pleas for food. At worst, he could have rightfully imprisoned them or handed them a death sentence for their wicked crime. But think if he did. There'd be no Israelites delivered from Egypt years later, no entrance into the promised land for Abraham's offspring. There'd be no Moses, no Joshua, no tribe of Judah from which would come David, Solomon, or the promised messianic king. In other words, this great plan of blessing the families of the Earth through Abraham's family would have come to a screeching halt. Instead though, Joseph finds a strange ability to forgive through the plan and purpose of God. Being convinced that even the painful and unfair trials he was dealt in life somehow were part of God plan to save many, he was freed to forgive.

Joseph resembles another king who would one day be rejected by his family, sold for 30 pieces of silver, and suffer death at the hands of hate-filled sinners. But with a similar conviction that God was up to something incredible, that He was turning the world's hate, violence, and injustice in on itself to rescue the souls of many, Jesus was freed to cry out in love amidst the agony of the cross, "Father forgive them!"

DISCUSS

- Have you ever considered how powerful the strange business of forgiveness is in God's mission of redemption? Is God inviting you to extend forgiveness to someone today? How can you find freedom in the loving and gracious purpose of God to do so?


THAT YOU
MAY KNOW
EXODUS 10:2
GOD TO THE RESCUE

WEEK 2 /DAY 4

SCRIPTURE READING

- Exodus 3-13 (Jesus Storybook Bible—*God to the Rescue)*
- StoryBook Bible Reading—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xW3Q6cjMwLk

Swarms of frogs leaping out of beds and cupboards? Hordes of locusts so thick that the sky seems dark? Painful boils and sores infecting people's skin, hail crushing crops and the animals grazing in the field? Is it just me, or is this a bit overkill? If God can do all this, He could've skipped the fuss and just magically transported the Israelites out of Egypt into the promised land. He could've softened Pharaoh's heart into simply letting them walk out from the get-go. But instead we get this dramatic display. AND God actually tells Moses (a few times) along the way, that He intends to harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will NOT let God's people go until God is done unleashing all these plagues. So...why?

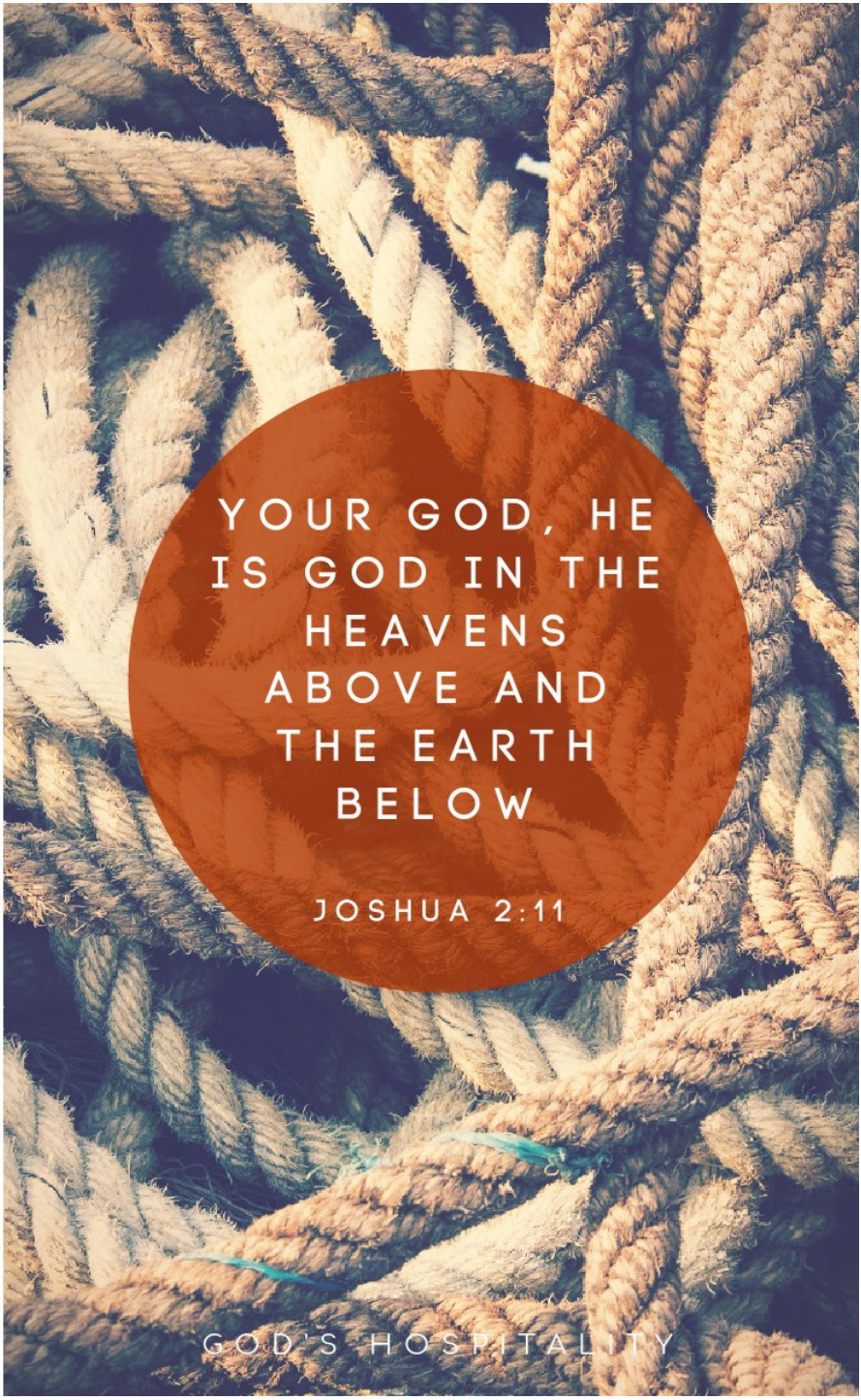
God puts it very simply: so that Israel may *know* that He is the only true God, worthy of their worship. Keep in mind, all that Israel had seen to that point was the power, the wealth, the success of Pharoah and his mighty empire with its supposed gods. Power, money, success—these are all things that tempt people's worship. God wants their undivided loyalty, confidence, and obedience so that He can use them for His great mission and purpose. And so He goes over the top to prove His power, His worthiness, His ability to deliver and protect the people He loves.

DISCUSS

- What are you tempted to trust more than God Himself? What do you sometimes think is more able than God to make your life safe and satisfied?

- How has God shown to *us* His ability to save and defend? How has He proven that He is worthy of our confidence, our commitment to His purpose for our lives, and our faithful obedience?

TAKE it FUTHER: Sing together or listen to *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing!*


YOUR GOD, HE IS GOD IN THE HEAVENS ABOVE AND THE EARTH BELOW
JOSHUA 2:11
GOD'S HOSPITALITY

WEEK 2 /DAY 5

SCRIPTURE READING

- Joshua 2:1-21

If you were to jump ahead to the first page of Matthew and read the genealogy of Jesus, you'd come across the name Rahab. The interesting part is Rahab was not originally part of Israel's family. She was not a particularly important person. She was not exactly a virtuous woman or upstanding citizen (at least leading up to this story) Not to mention the obvious—she was a woman. (women usually were not considered important enough to list in family genealogies back then)

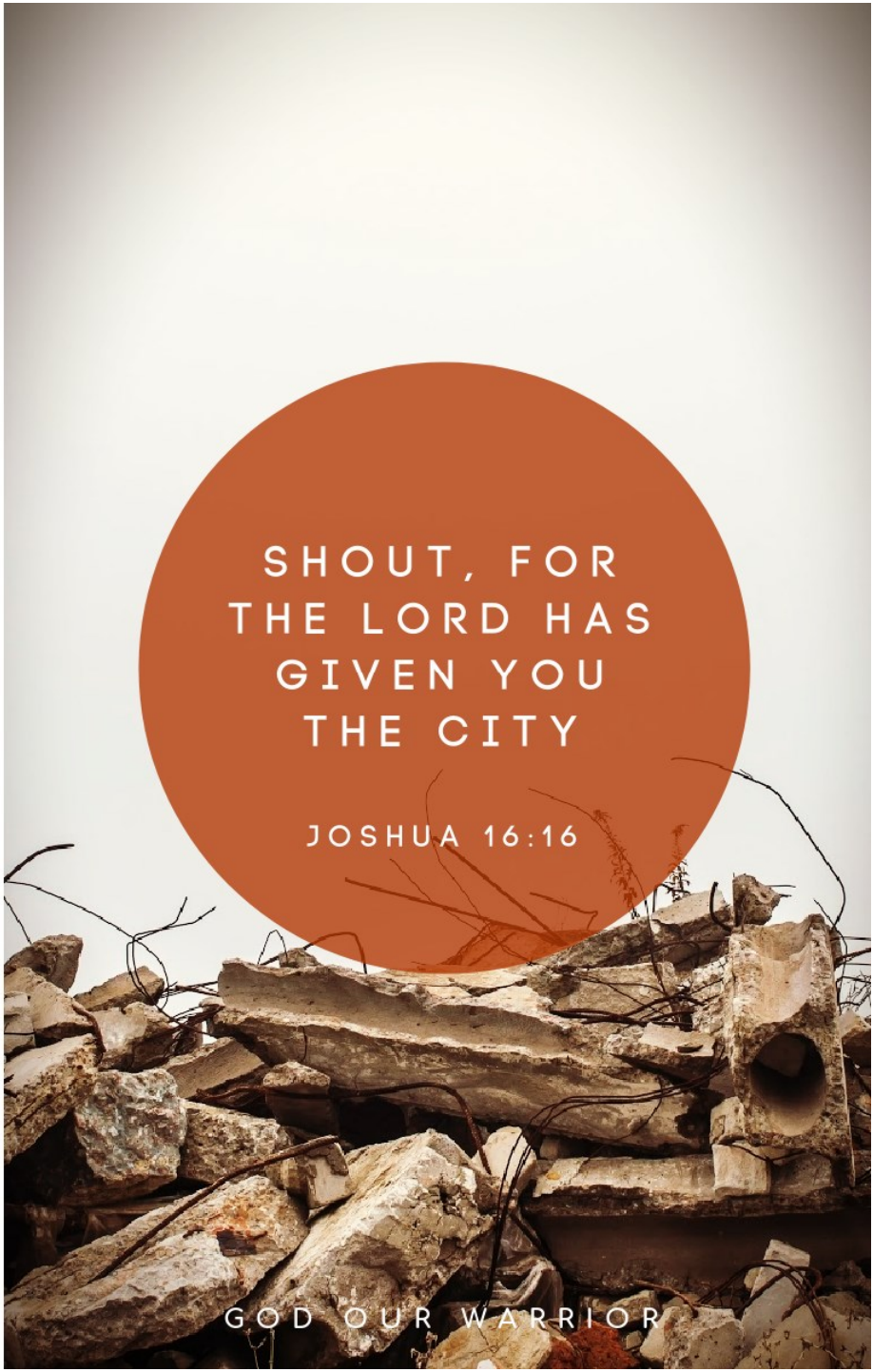
Today's passage is Rahab's story – her fear and respect for the one true God of Israel that she'd heard rumors about; her bravery inspired by that respect; her actions to save her family; her critical role in God's plan to establish His people in their new home.

Its also part of God's own story. In particular, we are reminded in the Rahab story that God has a gracious plan that ultimately includes those families and nations outside of Israel as well. Rahab's faith is used to rescue her family who then become part of God's chosen people . And it will be from the line of Rahab that we get the great King David and the even greater King Jesus.

Rahab's name in Jesus' genealogy is a neat little sign that this king comes, at least in part, from a line of sinners on the outside of the religious establishment, and that He has come to bestow God's blessings on those whom others might consider unimportant or those who don't have notable family names backing them up, or those who's character and past lifestyles are perhaps less than admirable. He takes His place alongside sinners on the outside of God's family so that He might share with them His status as a dearly loved Son.

DISCUSS-

How does the Rahab story challenge and/or encourage you?


SHOUT, FOR THE LORD HAS GIVEN YOU THE CITY
JOSHUA 16:16
GOD OUR WARRIOR

WEEK 2 /DAY 6

SCRIPTURE READING

- Joshua 3 and 6 (*Jesus Storybook Bible—The Warrior Leader)*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewXXQSMlCkk

Sometimes, if I'm working with one of my kids on their sports skills, maybe their jump shot or their tennis backhand, I might show off a little...maybe whip a shot down the line that catches their attention or drain a 3-pointer from a ways out (not that that happens all that often!). The goal is not just to show off, but perhaps to be able to say to the kids, "See that? Stick with me, learn from me, and you'll be good to go."

In some ways, this story is like the one we read two days ago. God is almost showing off a bit. The Israelites are finally entering into their land of promise. They come to the fortress of Jericho with its massive walls protecting it. They perhaps wonder how in the world they'll be victorious. And God essentially wins the battle for them. Stick with me (He says), and you'll be good to go.

Its an important lesson they need to learn. Whenever the Israelites doubt the power, the promises, or the love of God for them, they usually go chasing after other gods and worthless idols. They bow in worship to those gods and do detestable things to make those dead gods happy. What they need is to remember and trust the might of the living God who has promised to faithfully work His power on their behalf...and proven He can do it!

It's the same thing we need. We need to remember the great promises God has pledged to us—us resurrection life in a new creation fully restored to its original goodness, a day where there is no more sin to shame us or death and loss to bring tears and regret, no more feeling distant from the one who made us and loves us. And we can look to the power that raised Jesus from the dead as proof that God is able to do it. We don't need the promises or temptations of cheap idols. We can wait faithfully on the return of the One who's already out in front, fighting...and winning(!) our battles for us.


BLESSED BE THE LORD WHO HAS NOT LEFT YOU WITHOUT A REDEEMER
RUTH 4:14

WEEK 3/ DAY 1

SCRIPTURE READING

- Book of Ruth
(COVERED in CHILDREN'S CHURCH)

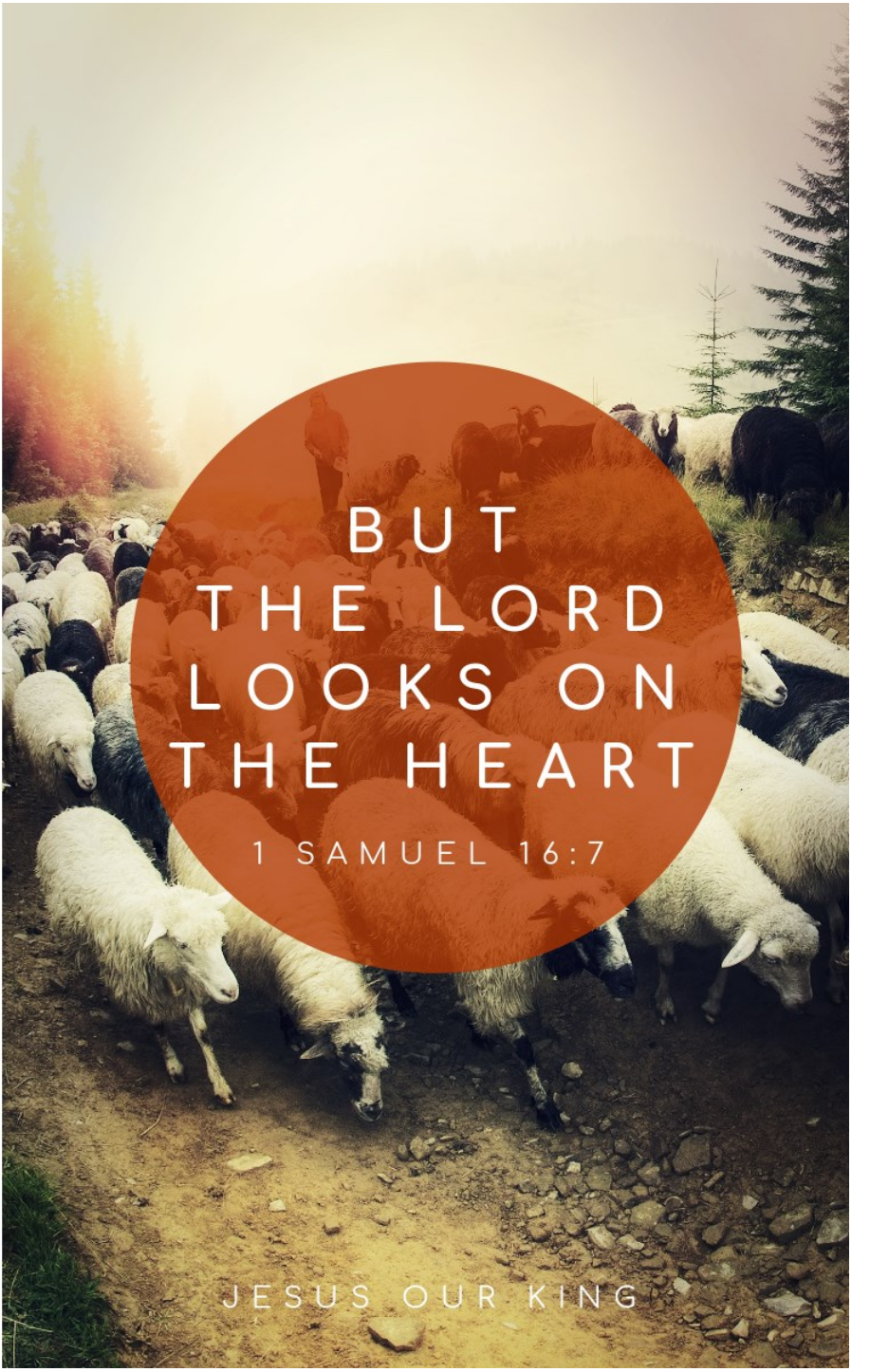
The book of Ruth packs quite a bit into just four chapters. It's the story of Naomi who not only suffers the intense grief of losing her husband and two sons but stands to be left without help and hope in the world. She changes her name to Mara (bitter) to better reflect her condition. But by story's end, she is called blessed!

It's the story of Ruth, who similarly has suffered deep loss and is in a pretty perilous situation herself without a husband or father to protect and provide for her. And yet, despite significant risk, she chooses to remain alongside Naomi and entrust herself to Naomi's God rather than return home to the safe confines of her family of origin.

It's the story of Boaz, who looks out for the widow and the fatherless, who shares from his field with those less fortunate, who welcomes the homeless into his home and sacrificially becomes a kinsman-redeemer.

It's the story of Obed, who we find out will later be the father of Jesse, the father of King David.

And it's even the story of what it means to be a true Israelite, a true member of God's family, with its drama of redemption and examples of faith, generosity, and sacrificial love.


BUT
THE LORD
LOOKS ON
THE HEART
1 SAMUEL 16:7
JESUS OUR KING

WEEK 3/ DAY 2

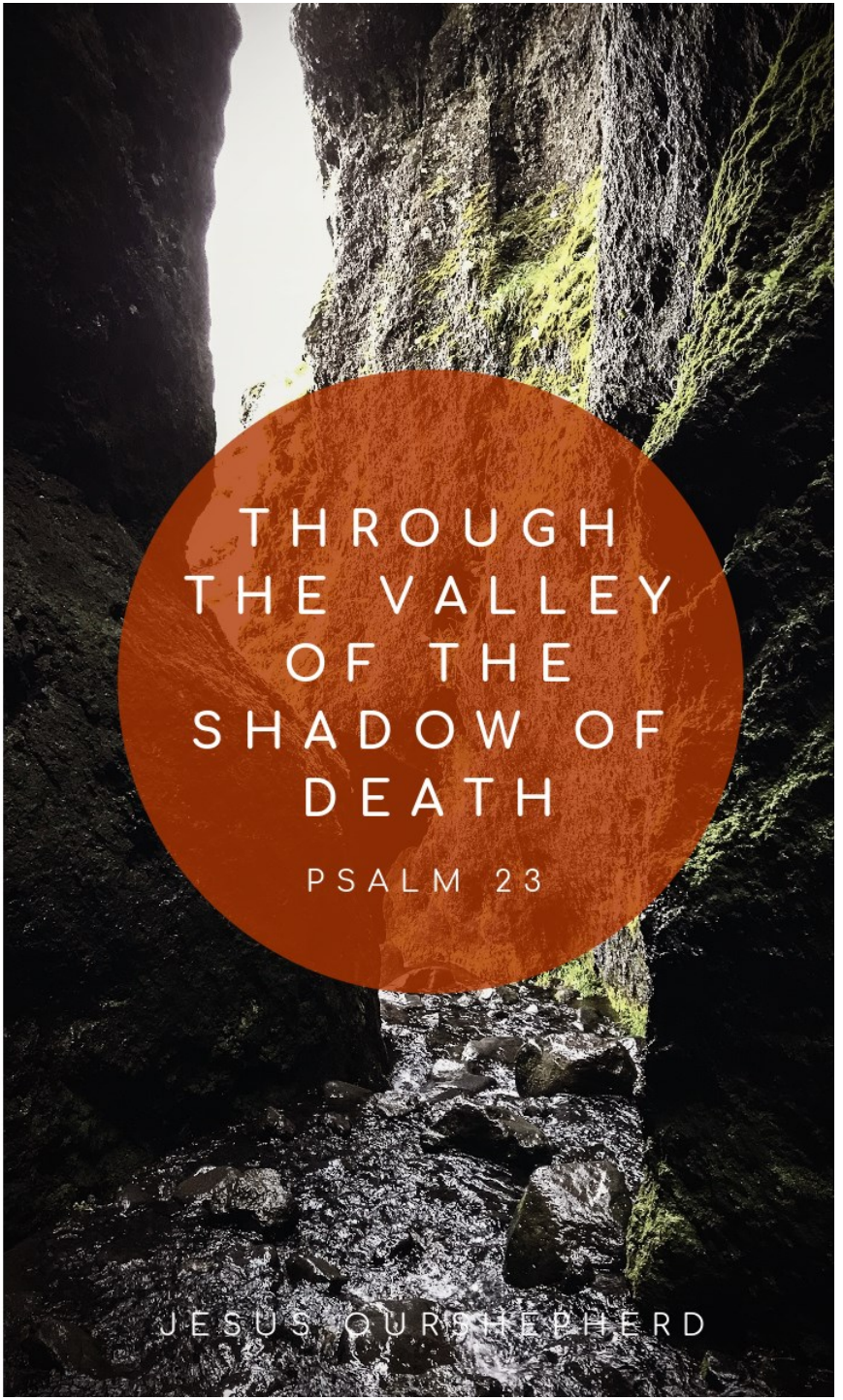
SCRIPTURE READING

- 1 Samuel 16:1-13
(*Jesus Storybook Bible—The Teenie, Weenie True King)*

If ever we are having to take two cars someplace as a family, my wife is not too fond of having to follow behind in one car while I lead in the other. Apparently I don't pay as much attention as I should to those who are following—making sure they are keeping up or making it through that yellow light or aren't getting stuck behind a line of cars, etc. And sometimes (though I never let on) I might not actually know where I'm going and thus have to pull the occasional U-turn or skip across lanes to make a quick ex-it...all hard things to do on the spot if you're following behind.

As we continue our story with the Israelites in the promised land, one thing becomes quickly apparent, they need someone to lead them in righteousness. They need to follow a king who will shepherd them in being faithful and obedient to God's desires and plans for them as a people. Left to themselves, they make horrible decisions, go astray chasing after other gods, and make a mess of the life God gives them. Today is the story of God anointing such a king for them. He's not a big and strong guy who's really into himself. He's not necessarily a lover of power and glamorous kingdoms. That would be a disastrous king to follow. Someone like that would lead God's people down all the wrong roads. This king (David), has a pure heart, knows how to look after those in his care, and is a wise shepherd. This is the king they need to lead them in paths of righteousness.

Even David was not perfect though. He had some painful flaws. We, however, are fortunate to have a king who was perfectly obedient to the will of the Father, whose heart is perfectly loving and faithful. who has already struck a deathblow to all of our enemies, and who promises to lead us safely to God's glorious future. How are you doing following King Jesus whom God has sent for your salvation and anointed to lead you in the fullness of life?


THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH
PSALM 23
JESUS OUR SHEPHERD

SCRIPTURE READING

- Psalm 23

David Powlison (a Biblical Counselor and professor) wrote the following anti-Psalm 23. For today's devotional, compare and contrast it with the actual Psalm 23—the greater reality that is always available to us through Jesus' finished work on the cross.

I'm on my own. No one looks out for me or protects me.
I experience a continual sense of need. Nothing's quite right.
I'm always restless. I'm easily frustrated and often disappointed.
It's a jungle — I feel overwhelmed. It's a desert — I'm thirsty.
My soul feels broken, twisted, and stuck. I can't fix myself.

I stumble down some dark paths.
Still, I insist: I want to do what I want, when I want, how I want.
But life's confusing. Why don't things ever really work out?
I'm haunted by emptiness and futility — shadows of death.

I fear the big hurt and final loss. Death is waiting for me at the end of every road, but I'd rather not think about that.
I spend my life protecting myself. Bad things can happen.
I find no lasting comfort.
I'm alone . . . facing everything that could hurt me.
Are my friends really friends?
Other people use me for their own ends. I can't really trust anyone. No one has my back. No one is really for me — except me.
And I'm so much all about ME, sometimes it's sickening.
I belong to no one except myself.
My cup is never quite full enough. I'm left empty.

Disappointment follows me all the days of my life.
Will I just be obliterated into nothingness?
Will I be alone forever, homeless, free-falling into void?
Sartre said, "Hell is other people."
I have to add, "Hell is also myself."
It's a living death...and then I die.


THEY WHO WAIT FOR THE LORD SHALL RENEW THEIR STRENGTH
ISAIAH 40:31
THE POWER OF HOPE

WEEK 3 /DAY 4

SCRIPTURE READING

- Isaiah 40 (*Jesus Storybook Bible—Operation No More Tears)*

If being a Philadelphia sports fan has taught me anything in life (and that's certainly questionable), it's that hope is a pretty powerful thing...and the absence of it can be devastating for my enthusiasm. I can endure a fair amount of poor performances, bad management, and lousy play calling if there's but a glimmer of hope on the horizon. Take it away, and I lose interest pretty fast.

Todays passage was written to a people exiled from their home, a people longing for deliverance and rescue, a people waiting in hope. It applies to us because the Advent season is about remembering that we too are waiting for the return of our king who will one day bring us home to His glorious new creation where we'll be forever free from fear, free from sin, free from separation from our Creator and those we love. And the thing is, while we wait, we are called to wade into the darkness and actually lament alongside a hurting world. Instead of just biding our time or making the most of an imperfect situation. We're called to actively follow our King, seeking the welfare of those around us, and interceding on their behalf. We're called to shine like lights in the darkness...while we wait. Which all can be more than a bit difficult at times. Dealing with the sin and brokenness in our hearts, homes, and families can be hard enough. Add to that the job of sacrificially serving and loving out *in* the darkness, and it can easily become overwhelming. Which is where hope comes into play. Hope is a powerful means of binding up strength, keeping our hearts pure from idols or controlling fears, building endurance, and even finding real joy in living with full abandon for the kingdom of Christ.

This is Isaiah's charge. Our God is coming. The glory of the Lord is soon to be revealed. His reward is with Him, And He, Himself will lovingly shepherd us into the firm gates of our long awaited home. Wait for Him in hope, and He will give you strength.


I WILL PUT
MY LAW
WITHIN THEM
JEREMIAH 31:33
GOD OF THE COVENANT

SCRIPTURE READING

- Jeremiah 31:31-34; 33:14-16

One thing I've learned as a parent—it is never my kids' fault. Its amazing. No matter what happens, no matter how much evidence points to the contrary, my kids are always convinced it wasn't their fault, and they argue that point quite persuasively...at least so they think. And ok, the thing is, this isn't just a tendency with my kids. I'm the exact same way. Whenever there's a problem, or I'm struggling with something, I'm pretty certain someone else is to blame. Or if someone is hurt by my actions or offended by my words, clearly, *they* have misunderstood the situation or misjudged me. The problem is with them...because it couldn't possibly be with me. Or at least, so I think.

As we continue listening to God's prophets and allowing them to point us forward in hope, we find this interesting thing: that when God comes to fix everything that is not right in the world, He isn't just aiming at the stuff *out there*. Part of the problem is...*gulp*... inside me too! Part of the brokenness, darkness, sin, addiction, and violence that I can see all too clearly all around me is actually hiding (at least from my eyes) within my own heart as well. In order for this story to have a truly happy ending, God has to fix things certain things not quite right within me.

The good news, if we're willing to receive it, is that God has begun that work already. His Son has already conquered the power of sin and Satan in His resurrection. And in His victory, He's gone to work, refining and changing our hearts by His Spirit. In other words, the promise that Jeremiah so looked forward to, that God would write His law on our hearts has begun (check out Romans 2). It isn't finished yet, and the promise remains that He who began the good work in us will bring it to completion when Christ returns (Phil 1). But it is underway. The question is, are we thankful for that...so much so that we would let the true heart surgeon do some of that uncomfortable work in our lives today?


GO TO NINEVAH, THAT GREAT CITY
JONAH 3:2
GOD'S MESSENGER

WEEK 3 /DAY 6

SCRIPTURE READING

- Jonah 1-4
(or from the *Jesus Story Book Bible—God's Messenger*)

We started this week with some characters who represented (faithfully) what it meant to be God's people. Ruth, in faith, chose to stay alongside Naomi in her distress and entrust herself to God's purpose and power. Boaz, chose to care for the hungry and vulnerable the way God's people had always been instructed. Today, we close out the week with a character who *instead* represented one of Israel's biggest failures as God's people.

God asks Jonah to share with the people of Ninevah the good news that God shows mercy towards those who repent . The problem is, Ninevah is way too wicked for Jonah to have any mercy or compassion. And granted, they were pretty brutal. But that's the thing about God's mercy—no one is beyond receiving it, no matter what's in their past. But ungrateful Jonah, with his own ideas on how the world should operate, runs from God. In a similar way, it was Israel's job to display God's truth and His mercy to the surrounding nations so that they might find it and be healed. Remember that promise God made to Abraham way back at the beginning of the story? "Through you and your family, God says, all the nations of the earth will be blessed." This was one of Israel's primary purposes. But they failed miserably. All they cared about was their own lives, their own dreams and demands, their own plans and purposes. God's plan? No thanks.

But God finds a way even when His people fail...as He did with Jonah, and as He would one day do despite His people Israel. God would soon send a true and faithful son of Abraham who would show God's relentless love and mercy for sinners no matter the cost. AND...he would also send His Spirit to help those who, like Jonah struggle with fear and selfishness, to more faithfully carry out His mission and share the wonderful news of His mercy with those who desperately need to heart it!


YOU WILL
HAVE JOY AND
GLADNESS
LUKE 1:14
PREPARING THE WAY

WEEK 4, DAY 1

SCRIPTURE READING

- Luke 1:5-25 (COVERED in CHILDREN'S CHURCH)

"How long, o Lord?" It's the cry of David in his Psalms (i.e. 6 &13). It's the longing of the prophet Habakkuk (1:2). It's the plea of the saints gathered around the heavenly throne (Rev. 6:10). And my guess is, it often flowed from the lips of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Long he had served God faithfully as priest over His people. Long had they kept "blamelessly" the commandments and statues of the Lord (1:6). And yet, the deep desire of their hearts, to have a child, year after year, was left unfulfilled. How long would they have to wait, trusting God's goodness in the midst of sadness?

"How long, o Lord?" I wonder if the multitude of people gathered in prayer outside the temple were wondering the same thing. I wonder if after years of heavy oppression and taxation, years of not being free to worship exactly as they would desire, years of not being their own people but rather subject to the Roman empire...they cried as they offered their incense, how long until you come and deliver?

It's into this scene that the birth of John the Baptism is promised—the one who would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord, the one who would prepare the hearts of the people to receive their King. The cries and longings of a waiting people are about to be answered. The "hopes and fears of all the years" are at long last about to be met.

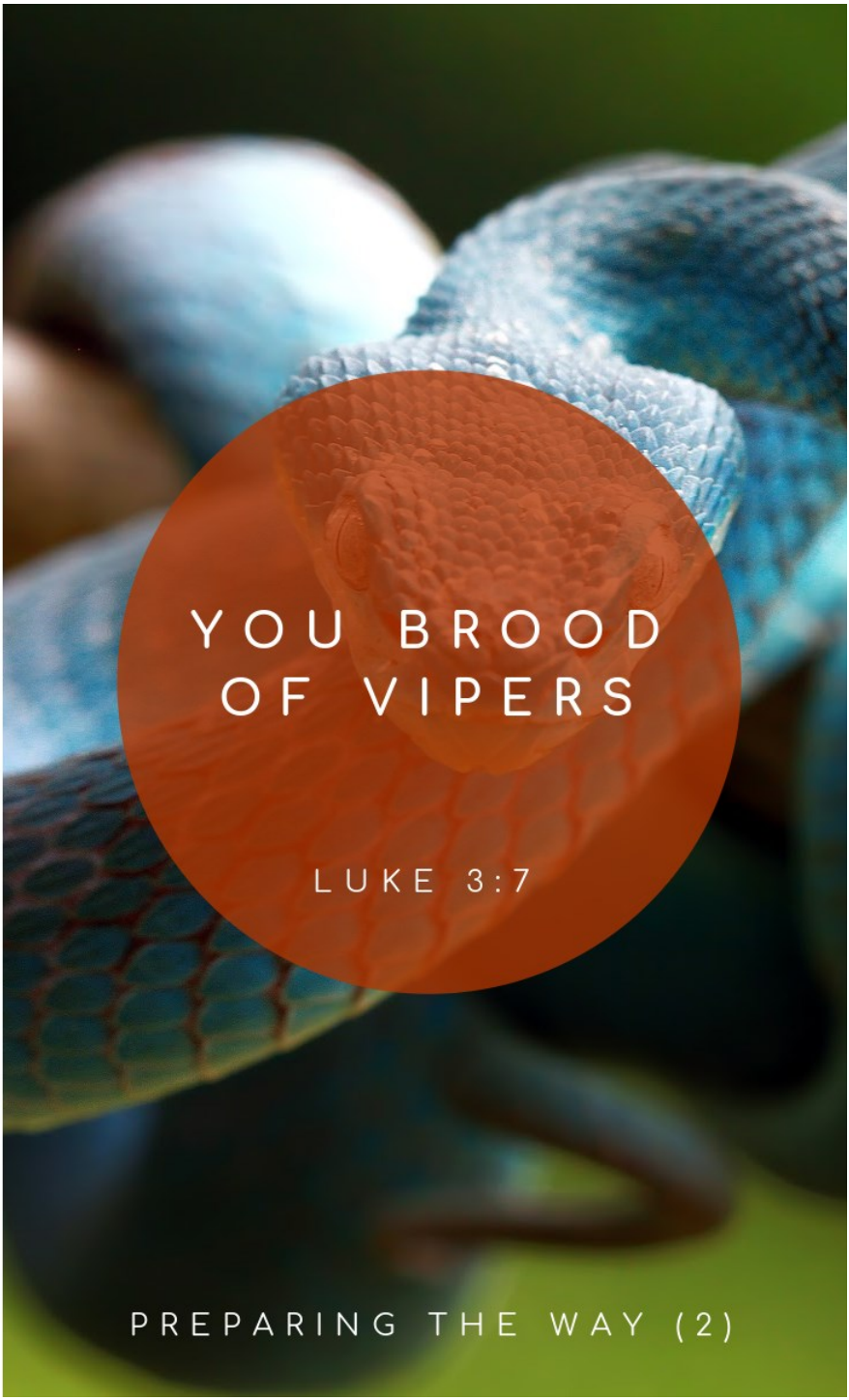
DISCUSS

- Who do you identify with in this story—Zechariah who wasn't quite prepared for the news of Gabriel and found it hard to accept, or Elizabeth who receives the news with great joy?

TAKE IT FURTHER

– Watch the Bible Project Advent video on joy and discuss the relation between believing God's promises and experiencing joy

https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/chara-joy


YOU BROOD OF VIPERS
LUKE 3:7
PREPARING THE WAY (2)

WEEK 4, DAY 2

SCRIPTURE READING

- Luke 1::57-79 and Luke 3: 1-3, 7

Before Jesus, there was John—the one who prepared the way for the king, the one tasked to deliver the incredible news of God's coming salvation. And he certainly had quite the way with words: "You brood of Vipers, who told you to flee the wrath that is to come?" Eesh, tell us what you really think, John! How exactly is this encouraging news?

Here again, we are reminded that some of the wrong things and evil stains that need to be dealt with are not just "out there". They are in us. In many ways, they *are* us. And there is the dilemma of Biblical hope. We want a God who is going to come deal with sin, evil, violence, and injustice. A hope that doesn't deal with that isn't really hope. It's just more of the same. And yet, if the story of God's people reveals anything, it's that we are not able, left to ourselves, to avoid the very things that need to be dealt with. We can't keep our hearts clean. We can't keep our hands off the seductive idols of our culture. And when our idols are threatened, we're all too quick to join in with the anger and the hatred and the violent tactics that plague God's creation. Hardly a day goes by without us running to the sin that rightly deserves God's judgment.

So we need both a judge to come make things right, *and* an advocate who will stand in our corner, take up our desperate condition, and loving plead on our behalf. Don't worry, He's coming!

DISCUSS

In what ways do you participate in the brokenness of creation? What sin or weakness in your life needs to be brought before the throne of mercy so that you may find grace to heal and grow?

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Watch the Bible Project Advent video on hope
https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/yakhal-hope


HE WHO IS MIGHTY HAS DONE GREAT THINGS FOR ME
LUKE 1:49
A DIFFERENT KING

SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 1:26-33 & 46-56

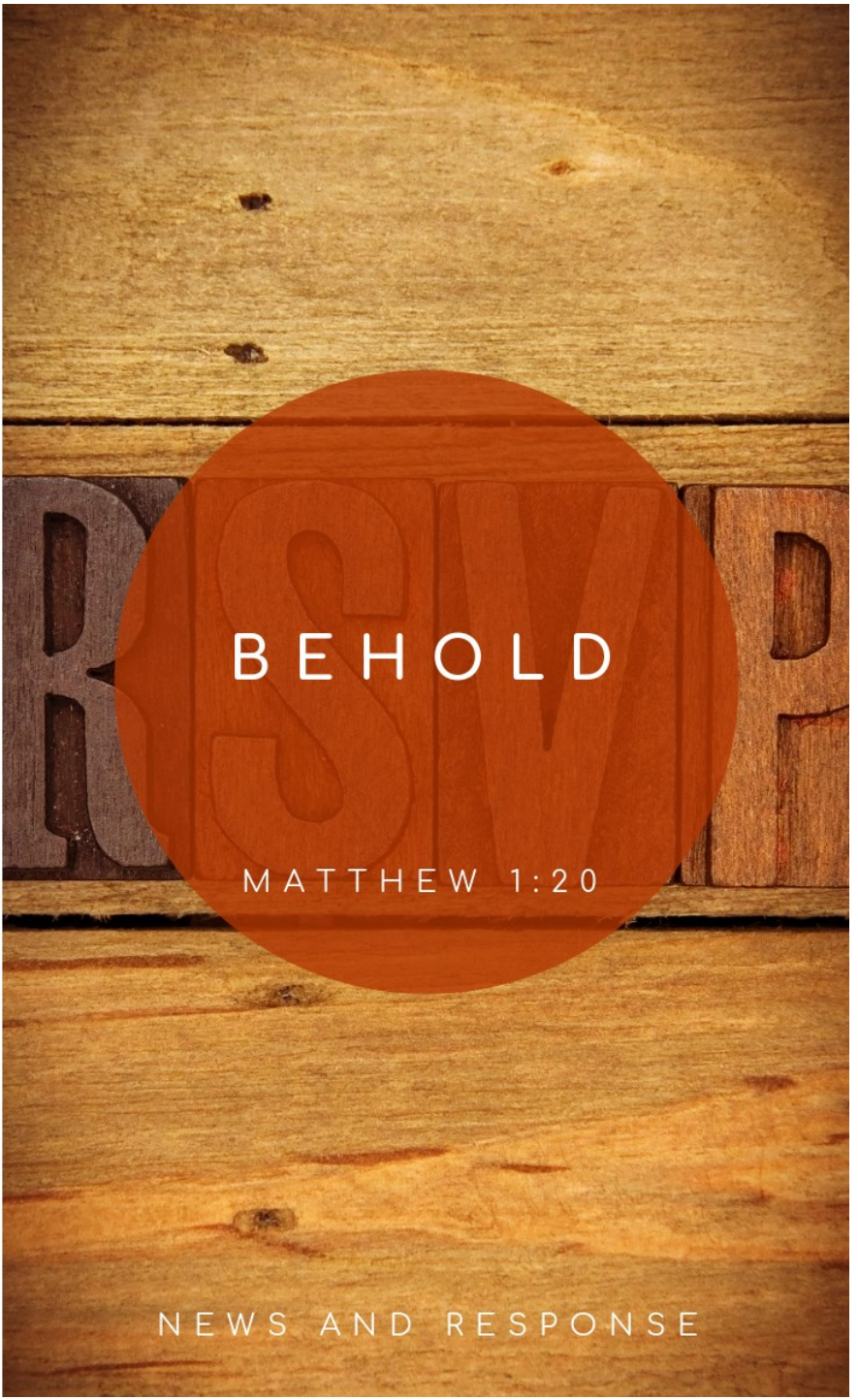
He could have come anywhere. He could have chosen a relaxing villa along the Mediterranean to be his home. He could been born in the palaces of Rome or to the families of important religious leaders...or perhaps just a quiet middle class house in the suburbs of Jerusalem. But instead, this king chooses to be born to a poor, peasant family in a small town in the backwoods of Israel that was often associated with tragedy and heartbreak.

What kind of strange king is this? Most kings seem in love with their treasures. This king seems more lovingly concerned for those in distress, those with deep need. Most kings seem desperate to hold onto power, maintain their kingdoms, increase the life they've attained for themselves. This king seems more interested in giving those things away—trading the glory of Heaven for the sorrows of Bethlehem, living and giving His life for those drowning in sin and death.

This is partly why Mary sings a song of praise, which is also a song of great reversal—the mighty have been brought down from their thrones while the humble are being exalted, the hungry are filled while the rich are sent away empty, the proud are scattered. Why? Because the great King of all creation has made His home among the weak, the desperate and lowly.

One thing to consider: Those who are proud and mighty feel no need for a rescuer. Those who are rich don't need mercy. Those who are full, like the inns of Bethlehem, have no room for a savior-king who comes to repair broken places and broken lives. AND...this strange king models for us a new way to think about life and love. True glory, it seems, is not about seizing the most out of life, often at the neglect or expense of others, but choosing to view life as a gift to be shared in love.

TAKE it FUTHER: Watch the Bible Project Advent video about *Love*. https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/agape-love


BEHOLD
MATTHEW 1:20
NEWS AND RESPONSE

SCRIPTURE READING

- Matthew 1:18-25

A common thing in each of our stories this week has been the voice of God's messengers, sent to prepare the people for what God was about to do. Gabriel came to Zechariah with the message that their prayers had been heard and that joy and gladness was about to burst onto the scene. He tells Mary that she will soon bear a son who will inherit the throne of David, a son who will lead God's people and secure His kingdom forever. We read about John who announced the coming of that kingdom and called God's people to repentance. And in today's passage another angelic messenger comes, this time to Joseph...

Joseph is figuring out what to do with Mary who somehow is pregnant with a child that isn't his. The law gave him every right to bring her to public trial and have her declared guilty so that he doesn't have to pay for the divorce. He's figuring instead to divorce her quietly so she avoids that shame. But then the messenger explains that something incredible has happened—the Spirit of God that brooded over the waters of creation and flooded a barren world with life, the Spirit Who birthed the people of Israel from the barren womb of Sarah, the Spirit that filled the mouths of prophets with comforting words of hope in times of darkness, this Spirit was once again stirring signs of life in an empty womb. Through Mary, He was bringing into the world the long awaited Rescuer-king. And this miracle would be greater than all the ones preceding. This baby would be Immanuel—God with us!

In response, Joseph laid aside his own intentions and "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." And that's the other recurring part of these stories—a response by those who hear the news. Some respond with celebration, others with quiet obedience. Some repent and are baptized. Some even doubt and question, how can this be true? How about you? In light of the good news God's Word brings to you today, how do you respond?


MY SOUL WAITS FOR THE LORD
PSALM 130:6
PREPARING to RECEIVE

SCRIPTURE READING

- On this last day before Christmas, as we wait to officially celebrate the greatest gift ever given in the birth of Jesus, we'll join with God's people through the ages who looked forward in eager hope and anticipation for the coming of God's salvation. Let the Psalm lead you in considering your need for Jesus and preparing your heart to receive again the good news of His coming. (And If you've been reading along with the Jesus Storybook Bible, you can read pages 178-179)

PSALM 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!
O Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness,
that you may be feared.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.
And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.


GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST AND ON EARTH, PEACE
LUKE 2:14
GOD WITH US

SCRIPTURE READING

- Luke 2; Matthew 2 (p. 180 from the Jesus Storybook Bible)

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