

IN LIGHT & DARKNESS
AN ILLUSTRATED DEVOTIONAL



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Intro Letter	1
Week 1 Reflection.....	4
Week 2 Reflection	10
Week 3 Reflection	18
Week 4 Reflection.....	26
Week 5 Reflection.....	32
About the Contributors	38



Thank you for your purchase of *In Light & Darkness: An Illustrated Devotional.*

Welcome to *In Light & Darkness: An Illustrated Devotional*. Our **Illustrated Devotionals** are meant to **be colored in and doodled and drawn on**. You will see opportunities to color, doodle, and draw throughout the devotional, and we invite you to allow the illustrations and spaces for creativity to draw you deeper into reflection.

In Light & Darkness: The inspiration for our theme comes from the common usage of "light" and "darkness" during Advent, and from exploring how the earth experiences both the very lightest and darkest days with summer and winter solstices during Advent.

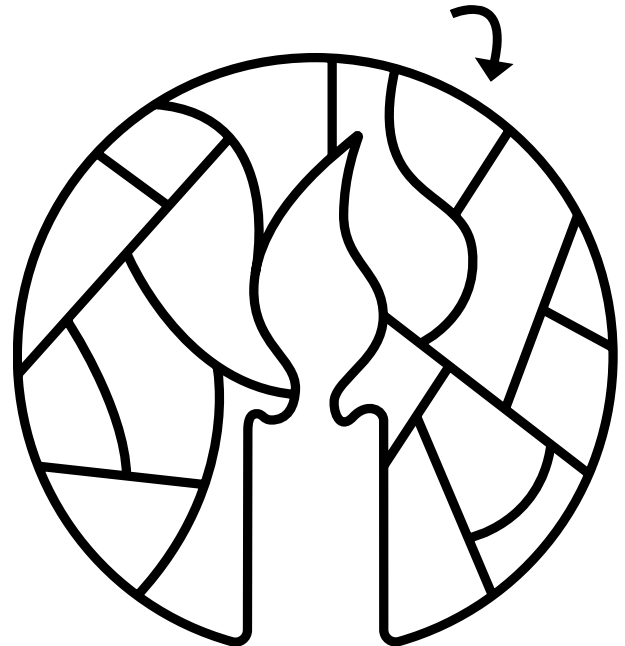
Scripture focusing on God's light has led to the belief light is the source of goodness and hope. This belief implies darkness is not wanted or needed, it is something to banish or get rid of, or God is not even present in the dark.

Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, helps us reimagine our understanding of darkness, primarily how Christianity heavily relies on the binary construct of light as good and darkness as bad. Taylor proposes the pair of light and dark exist together in balance, not opposition. She asks, "What can light possibly mean without dark?"¹

We hope our Advent devotional will help you share conversations about your understanding of light and darkness. We encourage you to explore how those understandings influence the way you view God, your faith, and the world. These Advent devotions are written so they can be used intergenerationally, or by youth groups or adult studies.

So grab a pen, some crayons or colored pencils, and start working through *In Light & Darkness: An Illustrated Devotional*.

And as you use these resources in your ministry or your home, we would love to hear what was helpful and meaningful and what suggestions or comments you have for us. It is our desire to create quality resources for children's faith formation and we appreciate your comments and feedback.



¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, pg. 13.



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Peace,

Adam Walker Cleaveland
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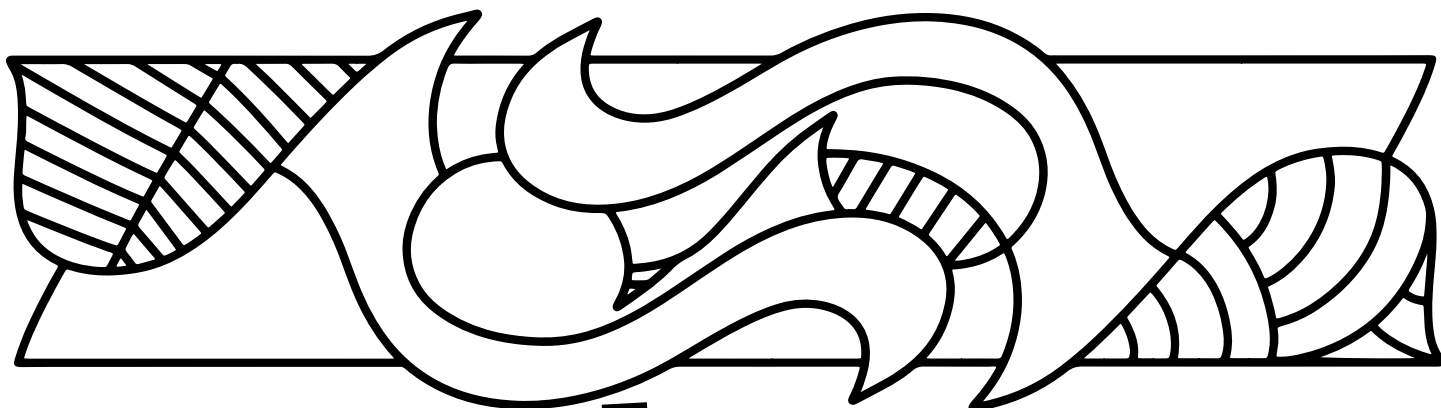


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WEEK ONE

REFLECTION



In THE beginning

Scripture: John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 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.

WEEK ONE Reflection

What is the night sky like where you live? Are you in or near a city, where the streetlights and store lights compete with the starlight? Are you out in the country, where the deep, velvety black of the sky is dotted by more tiny white lights than you can count? Have you ever gone to a place different than where you usually are, looked up into the night sky, and been amazed by how many – or how few – stars you could see, just based on that change of setting?

We often use competitive language around ideas of light and darkness, maybe assuming that since they're opposites, they must be at odds. The idea that light and darkness are in competition – “the light shines...the darkness does not overcome it” – is a common but not automatic understanding. The darkness not overcoming the light doesn't have to mean the light wins; it could mean there's simply not a fight to be had. Like stars in a night sky, the light and the darkness coexist, each helping create space for and define the other. They are part of the same world. They make each other visible, knowable. Without that dark sky, how would we see the stars shine? Without their shining, how could we guess at the scope of the sky?



About a hundred years ago, the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke – maybe while looking up at a starry sky – wrote,

*“the dark embraces everything:
shapes and shadows, creatures and me,
people, nations – just as they are.*

It lets me imagine a great presence stirring beside me.”

The darkness invites our imagination to play. The darkness is what existed with God – that great presence stirring – at the beginning of creation; it’s the canvas onto which the whole world came into being. It’s what welcomed the waters, the land, the sky, every living thing...and first of all, before anything else, the light. The darkness is still what holds all that is – maybe, as the poet imagines, in an embrace – each night as the light fades and the world falls into rest again.

And instead of a birth narrative for Jesus, like found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the Gospel of John gives us this – a call back to the very beginning of our faith’s story, to that initial darkness that “covers the face of the deep” and to the light that comes when God speaks it into being. This light – a light that exists before the sun or the stars – is the first thing God calls “good.” (Genesis 1:1-4)

The Gospel of John draws us back there at the beginning of his narrative, as if to say: remember how world-changing our story says the light was? Remember how it shaped all that could be? Our ancestors – the people John’s writing to, and those long before and long after that – would have known a longer, deeper darkness than we ever experience. They would have experienced the return of light as what made it possible for them to see and navigate the world around them, to know themselves and each other, and to play, work, learn, and discover. That’s who Jesus, the Word-Made-Flesh, is... nothing will be the same after him. Everything that’s possible – life, and abundant life! – only is so because of him.

This Advent, consider the suggestion of Genesis and John: that “the darkness” is what is, and “the light” is what comes. We are rooted in the first; we await the second. Our lives find meaning through them both.



Questions to Discuss

What do you notice in the night?

When have you relied on light shining in the darkness?

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Going Deeper

What do you imagine in the darkness? Does your imagination work differently there than it does in the light?

What are some consequences of thinking about “light” and “dark” as in competition with one another?

In what ways might darkness be a place of possibility?

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WEEK **TWO**

REFLECTION



Scripture: Matthew 1:18b-24a and Luke 1:26b-38

Matthew 1:18b-24a

When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

Luke 1:26b-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Then the angel departed from her.



WEEK TWO Reflection

Have you ever had a dream that seemed real?

I still remember a recurring dream I had as a kid: An older cousin was driving all of us kids somewhere fun – I don't remember the destination, but we were excited, and the roof of the car was piled high with luggage. On our way out of town, we stopped at a gas station, and while my cousin was filling the tank, the rest of us went inside to get snacks. Inside, there was a dragon, and a crowd, and an over-the-aisles game of volleyball with a colorful beach ball bouncing through the air.

As we watched, we saw that everyone who touched the ball became part of the dragon's body – the dragon kept growing longer and longer. It seemed friendly, but we weren't sure we wanted to join the game. At that point, my cousin came into the station, saw the ball flying toward him, reached up a hand to knock it back – and I woke up.

I had that dream often, and I always woke up at just that moment, unsure of whether my cousin was still human or if he'd become part of this fantastical gas station creature.

On some level, I was convinced it couldn't be real. But it felt real enough I always tried to fall back asleep, to see what happened, to find out where my cousin – who, in the waking world, lived six states away – really was.



Dreams feel real, some psychologists suggest, because they are real. Which is to say, our minds are always working on stuff. The questions we try to work out during the day – by talking about them with friends, making lists of pros and cons, or reading expert advice – those are the same questions our brains are still trying to work out at night, when we sleep. And they do that nighttime work in dreams.

I don't know what questions my mind was working out with that dragon dream. But sometimes, the correlations between what fills our minds during the day and what takes up space in our imaginations at night are more obvious. This is what the scripture tells us about Joseph: he had a question – what to do about Mary's pregnancy? – and then he made a plan, and, "just when he had resolved to do this," he was visited by the angel. That is, just when he'd worked it all out by the light of day, the dark of night brought him new insight.

But can we trust what happens in the dark? Joseph's dream is about as wild as mine was. Mary being pregnant by the Holy Spirit, with a child that will save all people? That sounds, if not too good to be true, at least too strange...

But Joseph trusts it. He wakes up and he acts on what he has learned from his dream. The nighttime gave him both new understanding of what was happening and new courage to act on that understanding. It's almost as if, because a dark night, a dream, is a setting in which nothing can be fully known, it's also a setting in which anything might be possible.

I wonder if Joseph trusts this wild possibility because he's part of a tradition in which God speaks to people in dreams and visions – and says some pretty unbelievable things. God tells Miriam and Aaron and Moses, "Those of you who are called to be prophets know that I make myself known to you in visions; I speak to you in dreams."² God takes Abraham out to look up at the night sky and promises him that his people will be countless, like those twinkling stars.³

And maybe it helped that Mary also had a visitor, an angel who came to her and told her basically the same message: that her baby was from God, and that she need not be afraid. Maybe the echoes between those two visits helped Mary and Joseph both to trust in the mysterious messages they received. Maybe knowing they had each other helped them know that what they had seen and heard was from God. And it was real.

² Numbers 12:6.

³ Genesis 15:5.





Questions to Discuss

Have you ever had a dream that felt “real,” or that stayed with you even after you woke up? Tell that story.

How do you make the transition from night to day, from sleeping to waking? Are there certain rituals or activities you do? Share about what you do, and why.

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Going Deeper

Has a dream, or vision, or voice you couldn't quite explain ever helped you figure out a question you've had? How so?

How do you decide what voices, or visions, or ideas to trust?

Where in your life do you need to hear God's urging to not be afraid?

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WEEK **THREE**

REFLECTION



Scripture: Luke 2:2-14

This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

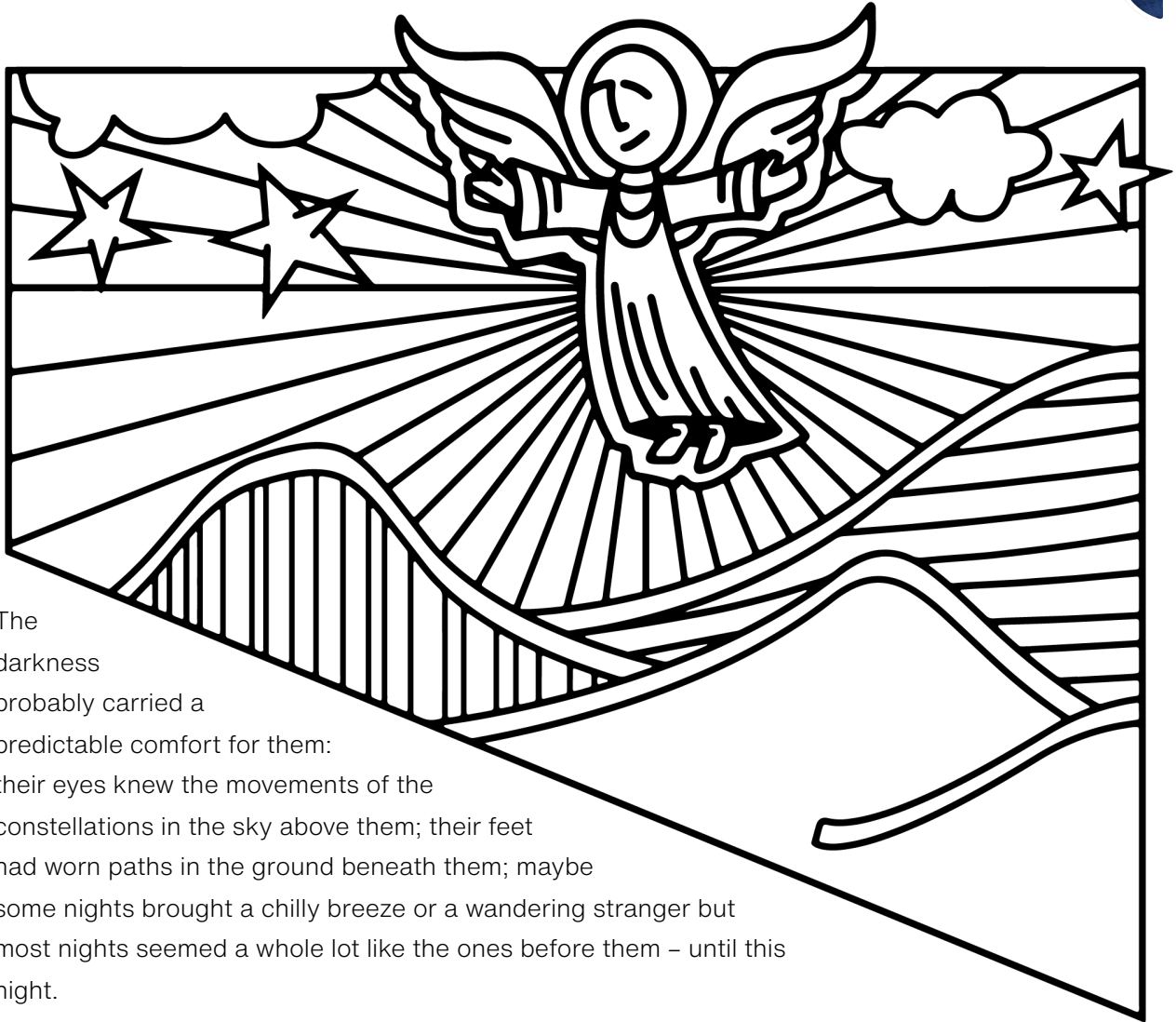
In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!”

WEEK THREE Reflection

Sometimes the skies surprise us. Maybe a fluffy white cloud, looking convincingly like a dinosaur, drifts across a blue sky. Maybe a shooting star flashes across a still dark night, leaving a trail of light lasting only long enough for us to remember we can make a wish, then disappearing before we've been able to think of what we should wish for.

I remember sitting outside on a lakeshore two summers ago with some friends waiting for the solar eclipse to begin. We listened for animal sounds, because we'd heard animals follow the cues from natural light, or darkness. Sure enough, when the moon passed in front of the sun for that brief time and the world grew dark, things got quiet – as though the animal kingdom was bedding down – and when the sun began to reappear barely minutes later, the birdsong and the squirrel rustling around started back up again, too! There are things we expect from the natural world; patterns our minds and bodies grow accustomed to, and when those expectations are unmet – or challenged – it can delight us, confound us, or sometimes even terrify us.

That's what happened to the shepherds. They were out in their fields, under a vast night sky, one they'd looked up into thousands of nights before this one.



The darkness probably carried a predictable comfort for them: their eyes knew the movements of the constellations in the sky above them; their feet had worn paths in the ground beneath them; maybe some nights brought a chilly breeze or a wandering stranger but most nights seemed a whole lot like the ones before them – until this night.

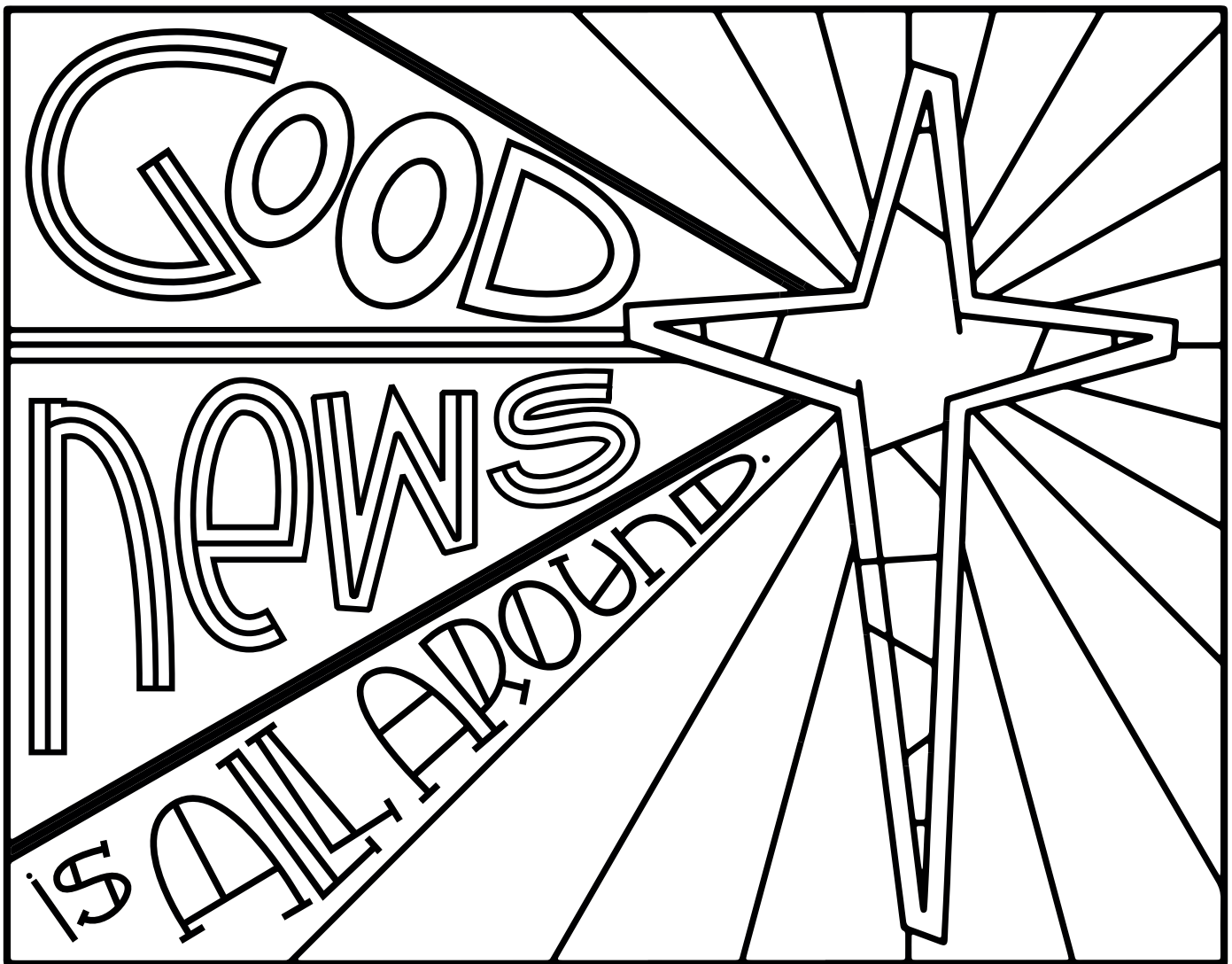
On this night, light pierced the darkness – “the glory of the Lord shone around them” – and it terrified them. It was unexpected; it was unnerving; it was intense. And they became the next ones to receive the message now forming our Advent refrain - “Do not be afraid.” All the characters with major roles in this story are visited at some point and told not to be afraid. Joseph heard it in his dream; Mary heard it in her vision. Now the shepherds hear it out in their fields. For those of us familiar with this story, the frequency with which this refrain, “do not be afraid,” is repeated is an invitation to wonder: is this a scary story? Like, if I didn’t know that this was going to end well, would I be trembling throughout, like all the characters seem to be?

And every time the angels tell their listeners not to be afraid, the accompanying message is the same: things are not what they seem. Joseph worries Mary’s pregnancy is a sign of her unfaithfulness to him; the angel tells him it’s a sign of her blessing from God. Mary fears the angel’s presence, uncertain why she’d be visited by God’s messenger and imagining it to be nothing good; the angel reassures her it’s a sign of favor, of God’s delight in her.



The shepherds cover when the light floods their field that night; they're quickly reassured this intrusion is a friendly one, that the angel brings "good news of great joy!" And the angel announces not so far away, under that same dark sky, a baby was born who would be the Savior – a baby who would one day, we know from other stories, come to be called the Light of the World; a Savior whose love, like Rilke's "dark" in the poem from Week One, embraces everything.

"Things are not what they seem" is news that can be comforting or unsettling, wonderful or terrible, depending, of course, on how things seem. But in a world where we've come to so easily associate light and dark with good and bad, it can be important to remind ourselves God shows up in everything: the dark night cradles the baby Jesus; the light piercing it displays God's glory; the shepherds are invited to witness all of it. Good news is all around.





Questions to Discuss

Is the story of Jesus' birth a scary story? Explain your answer.

Has darkness ever been a predictable comfort for you? How so?



Going Deeper

Imagine you were among the shepherds in the field this night. What would you have been thinking or feeling – first at the burst of light, then at the angel’s announcement, then at the invitation to go and find this baby? Would you have been trying to convince your friends to follow this good news, or would you have needed to be convinced yourself?

When has something not met your expectations and delighted you? Confounded you? Terrified you? How have you known God’s presence in that?

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WEEK **FOUR** REFLECTION



Scripture: Luke 2:15-20

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

WEEK FOUR Reflection

In a small town at the beach in North Carolina – and probably in other places, too – there’s a rule about porch lights. Actually, the rule is: no porch lights. For those people lucky enough to live or vacation with the Atlantic Ocean as their backyard, this is the deal they make with their surroundings – to not introduce artificial light at night. This means if they want to go walking on the beach at midnight, they have to find their way by moonlight. Sometimes, when I’ve walked there at night, I’ve gotten brief glimpses of ghost crabs scurrying away from my approaching footfall, and I’ve wondered what else it is I’m not seeing, what’s hidden where the moonbeams aren’t falling...

The rule exists to protect sea turtles who come ashore to lay eggs and find their way back to their watery home by the light of the moon. When other lights are introduced into their environment, the turtles can become confused, disoriented, lost – and find themselves in danger, dehydrated, and far from the waves they’d thought they were heading towards.

I wonder about the shepherds, making their way towards Bethlehem after the angel’s invitation. How disoriented might they have been – by the light that broke through their sleepy night sky, by the vision of angels before them, by the announcement God was bringing good news and they were invited to be a part of it? Did the darkness seem even deeper when the light withdrew? Did they rub their eyes with their fists when the angels disappeared? Did circles of light remain in their vision after the encounter with the angels, like what happens if you accidentally look at the sun and then look away?

Whatever adjustments it took, the shepherds fared better than turtles do after a new light is introduced into their night sky. The shepherds don’t have any trouble making up their mind to travel across the dark land; they seem to make their way through it, and to the Light the angels had proclaimed, quickly and easily.



Which makes me wonder – were the night-shift shepherds the first ones invited to visit because they were used to darkness and could traverse it confidently? Their eyes were trained for that environment; they trusted the world at night and themselves in it.





Barbara Brown Taylor, in *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, writes about her first experience exploring a cave that hadn't been outfitted with lights for tourists. She thought about the cave's natural dwellers: bears who come to hibernate and give birth, bats and frogs who come for the cooler temperatures, raccoons and skunks who come to duck in, out of harsh weather.

But why were she and her friend there? Why do people choose to make their way through darkness? "That's harder to say," she admits. "We come to see what is here and to discover who we are in the presence of what we find."⁴

Could that have been what the shepherds were after, too? Night after night under that wide sky, they probably had a sense of perspective, of how they fit in the world. But when the angels come with their news – and call it good, and say that it's for everyone – it's an invitation to set out and see what is there, and to discover who they are in the presence of what they find.



And this is about more than just the shepherds. When they arrive, they tell Mary and Joseph and the baby all that the angels told them. Then the shepherds leave, rejoicing. They've become carriers, bearers of God's good news, and witnesses to it. Mary stays, pondering. She's been a bearer of that news in her own way, and now she's a recipient of others' rejoicing over it. Everyone becomes someone new through this encounter, birthed in the darkness, proclaimed in the light.



⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, pg. 119.



Questions to Discuss

What do you think the shepherds talked about on their way to Bethlehem? What might they have been wondering about, or looking forward to, or fearful of?

What are the emotions you carry when you set out on a journey?



Going Deeper

Have you ever gone somewhere – just down the street or far from home – that gave you new perspective on who you are? Tell about it.

How is Jesus' birth "good news" for the shepherds? How is it "good news" for everyone?

This Advent, how are you being invited to explore, to discover, to proclaim, to rejoice?

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WEEK **FIVE**

REFLECTION



Scripture: John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 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.

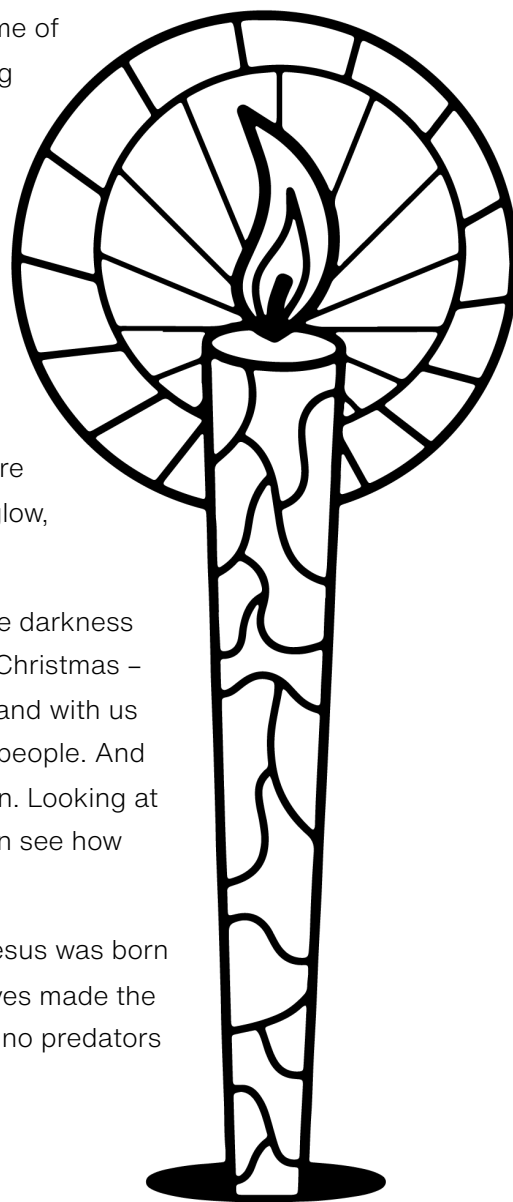
WEEK FIVE Reflection

Every year, the end of the Christmas Eve worship service reminds me of the power of light shining in darkness, and darkness not overcoming it. After the congregation hears the scriptures recounting Jesus's birth and sings the carols celebrating it, we switch the lights off. All we see are the flickering candles of the Advent wreath, five small points of dancing flame in an otherwise dark sanctuary. As the familiar chords of "Silent Night" begin, one person takes the light from the center candle, the Christ candle, and carries it to the congregation. Each person receives the light from the person next to them, until, maybe somewhere near the end of the third verse, somewhere near the "dawn of redeeming grace," tiny lights are flickering throughout the room, and a sea of faces swims in a soft glow, each one illuminated by their own small flame.

It's still dark. But eyes and mouths, tears and smiles, are visible. The darkness continues to hold the mystery and awe of the story we proclaim at Christmas – that God comes, in love, to dwell with and among us, to learn from and with us what it means to be human, to teach us what it means to be God's people. And the light creates spaces in which each of us can be seen and known. Looking at the faces around me, held by the darkness, shining in the light, I can see how holy each one is.

I think back to that first Christmas. Barbara Brown Taylor tells us Jesus was born in a cave – maybe not the way we usually imagine a stable, but "caves made the best stables in Jesus's day – no wind whistling through the boards, no predators sneaking up on you from behind."⁵

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, pg. 128.





It makes me wonder: Did Mary also labor in that dark cave – a womb, of sorts – and bring forth her baby in that protected space? Was Joseph beside her? Could she see him? Did Joseph cradle the little boy in his arms, carry him out into the crisp air and moonlight, to get a first glimpse of his face? Or had they brought a small oil lamp on their journey? Could they see each other by it, the way we see each other's candlelit faces in a darkened sanctuary on Christmas Eve? How visible were Mary and Joseph's exhaustion and elation to each other? Did the wonder and terror in their eyes – the same in any new parent's eyes – shine in that darkness? What did they see when they first saw the face of Jesus?

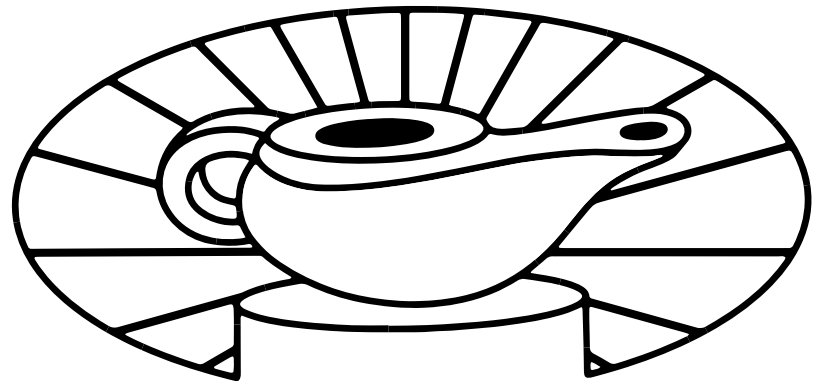
And what do we see when we turn out the lights, or step out into the night, or close our eyes? What do we feel when left with just ourselves, our stories, and the hopes and fears of all the years?

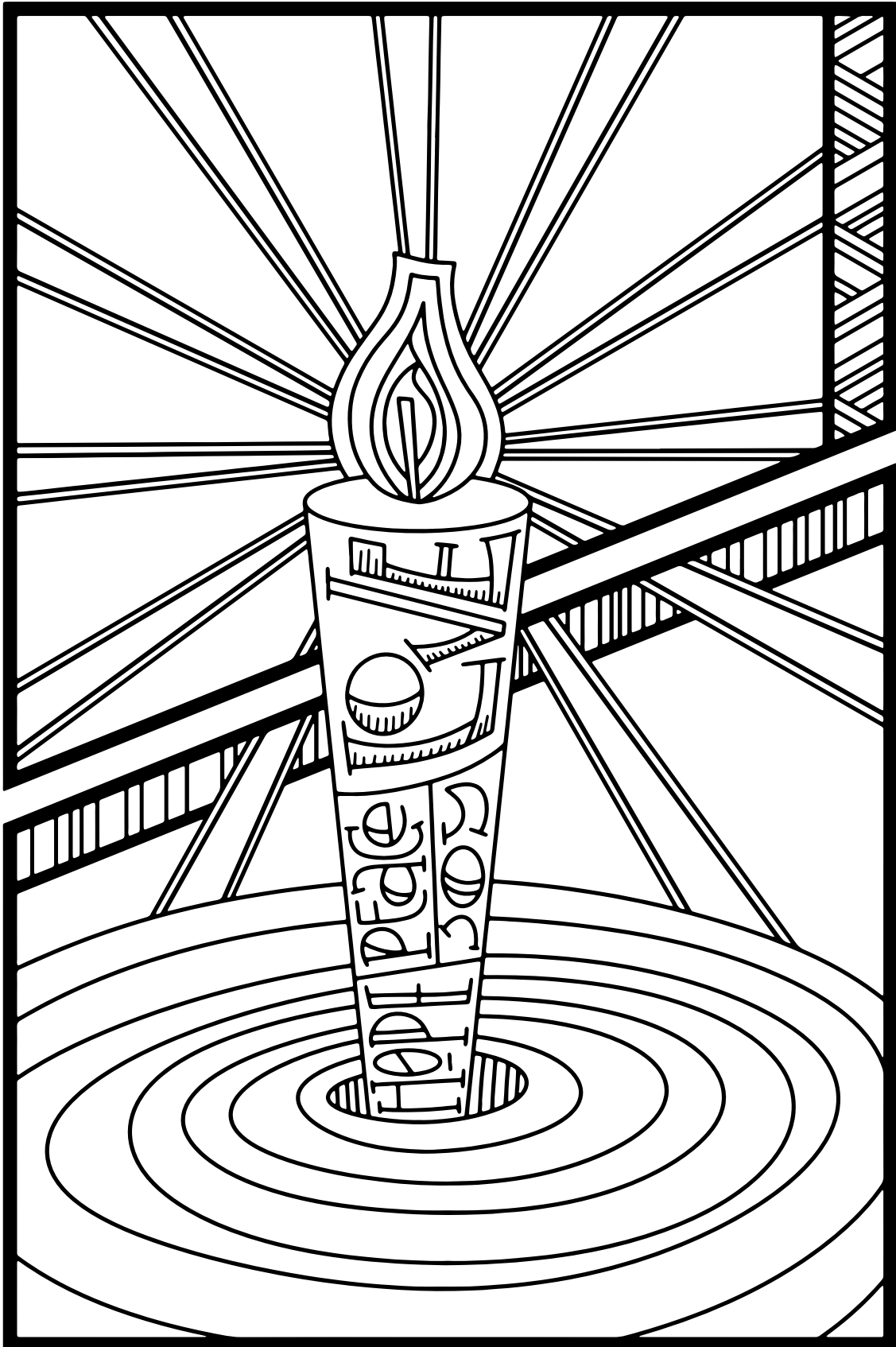
Maybe it's easy for our fears to come rushing back to us in the darkness. So much around us tries

to convince us darkness itself is something to be afraid of – ideas of good and evil, right and wrong, safety and danger, are all conflated with light and dark imagery and language. Heaven is drawn as a place of light; the earth as a place of darkness. Our spirits are imagined as light; our bodies as darkness. Villains in our stories do their work at night; heroes in the daytime. Those depictions can lead us to neglect the earth, to vilify our bodies, to fear the descending night and the people that populate it.

Sometimes our fears are legitimate; sometimes they can serve to protect us. But sometimes they're a response to conditioning, intentional or not, and letting this imagery go unexamined and unchallenged can have profound and harmful consequences for all of us. The creation accounts, the songs of the Psalms, and especially the story of Jesus' birth invite us into a holy, imaginative, redemptive, glorious darkness – just the right setting to hold the shining light, just the right manger to cradle the Light of the World.

Darkness and light are not opposites; they exist in relationship to one another, each finding its definition through the other. The story of God coming among us draws together light and darkness in one holy scene. The Christmas story invites us to rethink everything we thought we knew, presenting both the ancient grounding of the dark and the coming revelation of the light as places where God can be known. This Christmas, which of the gifts offered by darkness and light will you receive? Which will you share?







Questions to Discuss

How are light and darkness part of your Christmas celebrations?

What questions do you have about the first Christmas?

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Going Deeper

Have you ever experienced a moment that felt “holy”? How did light and/or darkness factor into that experience?

In what ways has “light” meant “good” and “darkness” meant “bad” in your experience? In what ways have those associations shaped your understanding? How have you challenged them, or how might you?

What are the hopes and fears you bring to this Christmas, or this season of your life? How might spending time with those – held in the clarity of light or the comfort of darkness – be a gift to your spirit?

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