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THE NEVERENDING STORY (2): participate in

BOTTOM LINE: THE CHRISTMAS STORY IS A ONE THAT WE PARTICIPATE IN.

INTRODUCTION: The Christmas story is more than just one we respond to individually, it's one we participate in—and we're not talking bathrobes and kids in sheep costumes. The participation the Christmas story calls for is more earth shaking than a quiet stable and a clear sky with a bright star. This story shook the way the world operates when it started to unfold thousands of years ago. But it has the potential to do the same thing today when we become an active part of it. What would our world look like if we became a part of the vision God has for the world—a vision revealed with the birth of His Son, and rests on us now?



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STATEMENT OF FAITH

ABOUT GOD

God is the one and only true God, yet He exists in three persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. God is the Creator, so everything belongs to Him and is under His control. God is holy, so He is righteous, majestic and loving. God is all knowing and purposeful, so He's at work to bring about His will. No person, thing or idea compares to God.

ABOUT THE SCRIPTURES

God reveals Himself to us through the Bible, and it is 100% accurate, reliable and authoritative.

ABOUT PEOPLE

People are made in God's image and for His pleasure. But everybody falls short of God's intention, or ideal, for people. In other words, everyone has sinned. As a result, we are all separated from Him, even though He wants an intimate relationship with each of us.

ABOUT SALVATION

That's why Jesus, God's Son, came and lived on this earth, died and rose again. God offers His free gift of salvation to all who believe in Jesus and accept Him as Savior, the only way to be forgiven and reconciled to God. Anyone who accepts this gift is adopted as a son or daughter into God's family and will live with Him forever in heaven.

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CREATING THE EXPERIENCE

We believe that the set, stage, music and everything in your room communicates a message—without you saying a word. That's why we put together a list of production ideas to help you set the stage for the session and the series. From the music you play when students come into the room to the worship set your band plays, we want to make sure that your room conveys "The NeverEnding Story" in a multi-sensory way. There is a downloadable checklist available in your series downloads that will give you all the elements for this session (and the entire series).

BACKGROUND PLAYLIST FOR THE NEVERENDING STORY SERIES:

"All I Want For Christmas Is You" by Mariah Carey (from *Merry Christmas*)
"What Christmas Means to Me" by Hanson (from *Snowed In*)
"Last Christmas" by Taylor Swift (from *The Taylor Swift Holiday Collection-EP*)
"White Christmas" by Michael Buble (from *Let It Snow! -EP*)
"Linus and Lucy" by Vince Guaraldi Trio (from *A Boy Named Charlie Brown*)
"Carol of the Bells" by Family Force 5 (from *The Family Force 5 Christmas Pageant*)
"Christmas Must Be Something More" by Taylor Swift (from *The Taylor Swift Holiday Collection-EP*)
"God With Us" by MercyMe (from *All That Is Within Me*)
"Silver Bells" by Relient K (from *Let It Snow Baby ... Let It Reindeer*)
"The Baby" by Family Force 5 (from *The Family Force 5 Christmas Pageant*)
"I Celebrate the Day" from Relient K (from *Let It Snow Baby ... Let It Reindeer*)

WORSHIP PLAYLIST FOR THE NEVERENDING STORY SESSION 2:

"Send Me Out" by Fee (from *Hope Rising*)
"You Are My Creator" by Unhindered (from *Be*)
"With Me" by Chris Tomlin (from *Hello Love*)
"The Stand" by Hillsong United (from *United We Stand*)

THE SET

Feel free to go as "Clark Griswald" as you want. Decorate your room in Christmas decor with trees, tinsel, lights and/or an inflatable snowman—or any inflatable Christmas character for that matter. Hang silver stars from the ceiling. Creating the set for this series would be a great opportunity to enlist some students to help you decorate.

SERIES ART

Art for PowerPoint backgrounds and for series promotional ads is available as a free download with every series. Visit the XP3 web site, log on to your account and download the images to use in your presentation, newsletters and web site.

VIDEO

A video bumper is available for The NeverEnding Story series as a video download from the reThink store. You can purchase the video by logging into your XP3 account and clicking on the "XP3 videos" link. The bumper video was created to be used as an intro for both sessions of The NeverEnding Story series.

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MIDDLE SCHOOL ADAPTATION

The following activities and illustrations will help middle school students connect with the subject matter in ways that engage them physically, mentally, socially and sometimes emotionally.

GAME: GIFT WRAP FRENZY

(Play this game as an icebreaker to Session 2.)

Nothing says Christmas like wrapping paper and gifts. You can either choose a couple of teams of three people each or break your whole group into smaller groups for this game. Each group will need wrapping paper, tape, scissors and bows. One person from each team will be the present to be wrapped. Give each team a time limit of two minutes. The team that best wraps the person wins. You could award candy canes to the winning team.

ILLUSTRATION: MY STORY

(Use the following in teaching point "A" in the APPLICATION section of the teaching script.)

There is something powerful and authentic in hearing a peer share his or her story. Ask a student to share his or her story of how he or she saw a need and responded. Or maybe that person can share about a time when someone responded to a need in their family. Have the student write out their story and make sure they keep it short. Meet with that student the week before Session Two to go over their story and help edit to make it clear and precise. Have them read their story (reading their story helps them feel more comfortable in front of their peers rather than just standing and talking) when it comes time to teach Session 2

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TEACHING SCRIPT

The teaching script is divided into five sections.

INTRODUCTION: This introduction is intended to connect you, the communicator, to the audience usually through a personal story or observation. We've included our stories, but you may want to substitute your own story in this section.

TENSION: The tension moves the message from the "me" mentality of the introduction to a "we" mentality. For example, a transition statement might be, "At some point in our lives, we have all been jealous of someone over something."

TRUTH: Once the tension builds, the next logical step is to uncover the truth of what the Bible says about the topic.

APPLICATION: At this point, the message moves to a "you" mentality in order to teach the application. The "you" is the student. Take God's truth and unpack how it relates to each student so that he or she can apply it to everyday life.

LANDING: Here it is important to land the message on what each student needs to know and do with what they've heard. Just as the message began with a personal story or observation, the message also ends with a "me" mentality. For example, one possible landing statement might be, "I have a greater sense of purpose knowing that God created me in His image." Leave the students with a clear sense of what all of you should do with what you've heard.

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THE NEVERENDING STORY (2): participate in

BOTTOM LINE: THE CHRISTMAS STORY IS A ONE THAT WE PARTICIPATE IN.

TEACHING OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION

The birth of Jesus demanded a response.
Two thousand years later, the presence of God, the arrival of Jesus, still demands a response.

TENSION

Even people who have never set foot inside a church know the reason for Christmas—that we are celebrating the birth of Jesus—but everyone, us included, seems to sort of ignore it when it comes down to it.

In our culture, Christmas is more of an event about who gets what and making sure we are clear when asking for what we want.

The truth is, our experiences with Christmas are more cultural than biblical.

TRUTH

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35 NIV).

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38 NIV).

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers" (Luke 1:46-55 NIV).

In sending His Son, God was doing more than just fulfilling His promise.
He was sending a message: "Once you have responded to Me, will you now participate with Me?"

APPLICATION

God's vision is about making things the way they should be.

The beautiful thing about the Christmas story is that God's vision for the world is still ongoing. It's a story that didn't just happen thousands of years ago—it is still going on, it's never-ending.

We need to focus this year on what we give, on what we are able to offer, on how we are able to participate in God's picture, and not on what we get.

LANDING

Christmas can remain a relic of the past or it can be something more.

We can participate, and we can give.
It's a story that never ends.

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THE NEVERENDING STORY (2): participate in
TEACHING SCRIPT

BOTTOM LINE: THE CHRISTMAS STORY IS A ONE THAT WE PARTICIPATE IN.

INTRODUCTION

A. Last week, we started talking about the Christmas story. Specifically, we looked at Matthew's gospel and got a clearer picture of how God's promise of being with us was fulfilled in Jesus. And then we talked about what that means for us. We said that the Christmas story is a story that is still going on, one that we respond to even today. The birth of Jesus demanded a response—like it did from Herod and the wise men. Not much has changed. Two thousand years later, the presence of God, the arrival of Jesus, still demands a response.

B. This week, we are going to take a look at Luke's Christmas account. Luke isn't telling a different story, but Luke's account of the Christmas story looks a little different from Matthew's. A different theme comes out in Luke's story, one that we don't see in Matthew's gospel, and we are going to take a closer look at that today.

TENSION

A. If we could just forget for a second that we are in church right now, I want you to give me a very non-spiritual, honest answer to this question: What is your favorite part of Christmas? Don't try to impress anyone; just yell the first thing that comes to mind! If we are honest, I think most everyone here would say we enjoy getting presents, right? And if you won't admit it, then I will. My favorite Christmas memories are usually connected to something someone bought me. My favorite Christmas memories have to do with the stuff. The getting. The unwrapping. The piles of things I accumulate in a matter of hours. I know—I'm selfish. I can still remember the exuberance that comes with running down to the tree on Christmas morning to find whatever present I'd asked for. And at the same time, I can still remember the disappointment that comes with not getting what I asked for. Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. It is enough to send you into a post-Christmas funk.

B. Christmas is tricky that way—when we view it through the lens of gifts. These presents have the potential to make or break our holiday. What makes it even more complicated is when you have to overcome the awkwardness that results from having to buy someone else a gift out of obligation. You know what I'm talking about. Maybe, it is that aunt or uncle who gives you a gift every year, one that you are never really that excited about. And as lame as it may be, you feel obligated to buy them something every year too. If you are like me, many of you have found yourself wandering a mall this season going into stores that otherwise would not interest you, stores that are the antithesis of your personal style, but have sucked you in because you are buying a gift out of obligation.

C. It is annoying, but it is all part of Christmas, isn't it? Well, at least the kind of Christmas we celebrate here in America. Even people who have never set foot inside a church know the reason for Christmas—that we are celebrating the birth of Jesus—but everyone, us included, seems to sort of ignore it when it comes down to it. In our culture, Christmas is more of an event about who gets what and making sure we are clear when asking for what we want. It is very likely that the mall in our town is crowded tonight with Christmas shoppers, and it is very unlikely that any of them would tell you they are there because Jesus was born—that they are there because of the story we read in Luke's gospel. The truth is, our experiences with Christmas are more cultural than biblical. Somehow, in the familiar facts of what we know about the Christmas story, we have lost the bigger picture—the significance of what happened. But something deep down tells me God had something bigger in mind for Christmas than pine trees and shopping malls when this story began.

   When we open the Christmas story, we find a story that isn't about what we are going to receive—at least not materially. In Luke we encounter a lot of everyday people—one of whom we are going to look at more closely. Luke tells a story about something unique that God is doing. And the story Luke invites us into is about more than what we have under the tree with our name on it. Luke is going to open our eyes to the bigger picture—a picture that a lot of us could stand to catch a glimpse of as the Christmas season comes upon us.

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THE NEVERENDING STORY (2): participate in
TEACHING SCRIPT

TRUTH

A. Last week we looked at the story of Herod and the wise men, and we saw how once they came into contact with Jesus or learned about this baby, God's Son, they had to make a decision about Him. They had to respond. They couldn't stay where they were once they encountered God—for better, like the wise men, or for worse, like Herod.

Today we are going to take a look at someone whose encounter with God was more intimate and more personal than any other person in history. This week we are looking at Mary's story—from Luke's point of view. Most of us know the basics about Mary whether we have grown up in church or not. We know she is a young girl, probably the age of some of you in here, and unmarried, though pledged to marry a man named Joseph, when she learns she is pregnant. And this wasn't just a typical story of teenage pregnancy. Mary is a virgin, and she doesn't find out she is pregnant by taking the at-home pregnancy test. Mary is visited by an angel and told the news—good news if you are the people of Israel, a little bit more disturbing news if you are an unmarried, adolescent girl claiming to have never had sex.

Luke tells us that the conversation between Mary and the angel Gabriel ended with Gabriel telling Mary this: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35 NIV).* It is a shocking statement, said with certainty and finality. But Mary's response isn't what you might expect. It isn't exactly how you or I would respond if in her position. I don't know about you, but I think the first words I would manage to utter would be something along the lines of, "Wait, what did you just say? And are you a for-real angel?" But Mary says this instead: *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38 NIV).*

This is Mary's first encounter with the Son of God, with the news that God is coming and that He is involving her in His redemption plan. So Mary, like Herod and like the wise men later, has a decision to make. How will she respond to the news of God's arrival? After an encounter with God, what happens next? Mary responds. Mary answers. And she does so by saying she will be the Lord's servant.

B. But what now? What does life look like after responding—for Mary and for us? After deciding we are going to be on board with this God who is with us, who fulfills His promises, what comes next? Well, for Mary, it means she makes some decisions. Responding is not enough. There has to be something more.

And Mary does something more. She responds with a song. Later, when visiting her cousin Elizabeth, who is also pregnant, Mary sings a song of praise to God, and what she sings about is bigger than just the small, humble life she is used to. After having heard the news of God's arrival through her, Mary's personal world gets much bigger.

C. Last week we started talking a little bit about the world as it was when Jesus was born. This was the world Mary lived and existed in. Just to review what we learned from last week and to get a better idea of life in Israel 2,000 years ago, we are going to take another look back. Mary was living smack in the middle of the Roman Empire. Most scholars agree that Rome was an actual empire for nearly 700 years. During that time they acquired land and they acquired people. And the larger they became, the more powerful they became—especially those in leadership. We have all heard the word Caesar—and most likely not just in the context of a salad. Back in the Roman Empire, the man who was Caesar was the man with more rule, influence and authority than anyone else on the planet. To be Caesar was to be considered divine—a literal god. And given how far-reaching the Roman Empire was, and the attitude of indestructibility that they possessed, Caesar saw himself on a throne that was never-ending. The government was forever. The world revolved around Rome. You could even say that Rome, specifically Caesar, was the world's savior, their lord, their messiah.

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THE NEVERENDING STORY (2): participate in
TEACHING SCRIPT

TRUTH (CONTINUED)

D. Those words sound familiar don't they? Like something we have heard before, in church, about Jesus. See, Jesus was born into a time and into an empire that already had a "god"—into a time when titles and designations carried a lot of weight. Remember how Herod was named "king of the Jews," and how threatened he felt when Jesus arrived on the scene as an infant given the same name? Status was important in the Roman Empire, and Mary was living in the midst of a political scene saturated with men who believed they had a divine heritage and the power and influence to run the world as they saw fit. And that meant you played by Rome's rules. That meant you lived by Rome's standards. That meant you worshiped Rome's leaders and all they and their empire represented. You paid their ridiculously high taxes. You followed their strict and trying laws. And you did your best to stay under the radar and not cause a scene. There wasn't room in Rome's system, in Rome's empire, in Rome's world for another Savior. Another Son of God. Another Messiah. There was room for Caesar and Caesar only. And anyone who had anything different to say was putting their life at risk.

E. But Mary, a young, humble, almost common teenage girl living in a cruel and overbearing empire, started to see the world differently once she heard news about the impending birth of the real Messiah. Having understood what God's presence on a planet desperate for His intervention meant, Mary couldn't help erupting in spontaneous praise to God, and rebellion to the Roman empire. Listen to what Luke records of Mary's visit with Elizabeth:

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers" (Luke 1:46-55 NIV).

Keeping in mind what we've learned about the culture at the time, Mary's song is more than just an adolescent girl's emotional outburst. In fact, she is committing treason—a crime against the throne of Rome saying some of the things she does. She calls God the Mighty One—not Caesar. She refers to God as her Savior—a title Rome said only Caesar was entitled to. And then she says something that, had the wrong people overheard, would have surely gotten her killed. Listen again to her song: *"He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble."* What Mary is doing while anticipating the birth of her baby boy, a baby sent by God Himself, is living in open rebellion to a kingdom, an empire that existed to exalt itself and squelch the poor. The lowly. The downtrodden. The underprivileged. People a lot like herself.

Mary and her cousin Elizabeth are more than just giddy friends talking baby talk and sharing pregnancy stories. They are two women who are declaring to one another, and ultimately to the world, that they have a role in a story even bigger than Rome itself. And with the arrival of the baby in Mary's belly, there is something coming that even Caesar can't offer. Hope. Expectation. Promise. For everyone. Not just for the Romans and not just for the rich and not just for the fortunate. But for people like Mary—for people the world would typically look over and look past.

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THE NEVERENDING STORY (2): participate in
TEACHING SCRIPT

TRUTH (CONTINUED)

F. In other words, Mary's song is a political rebellion in the making. But it is also more than that. Mary's song is a song of participation. It is her way of not just responding to God's news; it's also her way of becoming an active player in God's vision for the world. Mary understood the story of the world she found herself in. Rome was the primary character, and Jesus' birth was going to upset the play of power. Mary saw it, and Mary wanted to be a part of it. She took what started out as an internal response to God's announcement, *"I am the Lord's servant"*, and then decided to do something about it—to show the world what being a servant of God meant.

It meant a larger view. It meant that Rome no longer had all of the power. It meant that God was up to something, and Mary was going to be a part of it. She went from Rome's empire to God's kingdom. And according to her song, God's kingdom was about looking out for the overlooked. Feeding those whose hunger defined them. Remembering the people Rome considered insignificant. Extending mercy to those used to judgment. Worshipping the one true God and not a man-made empire that declared itself god. Mary's picture got bigger. Her vision expanded. And her sense of responsibility to God's dream caused her to see life beyond her humble and otherwise insignificant circumstances. Mary knew that having made the decision to be a part of God's kingdom, nothing would or could stay the same—in her own world and in the world as a whole. And her song proved it.

G. This is what Mary knew: In sending His Son, God was doing more than just fulfilling His promise and offering hope to individuals in need of some. He was sending a message: "Once you have responded to Me, will you now participate with Me?" God did more than just send a Savior to Israel and bring hope to this one people group. The world's hope is at stake here—a world even bigger than Rome 2,000 years ago and bigger than anything else that seems too powerful in our worlds today.

APPLICATION

A. The Christmas story Luke is telling is about God's vision for the world. And God's vision wasn't just for Mary to catch hold of or for Israel to rejoice in. God's vision for the world started long before Jesus' birth and continues long after—even 2,000 years later with us. And what is the vision? For Mary, it was about seeing a picture bigger than Rome. Maybe we too need to look beyond the powers of today, the powers the world sees, and take note of a bigger power at work. God's vision is about making things the way they should be.

The beautiful thing about the Christmas story is that God's vision for the world is still ongoing. It's a story that didn't just happen thousands of years ago. The Christmas story is not a relic of the past. It's a story that is still going on, it's never-ending. When we respond to God, when we become participators in His story, His vision for the world becomes our vision for the world. It is possible that if we spend less time thinking about what is going to be under a tree with our name on it and more time thinking about the birth of Jesus, the physical and spiritual hope for all people, then we can respond by bringing hope into the lives of those around us today.

B. The question is, do we recognize what God is up to in the world? Do we see what He is asking us to participate in? There are people in our lives and people in our world who need hope this season, much like Israel needed some hope 2,000 years ago. Mary responded. Mary participated. Last week, you responded to the story personally. But this week, how will you move beyond that mental exercise? How will you participate in it?

When you hear of someone in need this Christmas, what will you do?
When you see someone who is isolated and alone, how will you reach out?
When you recognize someone who is hopeless, how can you restore their hope?

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THE NEVERENDING STORY (2): participate in
TEACHING SCRIPT

APPLICATION (CONTINUED)

C. Refuse the temptation to let the Christmas story be something we read and then leave behind in order to get more presents. We must hear the cry in these songs and the cry of the oppressed and the hurting in our culture today, and bring light into their darkness. That is the soul of the Christmas story. That is when the Christmas story comes alive. When a hungry child in our community is fed—the Christmas story is alive.

D. My tendency, and maybe yours too, is to observe the Christmas story each year. Perhaps I'll read it once, and then I'll do whatever I want. But the Christmas story isn't asking for our observation; it asks for our participation. It is a call to action for followers of Jesus. Christmas comes alive not when we simply observe and receive, but when we participate and give.

(Note to Communicator: This would be a great opportunity to tell students about the XP for this series and how you are giving them opportunities to participate in the story.)

E. If we live this way, if we read the Christmas story this way, then our focus is on God's vision for the community we are in. While we don't find ourselves under the rule of an oppressive empire, we do find ourselves in the midst of people who are oppressed. What are the Caesars in our world and who are they hurting?

How do we make sure that Jesus gets the last word, like Mary invites in her song? To live this way, it means we focus this year on what we give, on what we are able to offer, on how we are able to participate in God's picture, and not on what we get.

F. Something about that Christmas story feels better doesn't it? Something about that Christmas story doesn't make me feel weird when I read about a baby being born and then fight at the mall for parking spaces. When we connect ourselves to the needs of our world, something feels connected to the heart of why Christmas happened in the first place.

LANDING

A. Something tells us Christmas is about more. Something tells us it is deeper than a new shirt or even a new car. Perhaps you have found yourself wandering the mall year after year, stuck inside a way of experiencing Christmas that feels empty.

B. This year, you and I have a choice. Christmas can remain a relic of the past; we can observe the story and then go get gifts. Or we can experience what God intended for the story to be about. We can participate, and we can give. It's a story that never ends.

[TRANSITION INTO SMALL GROUPS]

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