

Preparing for a Christ-Centered Christmas at Church and at Home

(Excerpts from *Good Tidings of Great Joy* by Eric D. Huntsman; Deseret Book)

The first Sunday in December marks the advent of the Christmas season, the time of anticipation and joy—and also an opportunity for thoughtful reflection. Through the music and messages of Christmas we feel again the familiar impressions of good will towards others, the excitement of serving and giving, and the hope that comes from knowing the extent of God’s love for us.

The themes of hope, love, joy, and peace that come through Jesus Christ, accord nicely with the major messages of Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2. A fifth theme, the salvation that comes through Christ, is a reflection on the prophecies in the Book of Mormon.

These five themes could be used on the Sundays leading up to and after Christmas to help those gathered at church or at home to prepare themselves for worship, to help celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world at his birth, to focus on his presence in their lives *now*, and to look forward to his glorious return in the future.

Theme #1: Hope in Jesus Christ

The Christmas story recalls the birth of the Promised King, an event prophesied and hoped for from the time of Adam until that first Christmas. An example of this hope is reflected in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus as well as in the angel’s message to Joseph, promising the birth of Immanuel, or “God with us.” But the celebration of hope does not just help us remember Jesus’ first coming. It can also celebrate his presence and importance in our lives *now* while also helping us look forward to his Second Coming.

Scriptures: Isaiah 61:1-2; Jacob 4:4-5; Romans 5:1-5; Moroni 7:41; 1 Thess. 4:16-17

Hymn: #203 “Angels We Have Heard on High”

Special Music: “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”

Theme #2: The Love of Jesus Christ

Love, which is one of the greatest of all the gifts of God, underlies the entire story of Jesus’ birth, sacrifice, and Resurrection, because God so loved the world that he sent his Only Begotten son (see 1 Nephi 11:22; John 3:16-17). This love was not only manifest at Jesus’ birth and through his atoning sacrifice; it can and should be present in our lives *now*, and it will fill the world with his return when he establishes his millennial reign, ruling with love as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Scriptures: Isaiah 49:13-16; 1 Nephi 11:14-22; John 3:16-17; Moroni 4:47-48

Hymns: #202 “O Come, All Ye Faithful”; #187 “God Loved Us, So He Sent His Son”

Special Music: “O Holy Night” (Truly He taught us to love one another / His law is love and His gospel is peace.)

Theme #3: Joy in Jesus Christ

Luke's account of the Savior's birth, complete with the angel's annunciation of "good tidings of great joy," provides one of the most joyful scenes in scripture, reminding us that the Christmas message is one of happiness and rejoicing. But we must also remember that Jesus came into the world foremost as a sacrifice. Nevertheless, the sorrow of Christ's suffering and death is blotted out as we triumph in his Resurrection, and we anticipate the return of Jesus in his Second Coming with joy.

Scriptures: Isaiah 12:2-5; Mosiah 3:3-4; John 16:20-22

Hymn: #201 "Joy to the World"

Special Music: "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring"; "The Holly and the Ivy"

Theme #4: Peace in Jesus Christ

The joyful message of both Christmas and Easter is that we can have peace in this life *now*, regardless of the earthly circumstances in which we might find ourselves. Through Jesus Christ, we can be reconciled to God, having peace of conscience and the quiet, strengthening support of his Spirit in times of trouble and heartache. Once we are at peace with God, we can then work, heart by heart, at being at peace with those around us.

Scriptures: Isaiah 11:1-4, 6-10; Mosiah 15:18-20; John 14:27

Hymn: #207 "It Came upon the Midnight Clear"

Special Music: "What Shall We Give to the Babe in the Manger?"; "In the Bleak Midwinter"; "Coventry Carol"

Theme #5: Salvation in Jesus Christ

The true Light has come into the world to usher in the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah 31:31-34. The Lord himself referred to this covenant at the Last Supper when he said that the sacrament represented his "blood of the new testament [or "covenant"], which is shed for many" (Mark 14:24). He thus made possible the blessings and promises of the "new and everlasting covenant" mentioned throughout latter-day revelation, whereby we are promised all that God has if we have faith in Christ and make sacred covenants of our own in his name.

Scriptures: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 118:24-25, 23-29; Isaiah 49:6; Mosiah 3:17

Hymn: #196 "Jesus, Once of Humble Birth"

Special Music: "I Come unto My Own" by Newell Dayley (a setting of a Book of Mormon passage for Christmas: 3 Nephi 1-13-14)