



Family Devotions
for Advent and Christmas:
Celebrating the Birthday of Jesus –
God's Gift to Us!

by Diana Loach

About the author: Diana Loach grew up in a Presbyterian manse, and happily wonders at God's goodness in calling her to marry into a Presbyterian manse as well. She has been involved in children's ministry for the past three decades, and is passionate that families have quality, straight forward resources to have real conversations about faith matters with their children.

Married to the Rev. Dr. Jeff Loach, and having served on staff in Windsor, and then in Toronto, Diana is honoured to be able to present these original resources for use in your home. Diana's blog is Joyfully Yours.

Dear Parents, Grandparents and Guardians,

These devotions have been prepared to be used anytime between the first Sunday of Advent and the day of Epiphany (January 6th).

They can be part of a family gathering of a couple of hours one day or shorter gatherings on four different days. The birthday celebration will require sufficient time to bake, ice and decorate cupcakes.

You will need:

- Four-part family devotions (on following pages)
- A Bible
- Supplies for a birthday celebration:
 - A cake mix for cupcakes, cupcake papers, and baking tin
 - A candle and matches
 - Package of icing, or ingredients to make icing
 - Optional: sprinkles
 - Optional: streamers, balloons, noise makers
 - A large sheet of paper, coloured markers and coloured pencils

My prayer is that you and your family can celebrate Jesus' birth through the retelling of a story, family discussion time and a fun activity -- who doesn't love making and eating cupcakes!

May you and your family experience the joy of Christmas... of the birth of Jesus... of God-with-us!

Merry Christmas!

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Note: *If your family will be using these four devotions in one day, then you might want to mix and bake the cupcakes after the first one, decorate them after the second, and celebrate the birthday after the third. If the devotions will be done on separate days, then you could choose when to prepare and decorate the cupcakes, e.g. perhaps prior to the third devotions and enjoying them afterward.*

1. The birth of Jesus

Read together Luke 2:1-7.

In order for important things to happen, we usually put time and effort into preparing; there are things we do in advance. What are some things you and your family have done to prepare for Christmas this year?

Even God prepares. God sent an angel to speak to Mary. Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem. Then they had to find a place to stay. Because the inn was full, they settled themselves in a stable, a place where farm animals were kept. Mary gave birth to Jesus there and laid him to sleep in a manger.

Why do you think that getting prepared is important?

Perhaps it's important because...

- ...we want to be ready and not miss out on anything.
- ...we want to be certain that we have everything we need.
- ...we want to get everything right for those we care about.

What other reasons can you think of?

Sometimes it takes a really long time to prepare. For example,

- A baby needs nine months to grow inside a woman's womb
- Preparing bread dough and baking bread can take all day
- God took hundreds and hundreds of years to have everything in place for Jesus to be born

Invite older family members to talk about preparations that took place before the arrival into the family of each of the younger family members.

God wants us to know how much God loves us; God wants everything to be just right for us. God wants Jesus' birth to be a sign to all people that God is with us and in the world for everyone.

Pray: Thank you God, for seeing that all the preparations for Jesus' birth happened. Thank you for setting the example of actively, patiently waiting and preparing; and for showing us how much you love us. Amen.

2. The shepherds and the angels

Read together Luke 2:8-14.

The shepherds in the fields were doing what they were supposed to be doing: looking after their sheep. Then an angel appeared with light shining around them. Imagine the shepherds' surprise! Imagine an angel showing up right now with you and your family, and telling you some really big news! How would you react?

We know how the shepherds reacted: they were afraid, really afraid. What kinds of things make you afraid? What makes you feel better and safer? Who helps you feel safe?

The angel told them not to be afraid but to hear the good news about the birth of a special child, the long-awaited and hoped for Messiah, who would save people from fear and harm.

What exciting news for the shepherds! Like so many people they knew, they were longing for God to send someone to lead them, care for them, free them from troubles so they could live in peace. This is a longing that many of us have today. But at Christmas we remember that Jesus has come. Jesus comforts us and protects us and saves us.

Jesus' birth was not a secret; the angel did not whisper the news and the shepherds were not told to be quiet about it. In fact, the angel was suddenly joined by a whole choir of angels praising God and speaking of peace.

And Jesus' birth is not a secret today. All around the world people like you and your family celebrate the birth of this special child, God's gift to us, born to lead and care for you and everyone worldwide.

Pray: God, what a great way to announce Jesus' birth! An angel joined by many, many more angels, speaking and singing to shepherds in the field – shepherds who were living their ordinary lives, caring for their sheep. Thank you for showing us that this great news is for everyone. Thank you for the gift of Jesus, the baby born to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. Amen.

3. The shepherds visit Jesus

Read together Luke 2:15-18.

Think about a time when you were told about something that was very exciting – perhaps something was happening at a friend's place or someone special was in your town, somewhere on the main street. How did you feel and what did you want to do?

The shepherds learned about the birth of Jesus from the angel, who was then joined by something like a choir of angels. After this experience ended, the shepherds decided to go to Bethlehem. They wanted to see the baby for themselves.

When the shepherds found the family in Bethlehem, they told Mary and Joseph – and anyone else who was listening – about their experience with the angels. Imagine the retelling of this story! Who else do you think had come to the stable or was walking by? Describe the scene and the celebrating that may have happened there with Mary and Joseph and the shepherds. Maybe it was like a party!

The Bible doesn't tell us any more about the shepherds or what they did, except that they went home feeling very grateful to God and saying lots of good things about God. Who do you think they spoke to? What do you think they said about their experiences with the angels and with Jesus and his parents?

Good news is just too good to keep to ourselves! The birth of Jesus was good news for the shepherds and is good news for us. What do you want to say about the birth of Jesus? Who would you like to tell?

Pray: Lord, this Christmas, help us be like the shepherds. They were so excited about Jesus' birth that they had to go find him and his parents, to see for themselves; they had to retell their story of the angels. Let us show our excitement and tell others about this amazing story, and about your amazing love for us all. Amen.

4. Mary treasures the shepherds' story

Read together Luke 2:18-20.

Sometimes things happen – special things with special people – and we like to remember them over and over again. We like to picture what happened; we like to review the details of who said what to whom, and we like to understand how it all came about. What are some of your best memories of especially good times?

After all the excitement after Jesus' birth, Mary kept thinking about what had happened: the shepherds had told about the angel appearing telling them about the birth of a special baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem; and then a choir of angels sang! The Bible says Mary "treasured" everyone's words and "pondered" them in her heart. What do you think that means?

We draw hearts when we want an image for the word "love" or when we want to emphasize that we love someone. The heart symbolizes our deepest emotion of caring for another person, of our love for someone. On a large sheet of paper, have family members draw some hearts and others print names or draw images of people whom you love deeply.

In the Old Testament section of the Bible, there are many times when a prophet urged people to think about their memories – to remember God, and God's love for them, and God's fair way of living. After Moses spoke the words of the Ten Commandments, he asked people to obey and to remember by putting the words in their heart (Deuteronomy 11:18). Invite an older family member to look up and read aloud Deuteronomy 6:4-6. Have one person write on the page, "Love God with all your heart."

Loving the world so much, God gave the world Jesus. Jesus' life began as a baby in Bethlehem; he grew up to teach and heal and show how to love each other; he died on a cross in Jerusalem; then God raised Jesus from the dead, showing us how great God's love is. Invite a family member to look up and read aloud John 3:16 in the New Testament. May Jesus be your most treasured gift this Christmas!

Pray: God, what a gift of love you gave to the world with the birth of Jesus! The shepherds celebrated in their own way, by going to find and see and share the news. And we celebrate Jesus' birthday our own way with cupcakes and decorations. But, what else will we do? We wonder how we can say "thank you"? We wonder what gift we can give? *What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part; yet what I can, I give him - give my heart.** Amen

(*The italicized words are from the last verse of "In the Bleak Midwinter" #145 in the Book of Praise, written by English poet Christina Rossetti.)