

NAMING JESUS

.....
A FAMILY-FRIENDLY
ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



INTRODUCTION



There's so much in a name. Ask an expectant parent choosing names for their unborn child. Ask a trans person working to live into their true self. At our house, we recently read a book in which a number of the protagonists had nicknames they preferred to be called; you could tell who was a villain and who was not by whether they went by their given names or by the names they chose.

Names matter, especially the ones we claim (or earn!) for ourselves. For Christians, nobody has more names and titles than Jesus, and during the season of Advent, we use as many of them as we can. We call them out in the middle of the night, like a child calling for their parent after a dream, like a lover searching for their beloved. By every name we can think of – some tender, some silly, some confusing, some magnificent – we invoke God's love made flesh and invite that love more fully into the world.

And then, on Christmas, Jesus comes bearing gifts: new names for us, the ones who so longed for him that we went searching with a whole litany of names on our lips.

For each of the four weeks of Advent (from the Latin for "coming" or "arrival"), we'll give you a practice to try, inspired by scripture and based on some of the names people have given to – or discovered for – Jesus over the years. Then we'll offer a few small things you might do together throughout the week to bring a little more meaning and mystery to your Christmas preparations and celebrations, plus a few fun "anytime" activities to do along the way.

This Advent, we hope you and your family will join us in some holy name calling – the names we give Jesus and the names he gives to us.

WEEK ONE

HOPE



LIGHT

One candle

SLEUTH AND READ

The "O Antiphons," in Latin, are:

- SAPIENTIA
- ADONAI
- RADIX JESSE
- CLAVIS DAVID
- ORIENS
- REX GENTIUM
- EMMANUEL

Break out your phone or turn on your computer and do a little online research. Find the meaning of each Latin word (hint: they're also in "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"), and find the Bible passage they come from. From what you know and believe, are these good names for Jesus? Why or why not?

HOLY NAME CALLING

THE "O ANTIPHONS"

Heaven knows there are lots of Christmassy songs playing on the radio, in the grocery store, and rolling around in your head right now! One that you won't hear too many places except church is "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Each verse calls Jesus by a different name. They come from the seven great "O Antiphons," a series of responses

One way or another, they're all names for the salvation that the most vulnerable people of Jesus' day hoped for; giving these titles to Jesus makes clear that he's the fulfillment of all those hopes. So, sing a song of hope fulfilled this Advent. Find a copy of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," and try singing every single verse, quiet at the beginning, and at the top of your lungs by the end.

PRAY

Have each person choose their favorite "O Antiphon" name for Jesus and pray a prayer of longing for this Advent season. For example, "O Wisdom from on high, come and help me see how to get through _____."

Or, "O Key of David, come and unlock _____."

You get the idea!

A NOTE FOR CONSPIRACY THEORISTS AND WORD NERDS:

If you take the first letter of each of the "O Antiphons" in Latin and read them backwards, you get the Latin words "Ero cras." Loosely translated, this means, "Tomorrow, I come." This almost certainly wasn't intentional – or was it? Who knows! But here's what we do know: it's perfect for Advent, and it sure is fun!

FOR PARENTS:

These particular names aren't the most exciting for many kids. "Key of David?" "Root of Jesse?" "King of the Gentiles?" Snore!

Consider talking about them in terms kids can relate to and understand. What hidden levels or abilities can the "Key of David" unlock? What does dawn feel like after a long dark night, and why does the "Dayspring" matter? Or maybe talk in ecological terms about chopping down the "Tree of Jesse," and what it means that a new shoot will spring forth from it...



THIS WEEK



- o Sing along to “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” at least two more times this week. Do you hear anything different in the song now that you’ve done a little research?
- o Early in the week, have everyone give Jesus at least two new names (they can be silly or serious, earnest or ironic – but make sure you have a reason you think they’re true!). Put all the new names in a bowl, and each night before dinner, draw one out. Ask the person who gave the name to explain why they chose it, and then use that name to address Jesus in your table grace.
- o Many parents had nicknames for their kids that they gave them before they were even born. What were yours? What are the names that only the people in your family call each other? Why?



MINIMALIST (ISH) GIFT GIVING

- o Something you want
- o Something you need
- o Something to wear
- o Something to read
- o Something used
- o Something made
- o Something to do
- o Something to play



WEEK TWO

PEACE

LIGHT

Two candles

READ

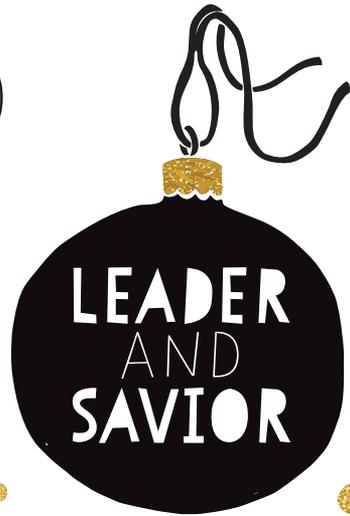
God exalted Jesus as **Leader and Savior** that he might give repentance...and forgiveness of sins. + Acts 5:31

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the **Pioneer and Perfecter** of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. + Hebrews 12:1-2*

HOLY NAME CALLING

LEADER, SAVIOR, PIONEER, PERFECTER

The word that's usually translated "leader" above actually means something more like, "instigator." For Christians, Jesus the one who starts it all, blazes the way for us to follow (pioneer), figures out the best ways to do stuff (perfecter), and rescues us when it all goes sideways (savior). So much of the trouble in our lives comes from all the ways we insist on going our own way, making our own path, figuring out everything on our own. There's nothing inherently wrong with that, and sometimes it's very good. But if you were to find a little peace in laying down your relentless individualism once in a while and knowing that somebody else is ultimately in charge, you wouldn't be the first!



PRAY

Come, Instigator. Come, Savior. Come, Pioneer.
Come, Perfecter. Be Our Guest. Amen.



THIS WEEK

- o Instigate a plan to show God's love for the world. Bake some cookies to give away to the neighbors, find a place to donate toys for kids in need, write letters or emails on behalf of a vulnerable population, find a way to support a local domestic violence shelter or transitional housing.
- o Perfect a tradition. Think of a thing your family always does around Christmas time: decorating, setting up a nativity scene, making special foods, DIY crafts as presents. How can you perfect it a little more this year by making it more loving, more generous, more faithful, or more beautiful, for Jesus' sake?
- o Call each other some names this week. Who in your house is the instigator – of trouble, of fun, of schemes and plans? Who's the pioneer, trying out new ideas and new ways of doing things? Who's the perfecter, helping get everything just right? Who's the savior, swooping in to help right when it's needed most?

ANYTIME: LOOK IT UP

Do an online search for, "Litany of the Most Holy Names of Jesus" and read your way through it.

Ask each other: What's your favorite name on the list? What's the weirdest? What's the most beautiful? What's the most poetic? And which one do you like the least ("King of the Patriarchs," anyone?)?

WEEK THREE

JOY

LIGHT

Three candles

READ

*Again, Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the **Light of the World**. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."* + John 8:12

*Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was, **I am**.* + John 8:54-59

HOLY NAME CALLING



LIGHT OF THE WORLD, I AM

In these two passages, Jesus gives himself new names (or at least, names new to his hearers). First he claims to be Light itself, the first thing God created back when the world was formless and void, the thing that allows us to perceive all other things. Saying you're the first thing ever is a pretty big claim to make, but Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on to basically claim he's God. "I AM" is a name that God reveals back in the book of Exodus. Any Jew listening would have understood just what Jesus meant when he called himself "I AM" – and probably would have been shocked to hear it. It usually doesn't go well when people give themselves their own "big-deal nicknames." What would happen if you started telling people to call you "GOAT (Greatest of All Times)," or "Top Dog", or "Boss," or "Kingpin" – never mind "God"! But Jesus does nothing by halves. He claims he's not only the one who makes it possible for you to know the world, but that he is existence itself. Without him, you wouldn't know anything; without him, we wouldn't even exist.

PRAY

Light of the world, great I AM, thank you for existence.
Thank you for letting us perceive all you've made. Amen.



THIS WEEK

- o Play around with light and dark. Sit in quiet darkness together for a while, appreciating the stillness. Wonder if this was what it was like when Jesus was in the womb. Imagine if this was all there ever was. Turn on a small flashlight or penlight. What's revealed by a little light? Now turn all the lights on. What can you see now that you couldn't see before? What do you think Jesus reveals about life that we might not have known without him?
- o Does the Jesus story (God coming as a vulnerable little baby; growing up as an outsider committed to showing forth God's love, hope, peace, equality, and justice; having a soft spot in his heart for marginalized people; becoming a victim of violence, dying at the hand of an empire; and rising again with love and forgiveness on his lips), help you "see" better what's happening in the world today? Why, or why not?
- o Talk about existence. Parents, tell your kids what it was like before they existed. Tell them how glad you are that they're here now, and why. What do you thank God for about each of them? Spouses or partners, what were you missing before the other came into your life? What do you give thanks for about them?
- o Pink Candle Week: This week is all about joy, and its color is pink! Have fun with it! List all the names for pink you can think of (fuschia, salmon, hot pink, etc.). Buy pink flowers for your home, eat pink donuts after church, paint your nails pink, make pink snowflakes and hang them from your bedroom ceilings. And do it all with great joy and anticipation of God coming into the world with a soft spot on his head and Mary's milk on his breath!



BONUS NAMES

Advocate
1 John 2:1

Carpenter
Mark 6:3

Immanuel
Isaiah 7:14

Alpha and Omega
Revelation 1:8

Cornerstone
Ephesians 2:20

Indescribable Gift
2 Corinthians 9:15

Amen
Revelation 3:14

Foundation
1 Corinthians 3:11

Lamb of God
John 1:29

Beloved
Luke 3:22

Friend of Tax Collectors
Matthew 11:19

Messiah
Luke 2:11

Bread of Life
John 6:35

Gate for the Sheep
John 10:7

Bright Morning Star
Revelation 22:16

Good Shepherd
John 10:11



ANYTIME: UNREHEARSED CRECHE PAGEANT



Gather all the figures from your Nativity scene; if you don't have one, draw or print up an online paper doll version. Put all of the characters into a bag or pillow case and take turns drawing them out one by one (if yours are too fragile, write their names on slips of paper and draw those out of the bag). As you draw each character, tell her or his part in the story as best you can (feel free to embellish!), then place them in the "stable." Don't forget to include some of the inanimate "characters" like the star, the manger, the stable, the gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and so on. If you're not sure why something is included or what one of the characters did, feel free to look it up!

WEEK FOUR LOVE

LIGHT

Four candles

READ

*For a child has been given for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and the child will be named: **Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Parent, Prince of Peace.** + Isaiah 9:6*

*In the beginning was the **Word**, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. + John 1:1*



HOLY NAME CALLING

WONDER COUNSELOR, THE WORD

In the translation of Isaiah above, the predicted Messiah is called "Wonderful Counselor." There's an older translation that calls the Messiah, "Wonder Counselor," which we like better, for reasons of poetry, if not accuracy.

A "Wonder Counselor" is not only wonderful as a counselor, but she or he also counsels wonders. Gives advice that makes our jaws drop. Recommends we marvel at the world. Counsels us to fall in love not only with that which is easy to love – easy commitments, lovable people – but also that which is difficult to love: narrow paths, enemies, forgiveness.





If we look closely at Jesus, we can see both how he counsels wonder and how he is also the Word, the one who ordered and created and spoke the world into being. "Look!" he says. "Look at how glorious the world is, the stars and planets, the animals and plants, the way it all works together. Look how wonderful you are, in all your parts and all your self. Look how wonderful even your enemies are." The baby that the shepherds and magi and star lined up to love would grow up to spend his life pointing to the wonders of the world, both interior and exterior, and inviting people to love it back to life.

PRAY

Word of the World, Wonder Counselor, help us to see the glory of life, and to honor it whenever we see it. Amen.

ANYTIME: NAME ORNAMENTS

Make and decorate Christmas ornaments with as many names of Jesus as you can come up with. Print out stars or Christmas bulbs or little red and green hearts onto heavy paper, cut them out, write a name of Jesus on each one – as many as you can remember – decorate, and hang. Or do the same thing, but with the links of a paper chain. Don't forget to include your own names in the list; Jesus lives in you, too!



THIS WEEK

- o The name, "Jesus" means "God saves." Look up the meanings of everyone's names in among your family and friends. How do they (or how don't they) reflect their names in their personalities?
- o Go for a walk together. Notice as hard as you can. Whenever you see something wonderful – snow, light, darkness, smells, sights, sounds, the feel of the hand you're holding – take a second and point it out. Wonder together what Jesus would say if he were on the walk with you. What would he have you do with it, to care for it or protect it or correct it or change it or love it?
- o It's almost Christmas, and the pressure is probably ramping up to get stuff done. If you're rushing around like crazy, force yourself to stop and take in, really take in, the beauty and wonder of the Christmas story. Spend 20 minutes sitting in front of your Christmas tree, or reading a Gospel of Jesus' birth, or just sitting and listening to some music. Breathe. Wonder.

CHRISTMAS EVE OR DAY

LIGHT

Four candles in a ring, and a fifth in the center for Jesus

READ

"You are the Light of the World."
+ Matthew 5:14



HOLY NAME CALLING

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

LIGHT OF
THE WORLD



The name “Christian” literally means “little Christ.” Followers of Jesus become little Jesuses. Worshipers of our God become – or discover that they have always been – little Godlings themselves. This is the essence of Jesus’s message: what I am, you can be too. What God is, you are, at least a little. In this spirit and during this time of gift-giving, Jesus gives you a brand-new identity, and a brand-new name to go with it. Jesus is the light of the world, and now you are, too. You might not be as big or as bright, but you’re plenty shiny enough to illuminate everything around you. That’s why so many churches end their Christmas Eve service by singing “Silent Night” while everybody holds candles. It’s lovely, sure, but more importantly, it reminds you that it’s not just God – not just those big candles up front – that the world depends on for light. It depends on you. It depends on all of us.

SING

Whether or not your church is meeting in person on Christmas Eve, celebrating at home and recreating the best part of the service is always fun (and magical!). Light a big candle and give smaller candles (even birthday candles will do – heck, they may be the most appropriate of all!) to everyone in the room. Turn off the lights. Then pass the light around the room, singing at least three verses of “Silent Night” together as you marvel at the beauty of the light that each of you has inside!



- *Silent night, holy night*
- *All is calm, all is bright*
- *'Round yon virgin Mother and Child*
- *Holy infant so tender and mild*
- *Sleep in heavenly peace (repeat).*
- *Silent night, holy night!*
- *Shepherds quake at the sight!*
- *Glories stream from heaven afar;*
- *Heavenly hosts sing Al-le-lu-ia!*
- *Christ the Savior is born (repeat)!*
- *Silent night, holy night*
- *Child of God, love's pure light*
- *Radiant beams from Thy holy face*
- *With the dawn of redeeming grace*
- *Jesus, Lord at Thy birth (repeat).*

PRAY

You are the shiniest star, the breaking of the dawn, the brightest and best. Thank you for making me shiny and bright, too. Help us all to light up the world. Amen.

THIS WEEK

- o Make a cake for Jesus' birthday, with his name(s) spelled out on top. Cake topper idea: make a mini-manger with tiny twigs you collect outside. And while you're at it (or while you eat it!), talk about what it was like for Jesus when he came into the world.
- o Bring a little brightness into someone's world this week. Play with your sibling, call your grandparents without being told, send a thank-you card to the staff at the local hospital, shovel a neighbor's front walk. Whatever you choose, let your little Godling light shine!
- o Tell each member of your household or family one way that they make your life brighter. If it's too embarrassing to say it out loud, write it down on a piece of paper, pop it into a bowl, and read them one by one during dinner – or on Christmas morning!

ANYTIME: CHRISTMAS SONG FAMILY KARAOKE!

Write down three (or more!) of your favorite Christmas songs (hymns, pop songs, kids songs, anything goes!) on three slips of paper and put them in a bowl, a hat, or up on the tree. Agree that everyone in the family is going to sing and dance along, no matter how they feel about the song – even (and especially!) if they hate it.

Draw a song, queue it up, and party! Do them all in one sitting, over the course of several nights, once a week, or whatever makes your Christmas the merriest yet!



CONCLUSION

Well, there it is. We call Jesus by a million names, and he answers. Doesn't it make you wonder what other names he answers to, in other places we know nothing about? And what about those new names he gave us when he got here? Don't they make you wonder what other names you'll be answering to one day?

In the meantime, keep calling him by the names you know best: Friend, Lord, Savior, Liberator, Healer, Gentle Shepherd, Bright Morning Star. But don't forget to try out a new name for him once in a while, too: Pattern of Patience, Courage of Martyrs, Joy of Angels. And while you're at it, don't forget to look in the mirror once in a while and practice some of your new names: O Light of the World, O Salt of the Earth, O Welcomed and Accepted, O Fragrance of Jesus, O Beloved Child of God!



ADVENT & CHRISTMAS EVENTS

