

2023

A D V E N T & C H R I S T M A S
D E V O T I O N A L

God
With
Us





DAILY DEVOTIONAL
Advent & Christmas 2023

GOD WITH US

WHAT IS ADVENT?

The great proclamation “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14) assures us that God has entered into human history through the incarnation of the Son. The season of Advent, a season of waiting, is designed to cultivate our awareness of God’s actions — past, present, and future. In Advent we hear the prophecies of the Messiah’s coming as addressed to us — people who wait for the second coming. In Advent we heighten our anticipation for the ultimate fulfillment of all Old Testament promises, when the wolf will lie down with the lamb, death will be swallowed up, and every tear will be wiped away. In this way Advent highlights for us the larger story of God’s redemptive plan.

A deliberate tension must be built into our practice of the Advent season. Christ has come, and yet not all things have reached completion. While we remember Israel’s waiting and hoping and we give thanks for Christ’s birth, we also anticipate his second coming at the end of time. For this reason, Advent began as a penitential season, a time for discipline and intentional repentance in the confident expectation and hope of Christ’s coming again.

The Advent season includes the four Sundays preceding Christmas. Worship on these Sundays should be designed to help people see the tension between celebrating and hoping.¹

¹ *Adapted and reprinted by permission from The Worship Sourcebook, Second Edition, © 2013, Faith Alive Christian Resources.*

USING THIS DEVOTIONAL RESOURCE

The purpose of this guide is to give our Capital Pres Family a supplemental resource for mid-week worship and discipleship during the 2023 Advent & Christmas season. The content follows our sermon series theme: “God with Us,” which will help us see that God is with us whatever we are going through.

The birth of Jesus, our Immanuel, testifies that God is truly with us in the midst of the brokenness of the world and the brokenness of our lives. The big story of the Bible is of God pursuing greater intimacy with his people. It’s a story of God restoring all that was lost in Eden, culminating in the new heavens and earth. These pages are written to remind us of this big story – God’s plan of saving the world through Jesus, our Immanuel (God with us).

Feel free to use these materials with your personal devotions, family worship, Community Group, or other gatherings. Each of the four weeks in December will focus on one theme of how God is with us in our wandering, worship, worries, and weakness. For each week, there is one devotional reflection written by a member of our Capital Pres Family. There are six daily Scripture readings related to the weekly theme, and we’ve provided a Call to Worship, song suggestions, prayers, and questions for group discussion and personal reflection to be used as they are helpful in your daily devotional time.

As we walk through these weeks of Advent & Christmas, it’s my prayer that we’ll truly experience God’s presence with us together as we glorify and enjoy him for who he is, for what he’s done for us, and what he’s promised to do.

Grace and peace,
Dr. Jeff Vogan
Director of Worship

TIPS FOR FAMILY DEVOTIONALS

If you are working through this devotional as a family, here are some ways you can get everyone involved:

1. Give each person responsibility: let one person read the Call to Worship, another pray, another choose a song from the “God with Us” playlist, another read the Scripture... you get the idea. Make this time participative.
2. As you listen to a song together from the playlist, encourage kids to move as they feel led! God is with us in our wiggles, so let them wiggle!
3. Draw or use some other artistic medium to create symbols. Kids are often visual learners. As a family, draw a picture or make an art project related to the Scripture story for that day. Be creative!
4. Take time to explain more difficult concepts, but don’t be concerned that everyone has to understand everything. We are all learning and growing in our faith, no matter our age. If we each have one “take-away” per day, that’s great!
5. Set a regular time. It’s best to have a set time to do this devotional every day. Whether at the start of the day before everyone begins their work, or at the dinner table, strive to be consistent in doing this devotional together.

WEEK 1: GOD WITH US IN OUR WANDERING

DECEMBER 3 - 9

DEVOTIONAL REFLECTION ON EXODUS 13:17-22

by Mike Quinn, Ruling Elder

After God delivered the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage, he led them through the wilderness with his visible presence in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire. Our first impression of this situation could be that the Israelites had it made! They were secure and protected because of the actual visible presence of God. Clearly God was with them even in their time of uncertainty and wandering. I wonder, might you be in a similar place and time in your life?

Throughout history, the idea of “wilderness” has represented the unknown, uncertainty, and even the threat of death, but the “wilderness” can also serve as an opportunity for exploration, discovery, and the testing of our faith. I’m sure the Israelites experienced their wilderness wandering with lots of challenging emotions and thoughts. Their faith was tested, and that testing even tempted them to consider returning to their former life of slavery.

What does the “wilderness” mean for you? Does it bring a sense of adventure and discovery, or perhaps apprehension and fear? Is your wilderness challenge physical, emotional, spiritual, or personal? And in those challenging times of wilderness and wandering, do you believe that God, our Immanuel, is with you, always?

Ever since I was a young boy, I’ve always felt the outdoor wilderness calling me to a life of exploration and adventure, from a forest of cedar and oak to the promised land of the stream close by. In my early wanderings I would follow the game trails to this flowing water that provided hours of exploration and curiosity. Like any young child, I would get lost. Yet, I always knew that my father would eventually come find me. I didn’t realize it at the time, but in those earthly childhood rescues, I was experiencing the love of our true heavenly Father who comes to rescue and lead us. I’ve continued a life of exploration to this day: from working in the mineral-rich forests of Alaska as a geologist to running my Land Cruiser in the Appalachian mountains of Virginia. The outdoor wilderness calls me to return and continues to bring joy, adventure, and a place where I experience God’s presence.

Recently, I’ve found myself in a new kind of wilderness exploring life with cancer, for a second time. I thought I had navigated this terrain before and had arrived at the promised land of being cancer-free. This is a wilderness I never planned to revisit. Cancer, and any serious illness, brings many questions. People, degreed or novice, bring you “answers” and terrain maps to lead you through and potentially out of this wilderness of illness. Yet, only one question really matters: is God with us?

David Powlison, in his book, *When Cancer Interrupts*, states, “Remember that God himself is with you. He will strengthen you and give you courage. He will clarify your thinking. He will advise you about things far more important than cancer. He will settle you in your true identity. God is an actual person. He willingly comes to you.” John 14:18 reminds us, “I will not leave you...I will come to you.” In this season of Advent, rest in this assurance. I am.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Psalms 67:1-5

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
that your way may be known on earth,
your saving power among all nations.
Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you!
Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.
Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you!

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION

God of all wisdom, you call us out of the darkness
and confusion of sin into your glorious light. Help
us to understand the meaning of your word and
guide us as we go about our days, that we might live
according to your perfect counsel. This we pray in
Jesus' name. Amen.

DAILY READING

MONDAY *Exodus 13:17-22*

TUESDAY *Psalms 23*

WEDNESDAY *Isaiah 40*

THURSDAY *Lamentations 3:19-33*

FRIDAY *Hebrews 11:1-12:2*

SATURDAY *Matthew 4:1-11*

PRAYER OF RESPONSE

An Advent Prayer by Henri J.M. Nouwen, from The Lord is Near

Lord Jesus, Master of both the light and the
darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our
preparations for Christmas. We who have so much
to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day.
We who are anxious over many things look forward
to your coming among us. We who are blessed in
so many ways long for the complete joy of your
kingdom. We whose hearts are heavy seek the
joy of your presence. We are your people, walking
in darkness, yet seeking the light. To you we say,
"Come, Lord Jesus!"

QUESTIONS FOR DAILY REFLECTION

- Was there a time you felt lost or unsure of the future? In that time, did you experience God's presence, guidance, or comfort? If so, how did God show that he was near to you in that situation?
- What have you learned about God in your own wilderness or wanderings?
- In today's reading, what have you learned about who God is, what he has done, or what he has promised to do?
- In response to today's reading, how can you glorify and enjoy God in your life?

QUESTIONS FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

- Think about a time that you got scared. How did your parents comfort you? Brainstorm ways that God shows comfort to you.
- Have you ever been scared about the future or a big change? Did you feel that God was with you when you were scared? How do you feel that God is near?
- Do you remember a time when life was crazy or difficult? How did you see God's faithfulness through it all?

SONGS

Use the QR code to access our Capital Pres Family Advent playlist, and queue these songs this week:

- "Emmanuel (Glory in the Highest)"
- "King of Kings"
- "I Wonder as I Wander"
- "Noel"
- "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"
- "O Sing a Song of Bethlehem"



WEEK 2: GOD WITH US IN OUR WORSHIP

DECEMBER 10 - 16

DEVOTIONAL REFLECTION ON EXODUS 40:16-38

by Christy Danner, Associate Director of Worship & Arts

Detail. Order. Directions. Do this first, use these materials, put this here, put that there... The opening verses of this passage read an awful lot like a user manual or handbook. Moses followed very precise instructions when it came to constructing and ordering the tabernacle. What are we to take away from this passage? God cares about the details? God is particular about his house? We must follow rules in order to have access to God?

Countless theologians have studied and provided helpful explanations for why it truly was important for Moses to follow God's instructions so closely. But I'd argue the most important takeaway for us is not in the actions listed in verses 16-33 but in the extraordinary encounter with the presence of God in verses 34-38: "The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle....For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys." The God of all creation was present with his people. He made his dwelling place among them.

Who is this God who dwells with his people? He is the Lord seated on his heavenly throne, high and lifted up in glory, deserving of endless praise and worship (Isaiah 6:1-3). He is the rock of our salvation, a great King above all gods, the Lord over all of creation (Psalm 95:1-5). He is our light, our salvation, our only true stronghold when our world gives way and those closest to us fail us (Ps. 27:1, 3, 10). He is compassionate, caring, healing all of our pain and wiping away our tears (Revelation 21:4).

Who are God's people? People who vow to follow God in one moment and turn to worship a golden calf crafted by their own hands in the next. A people who beg God for help in their suffering and turn away from him as soon as things are going well. A people of unclean lips and hands who deserve nothing but rejection and abandonment. I don't know about you, but when I look in the mirror, that is the kind of person I see. An unfaithful, inconsistent, fickle follower of God who deserves nothing but his rejection.

And yet, God made his dwelling among such people. He made a way for us to see him, know him, be loved by him, become like him. The God of glory whose presence filled the tabernacle loved his fickle people so fiercely that he was willing to become tiny in a manger, gruesome in death, and glorious in resurrection so that we could be with him for eternity.

That should change our worship into something more than completing a list of instructions. May our worship instead be a transformative encounter with our extraordinary and loving Immanuel, God with us, who is ever present with us not only in worship, but throughout all our journeys for all of our days.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Isaiah 2:3, 5

Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.
O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION

Inspired by Hebrews 1:1-4

Mighty and merciful Father, you have spoken to us
by your Son, whom you appointed the heir of all
things and through whom you created the world.
Christ, you are the radiance of the glory of God
and the exact imprint of his nature, and you uphold
the universe by the word of your power. By your
Spirit, show us your glory through these words of
Scripture. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

DAILY READING

MONDAY *Exodus 40:16-38*

TUESDAY *Isaiah 6:1-8*

WEDNESDAY *Psalms 95:1-7*

THURSDAY *Exodus 24*

FRIDAY *Psalms 27*

SATURDAY *Revelation 21:1-7, 22-27*

PRAYER OF RESPONSE

Faithful God, we wait for you to come. We know that
you will because you already have and because you
promised to return. While we wait, send your Spirit
so that we may worship you and grow in grace.
Prepare us for your coming, Lord. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR DAILY REFLECTION

- Was there a time you experienced God's presence in worship? If so, how did God show that he was near to you at that time?
- What have you learned about God in worship?
- In today's reading, what have you learned about who God is, what he has done, or what he has promised to do?
- In response to today's reading, how can you glorify and enjoy God in your life?

QUESTIONS FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

- Pick a song to listen to from the Advent playlist. What words are used to describe God? Make a list of all the words you find.
- All life is worship! What are different ways that we can worship and give the glory and thanks back to God? How do you see that God is with you in all of life?

SONGS

Use the QR code to access our Capital Pres Family Advent playlist, and queue these songs this week:

- "Angels, From the Realms of Glory"
- "Come and Worship"
- "Creation Sings the Father's Song"
- "Emmanuel (Glory in the Highest)"
- "Emmanuel (God with Us Forever)"
- "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"



WEEK 3: GOD WITH US IN OUR WORRIES

DECEMBER 17 - 23

DEVOTIONAL REFLECTION ON DANIEL 3

by Lauren Shannon, Board of Women, Capital Pres Reston

I am an expert worrier, and it often feels like I make no progress in my battle with anxiety. Sometimes, it is potent and all-consuming. Other times, it hums in the background as I go about my day. I know the passages forbidding worry well. Scripture is full of passages commanding God's people to "fear not." For years, I responded to these passages with an inward spiritual eye-roll. Easier said than done. I've often imagined God's displeasure at my failure of trust. A life free from worry often feels like an impossible assignment. Just another thing for me to fail at. I have avoided these passages, feeling like they have failed to help me through difficult times when my mind and heart are consumed with "what ifs" and vivid, imaginary, worst-case scenarios.

When I read about Jesus speaking about caring for the sparrows (Matthew 10), I often respond with cynicism. That's nice, but a sparrow's life is much less complicated than mine. These passages can seem naive; sparrows die all the time. I've often wondered why God would promise well-being and safety when Christians starve, die, hurt, and grieve over the same events as everyone else. God says he protects his people, but he also allows unspeakable pain into our lives.

It's only recently that I have considered that these passages might not only refer to God preventing hardship but being sovereignly present with us no matter what happens. Sparrows die, but only with God's oversight. In Daniel 3, three men find themselves in a true worst-case scenario. If we imagine ourselves in the position of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, standing in front of an enormous oven, feeling its heat from a distance, and watching other people burn to death, the terror is palpable. It's one thing to talk about trust and faith on a good day, but this is a nightmare.

As I think about my tendency to worry, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's complete submission to the authority of God has been a challenge and a comfort. When threatened with this horrific death if they do not worship Nebuchadnezzar's idol, they reply: "God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand...But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." They believe in the ultimate power of God and trust in his mysterious providence. God can rescue them, but even if he allows the worst, they will remain obedient.

God could have rescued these men by dousing the furnace or preventing their entry into it. Instead, he rescues them through a supernatural figure inside the furnace with them. They survive because God is present. God doesn't always protect us from hardship, but he is always with us in trouble. I've tried to remind myself when I am paralyzed by "what ifs" that God will be with me "even if" the worst happens. When he has not rescued me from pain, he has provided richly for me in the midst of it through the church, family, Scripture, counselors, doctors, and mentors. In Matthew 1, Jesus is called Immanuel, "God with us." During this Christmas season, may we remember that when God does not rescue us from struggle, he enters into it with us and has given us everything we need to endure — because he has given us himself.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Psalm 130:5-8

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.
O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.
And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION

Eternal God, we cry out today for a word from you. As our season of discontent approaches the day of your coming, we pray that you would speak to us in the gracious ways that you know best. Open our eyes that have been closed by fear and blinded by self-pity, that we may see you even in the anxieties and uncertainties that beset our days and threaten to overwhelm us like a cloud of darkness. In the name of Jesus Christ, who is the joy of those who are happy and the comfort of those who mourn, we pray. Amen.

DAILY READING

MONDAY *Daniel 3*

TUESDAY *Matthew 6:25-34*

WEDNESDAY *Matthew 10:16-33*

THURSDAY *Romans 8:18-38*

FRIDAY *2 Corinthians 1:3-11*

SATURDAY *Philippians 4:4-9*

PRAYER OF RESPONSE

Inspired by Luke 1:67-80

Blessed are you, God of Israel, for you have visited and redeemed your people. You bring salvation through your Son Jesus and deliver your people from all our enemies. You have shown mercy to us and have remembered your covenant so that we might serve you without fear in holiness and righteousness all our days. By your Spirit, give us ears to hear and hearts to receive the word of peace

you spoke through the mouth of your holy prophets and apostles. We pray this in the name of Jesus, our horn of salvation. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR DAILY REFLECTION

- Think of a time you felt worried, fear, persecution, suffering, or pain. Did you experience God drawing near to you in the midst of that situation? If so, how?
- In today's reading, what have you learned about who God is, what he has done, or what he has promised to do?
- What have you learned about God through your own experiences of worry, fear, persecution, suffering, or pain?
- In response to today's reading, how can you glorify and enjoy God in your life?

QUESTIONS FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

- God is with us even when we feel worried, fearful, or pain. When is a time this week that you might experience suffering and can turn to God to comfort?
- When we experience worry and pain, it can help us experience God as a healer. Make a list with your family of characteristics of God we can see during hard times.

SONGS

Use the QR code to access our Capital Pres Family Advent playlist, and queue these songs this week:

- "When Love Came Down"
- "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"
- "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen"
- "He Who is Mighty"
- "In the Bleak Midwinter"
- "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear"



WEEK 4: GOD WITH US IN OUR WEAKNESS

DECEMBER 24 - 30

DEVOTIONAL REFLECTION ON MATTHEW 1:18-25

by Kristen Usher, Board of Women, Capital Pres Fairfax

In the first chapter of Matthew, the apostle quotes the prophet Isaiah, declaring that Jesus shall be called “Immanuel, which means ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:23). To those who first read Matthew’s letter, many had tangible moments to attach to Isaiah’s prophecy. Maybe it was a sunny day on a hillside or a wedding feast or some dusty walks.

Or maybe Matthew’s readers would have remembered a storm-tossed boat (Mark 4:36-41) or a busy village where a young pregnant woman kept getting turned away (Luke 2:1-7). Or maybe contentious dinner parties (Luke 7:36-50) and betrayals (Matt. 26:47-50) and doubt (John 20:24-29).

Those are the moments that I’ve been sitting with lately: the messy and weary and uncomfortable ones. Maybe that’s because these days, I have two small children — one with persistent medical challenges. I work part-time and have all the typical adult responsibilities of bills to pay, inconvenient home repairs, church/school/neighborhood committee meetings, relationships to navigate, and on and on. I spend most days feeling like what I’ve done has fallen short of what was needed, often with a child chiming in to really underscore an area where I’ve missed the mark — the “wrong food” in a lunchbox or tears after I raised my voice in anger. I live in a space that feels worn thin.

Some 800 years before Christ was born, the prophet Amos proclaimed to the Israelites that a day was coming when the Lord would “...send a famine on the land — not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11). A people who’d seen signs and wonders, been delivered from their own foolishness and rebellion time and again were told that they would walk in darkness; in silence. And they did. Until finally, after generations of silence, into the weary, dusty, beaten down path of a people worn thin by listening to silence comes Immanuel. The cry of a baby, with us.

Jesus Christ, very God of very God came to a people who had almost lost hope. He comes to me when I am losing hope. He is with me through his Spirit who comforts me in my many weaknesses, gives me patience when I’m at the end of my rope, and helps me find the words to ask for forgiveness. He is with me through text messages from my Community Group who assure me that I’m not alone, or through another parent’s commiserations in the school parking lot, or a phone call with my mom encouraging me that she sees progress in areas where I feel stuck. And I can look to Christ’s own brief time here on earth — friends and family who don’t quite understand him, or rude interruptions, or false accusations — and see that he is with me because Jesus knows all of these struggles, all of my struggles. And he will never leave nor forsake me (Deuteronomy 31:8). Amen and amen.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his
shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of
peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION

Be near us, Lord Jesus, we ask you to stay close by us forever and love us, we pray. Immanuel, we invite you to draw near and dwell with us. Surround us with your tender, caring presence, that what we say and do in worship might prepare us to live forever with you in heaven. In your powerful name we pray. Amen.

DAILY READING

MONDAY *Matthew 1:18-25*

TUESDAY *John 1:1-18*

WEDNESDAY *Romans 5:1-11*

THURSDAY *2 Corinthians 12:1-10*

FRIDAY *Hebrews 4:14-5:10*

SATURDAY *Isaiah 53*

PRAYER OF RESPONSE

Prayer by Thomas à Kempis

Lord Jesus, we praise and magnify you for voluntarily emptying yourself of your fullness, and for graciously taking upon yourself our weak and degraded nature, capable of suffering and of death, that you might fill us by emptying yourself, might save us by your sufferings, might raise us by your lowliness, might strengthen us by your weakness, and by your death might bring us to a glorious immortality. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR DAILY REFLECTION

- Think of a time you felt weak and even helpless. Did you sense God with you in the midst of that experience? If so, how?
- In today's reading, what have you learned about who God is, what he has done, or what he has promised to do?
- What have you learned about God through your own experiences of weakness?
- In response to today's reading, how can you glorify and enjoy God in your life?

QUESTIONS FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

- When are times that you are helpless and need to ask for help? Who helped you? Did you know that you can always ask God for help? He is always with us!
- What did God promise Mary? What does God promise us today?
- Memorize 2 Corinthians 12:9 with your family this week. When might be a helpful time this week to remember this verse?

SONGS

Use the QR code to access our Capital Pres Family Advent playlist, and queue these songs this week:

- "Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery"
- "Away in a Manger"
- "Behold the Savior"
- "What Child is This"
- "Fullness of Grace"
- "Joy Has Dawned"



 **Capital Pres Family**

MCLEAN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
1020 Balls Hill Road
McLean, VA 22101

CAPITAL PRESBYTERIAN FAIRFAX
9525 Main Street
Fairfax, VA 22031

CAPITAL PRESBYTERIAN RESTON
1545 Dranesville Road
Herndon, VA 20170

mcleanpres.org/christmas

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reston.capitalpres.org/christmas

2023 Advent Schedule

Advent Communion Service

Dec 3 · 7pm · McLean

Live Nativity

Dec 9 · 10am-12pm · McLean, Back Parking Lot

Christmas Choral Concert & Reception

Dec 17 · 7pm · McLean, Sanctuary

Christmas Eve

Dec 24

Each site will have one morning worship service at 10:45am.

Details available online.

FAMILY CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE

McLean · 4pm · Fellowship Hall

Fairfax · 4pm · Stacy C. Sherwood Center

CANDLELIGHT CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICES

McLean · 6pm · Sanctuary and Fellowship Hall

McLean · 8pm · Sanctuary

Fairfax · 6pm · Stacy C. Sherwood Center

Reston · 6pm · Sanctuary

Find details for each site at:
mcleanpres.org/christmas
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