



Over the next three weeks, many will be busy preparing to celebrate this special season of the year. Hanging Christmas decorations, attending holiday parties, buying gifts for loved ones and preparing our homes and tables for guests are just a few of the tasks which will occupy our time. Just the thought of what lies ahead leaves some of us feeling weary and exhausted.

Isaiah writes, "Even youths grow tired and weary . . . but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength." In Psalm 55, we are encouraged to, "Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall."

As you make preparations for Christmas, how might you "cast your cares" on God and find rest in sharing your burdens with Christ? What is one worry you are currently carrying that you might surrender to God today?

GPS for Families

GrowPrayStudy.org/family

Use this activity to focus on the true gift of Christmas.

Gather materials for a nativity scene. These can be bought in kits or individual pieces. Read the Christmas story found in Luke 2. Add figures in the scene piece by piece, weekly or daily. Start with the stable, then an empty manger. Add Joseph and Mary outside the stable, and gradually move them closer to symbolize their long journey to Bethlehem. Place the animals in the stable one by one as if all is normal, yet something wonderful is about to happen. Start the shepherds some distance away from the stable. Remember, the shepherds did not know what was happening until the angels told them. Keep the wise men separate and do not move them until Christmas. Their journey did not begin until the star announced Jesus' birth.

Next, put the angel with Mary and Joseph. Slowly move them to the stable. You might add townspeople to represent the people of Bethlehem and discuss what they might have been thinking and doing. (If your nativity set did not come with townspeople, let the children add their own small dolls, action figures, etc.)

On Christmas morning, place the baby Jesus in the manger. Discuss the excitement of the birth! Place a star over the stable and move the three wise men in closer. Talk about what gifts you might bring to Jesus. End by reminding everyone that Jesus is the greatest gift of all.

MESSAGE "Christmas Is for Sinners"

SCRIPTURE Matthew 1:18-25

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Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon:

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PRAYER FOR THE WEEK

Holy and loving God, I give you thanks for the gift of Christmas. As I celebrate the coming of our newborn King, I pray that you would forgive me of my sin, bind up my wounds and cast out all my worries and fear. May the life I live this day and every day testify to my belief that Jesus has come to save my life and redeem the entire world. Amen.

We begin our advent journey with the words of the angel Gabriel who came to Mary and turned her life completely upside down. All the hopes and dreams of this young Jewish girl were soon to be met in her upcoming marriage to Joseph. Gabriel's announcement that she would "be with child and give birth to a son" threatened those aspirations. There is no doubt that she was frightened by the angel's presence and the prophecy that she received, but Mary replied in faith not fear. "I am the Lord's servant."

Have you ever felt like God turned your world upside down? What was your initial reaction to that realization?

What does Mary's response to this trouble and amazing news say about how she understood her relationship with God? What might this teach us about surrendering the worry and anxiety we experience in our lives?

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In yesterday's reading, we looked at the initial conversation that took place between Mary and the angel Gabriel. We follow that with what is often referred to as "the Magnificat," or "the song of Mary," which is Mary's response to that earlier exchange. These words would eventually become one of the first hymns of the Christian faith. In this song, Christians not only celebrated God's power to deliver but also the trust which Mary placed in God.

When worry takes hold of our lives, we automatically begin to see a more limited picture of our lives. Our fears move to the forefront of our attention, which allows this more limited perspective to develop. In her own moment of fear, how does Mary reverse that process in this song? Where does she focus her attention?

What has God done in your life that you must never forget?

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Proverbs 22:17 instructs, "Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise." The book of Proverbs is a collection of those "sayings" meant to lead us towards righteousness and away from what is described as "foolish living." Throughout the scriptures we are taught that fear is what manipulates us into foolish living while love is the true motivation for a life of righteousness.

In verse 3, we read, "Let love and faithfulness never leave you." Can you think of a time in your life when you found yourself drifting from love and faithfulness? What brought you back? How has that experience helped you to grow?

Verse 5 instructs us to "lean not on your own understanding." How might this instruct you in those moments or seasons where worry tries to take hold of your heart? How might you give your worry to God today?

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In the sacrament of holy communion, we remember the last meal that Jesus shared with his disciples before his arrest, trial and eventual crucifixion. These men were about to walk through the darkest days the world had ever known. Gathered with them for the celebration of the Passover meal, Jesus sought to prepare them for what was to come.

The question that Thomas asks of Jesus in verse 5 is one that should sound familiar to us. At some point in our own lives, we have probably asked of God a similar question. "Lord, I don't know what I should do or where I'm supposed to be going. Show me the way."

How does Jesus respond to Thomas? What do you think Jesus was trying to communicate to Thomas? When we find ourselves struggling for answers and direction, how might these words from Jesus guide our next steps?

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