

[BLANK][PRAYER] Rejoice! Rejoice! Jesus is being born. The reason for the season, Jesus, is being born, again, as we celebrate Christmas, again, in our homes, and in our hearts. What a wonderful day to feast on the newborn love of God, in our world! What a wonderful day to just sit back, and to be in awe of the love that comes to us when we think of Jesus, Son of God, coming into the world as a baby. In spite of everything today that threatens to kill Christmas spirit - wars, injustice, greed, violence in our streets and homes, loss of faith - Jesus, the reason for the season, still gives us hope that makes us speechless.

Rejoice! Rejoice! The word “rejoice” is so familiar to us, but maybe not. It means to experience joy again. We had joy, once. Now, it comes to us again. Joy is a sweet, sweet feeling. Joy is happiness beyond all happiness. Joy is freedom, after getting freedom seemed impossible. Joy is a gift that we never thought we would get, a gift that comes to us bigger and better than our wildest dreams. Joy is amazing. But to re-joyce, to claim our joy again, after we thought that it was gone, forever - that is the sweetest, most amazing feeling of all, Amen? Rejoice! Jesus is coming! Jesus is here!

We are rejoicing in our home, in spite of everything that might make us not want to rejoice. Death has been a heavy presence in our family this year. And yet, quietly, one day, my wife announced that she wanted me to buy a Christmas tree again, and to bring down the boxes of ornaments from the attic, again, and to trim the tree, again, as we have for so many years. We started as usual: [TREE1] first, with Christmas bear, and Christmas mouse, our very first Christmas ornaments, from forty years ago. [ANGEL] Then, comes our angel, our first ornament from when we were first married, made of painted paper and cardboard. She is playing music, [ANGELS] as are the angels that follow her to Jesus. [ANIMALS] There are many ornaments of animals, some reminding us of journeys to places like Maine, and Texas, and ornaments with a reflecting star, like my mother would put on our Christmas trees. [ORNAMENT] There are ornaments to remind us of my wife’s family, [TEAMS] and ornaments to remind us of our favorite baseball teams. [BIRDS] And there are lighted bird ornaments, from many years ago, which remind us of our love for the birds that we watch and listen to. [BLANK]

All of these, and more, connect our family to moments of joy in our lives. Christmas gives us permission to remember our moments of joy, to reclaim our joy, and to reconnect our joy to the reason for the season - Jesus, the greatest gift of God to all of Creation. [TREE] When we finish decorating the tree, and turn on the lights, the joy of Christmas today, and the joy of Christmas through all of our lives, lights up, and humbles us.

Rejoice! Rejoice! We are allowed at Christmas to let our hearts melt like a chocolate candy, and to experience the breadth, and depth, and height, and strength of God’s power of love in Jesus. All of a sudden, God doesn’t seem so far away from us. [BABY] All of a sudden, in the form of a baby, defenseless against the world, as we were as babies, without privileges or worldly power of any kind, just the breath of his lungs and the beat of his heart, God is really with us, really like us, and we are really like God,

sharing a human birth with God, having a mother, like God, a life on this earth, like God.

God did not beam Jesus down to us, fully grown, like in a science fiction story. To be us, God had to become us the way that we all become us, so that we could believe that God's reclaimed joy on earth could come to us, too. God's original joy, in making all of Creation, starts to be reclaimed for all of Creation, when we see that we were born just like Jesus. With the baby Jesus, we can believe that we are children of God, because in Jesus, God, too, was a child, born like we were, innocent, like we were, pure, like we were, full of new possibilities, like we were.

[BLANK] Rejoice! Rejoice! Mary, the mother of God, our Lord, Jesus Christ, shows us how to rejoice at Christmas. As much as Christmas is about Jesus, the story itself centers on Mary, a very young woman, who was visited by God's Holy Spirit, and became a mother, by the hand of God. We celebrate Christmas to honor Jesus, but without Mary, there would not be a Christmas to celebrate. God, the Creator, needed a willing partner on earth to enter earth as any other person would. [BIRTH]

Rejoice! Rejoice! Mary experienced God's joy inside of her, and coming out of her, as she rejoiced in the coming of Jesus with God. Mary, a scandal to her husband, her family, and her town, because of her strange pregnancy, as poor as could be, with no privileges to speak of, was called upon by God to become privileged like no other person in human history. Mary, the first disciple of Jesus, before Jesus was ever born, bowed to the God who would become a new life in her, and said to her God, "I will be your servant, according to your will." She served God through the humiliation of her scandal. She served God through the heartbreak of her poverty. She served God through the oppression of the Romans, who forced her and Joseph to travel far from their home, while her birth labor began. She served God in the lowly comfort of a stable for a place to give birth, with a manger, an eating trough for animals, as her newborn child's crib. She endured the pain of a first-time young mother, giving birth to the miracle of a new life, and a new presence of God in earth.

[BABY] And when Mary's baby came, it was a beautiful baby, as all new babies are. Jesus cried, like any baby. Jesus feasted on his mother's milk, like any baby. Jesus was wrapped in swaddling, to comfort him, like any baby. And, like any baby, the mystery and the miracle of God in Creation being just like us, but not exactly like us, was there for Mary to hold, and to behold. In the amazingly pure eyes of a baby, in the amazingly innocent hands of a baby, we can imagine, again, that pure joy is really possible, again, that life can really be new, again.

[STARS] Rejoice! Rejoice! Every birth is a mystery and a miracle from God, bringing into the world the stuff from which God made the heavens and the earth, billions of years ago, as a new, living, breathing person, starting the story of life again, fresh, pure, innocent, filled perfectly with all of God's possibilities, no matter what our circumstances. Every child, born of a woman, unites us, as people, with this perfect and eternal story of God. Every child is born into God's potential for perfect hope, perfect love, perfect joy, peace. Yet, on our own, we always fall short of making our stories perfect ourselves.

Because, after all, we are not God. [BLANK]

And this is the reason for the reason for the season. The reason for the season is Jesus. The reason for the reason for the season is salvation through Jesus. God needed to show us the way to God's saving love in Jesus as only God can, and to show us how to share and to grow that way with other people, who try to become children of God with us, day by day, together. The baby Jesus, lying in a manger, is God's perfect promise that becoming a child of God is possible, because God has already done it as us, with us, and for us. We can reclaim God's perfect joy, born on that first Christmas day, through faith in Jesus Christ. We can be like Jesus, because Jesus is already like us.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Reclaim the joy that was your life at the moment of your birth, and become new, all over again, again and again, through faith in Jesus Christ. Let it start in simple and humble ways. Let the warmth and light of Christmas love into your hearts. Pause for a moment in front of your Christmas tree, or whatever you use to transform your home at Christmas, and let the possibilities of a newborn child, Jesus of Nazareth, enter your life. Dare your heart to actually bow your knees before that child, our savior, in thanks for Jesus coming into our world, and for giving us the reason for the reason for the season. Celebrate your Christmas feast not just as a good time with family, but as a feast to rejoice in the coming of Jesus.

Our Advent journey is ending. We have explored our travel kit, filled with tools to open the gifts of faith. On our journey ahead, we will continue to reflect, refresh, restore, and rejoice, as we grow our faith, together. But for now, as the Christ child enters our world again, reclaim the joy of God coming into the world again, in the form of a new life, Jesus, our savior, who will, through faith, restore our new life. Rejoice! Rejoice! It is what God wants us to do, always. And on Christmas, may we do it, with all of our hearts, and be glad, and at peace. Merry Christmas! Amen.