



# ADVENT IN THE VALLEY

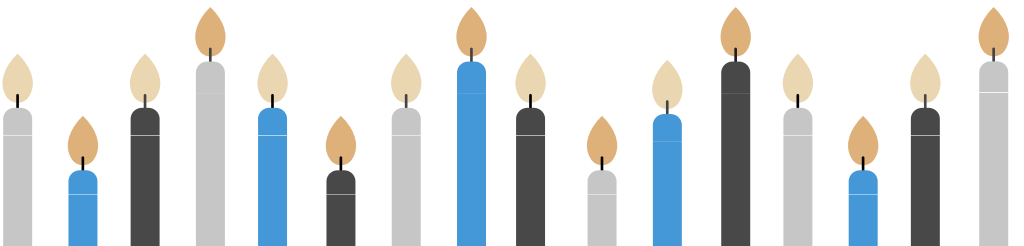
## WEEK 4: LOVE

As we begin, we light the first, second, third, and fourth Advent candles and say,

**Jesus Christ is the light of the world.  
A light no darkness can extinguish.**

Today we light the fourth candle, the candle for Love. It reminds us that Jesus is love and brings love to our lives, and asks us to love God, love ourselves, and love our neighbours.

Let us pray,  
Christ our Light,  
Illumine our hearts with your grace.  
Enlarge our vision so that we recognize  
that we are one family with all the people of the world.  
Help us to give to others  
in ways that meet their deepest needs.  
We await your coming with gratitude.  
Amen.



*"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way..."  
Matthew 1:18a*

### Week Four Reflections from Rev. Matthew Brown

I think we often forget how scary it all must have been. And I mean scary!

Christmas time, after all, is such a warm and fuzzy time of year, with colourfully lit trees, Hallmark movies, and so many heartfelt renditions of Silent Night sung around rip-roaring fires, complete with roasted chestnuts! Hope, peace, joy, and love - that is the true meaning of Christmas, right?

And yet, this certainly wasn't the spirit of the first Christmas. This week we hear in Matthew's gospel that Joseph, being a "righteous man," plans to dismiss Mary quietly, "unwilling to expose her to public disgrace." Or in other words, Joseph was unwilling to expose his would-be wife to the prospect of being completely ostracized by her patriarchal bedouin community, and left utterly destitute because she found herself pregnant out of wedlock. Mary may well have been at risk of being buried up to the neck and stoned to death given the egregiousness of her "offence." Not exactly the stuff that Hallmark Christmas specials are made of.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. A treacherous journey made by two humble peasants to register for a census imposed by a powerful foreign occupier. Morning sickness (otherwise known as "all the time" sickness) raging for Mary throughout it all. A frightened teenage mother giving birth in a dirty stable filled with sheep manure, no food, and certainly no doctors, nurses or an epidural. The first Christmas was certainly not a pretty picture.

But isn't that the point? Isn't that the grace of Christmas? God doesn't only sanctify the parts of our lives that look like pretty Hallmark greeting cards. God doesn't just stand around with us when all is calm and all is bright and join us in the singing of Silent Night. At Christmas, we remember that God in Christ chooses to put on human flesh in all of its fullness, with all of its messiness, frailties and vulnerabilities. God chooses to be our Emmanuel: "God with us," through thick and thin. Through the body of a tiny peasant boy born in Bethlehem, God affirms that the human condition is in no way beneath the dignity of the same heavenly creator who once addressed a dark and formless void and said, "Let their be light." At Christmas, God's heart, and the human heart, resoundingly beat as one. Now that my friends is a Christmas present!

#### *Questions for further reflection:*

1. Think about one of the most difficult times in your life. Looking back now, can you identify some of the ways that God was journeying with you at that time?
2. Are there parts of your life right now that are "messy," or that you hope will soon change? Where might God be with you now, in the midst of it all?
3. If God is committed to redeeming your messy humanity, then God is equally committed to redeeming the messy humanity of others — and invites us all to help do the same. As we approach Christmas, where in your life might you be called to be more loving and forgiving towards others; or towards yourself?