



# *Good things come in small packages*

## Moving from wanting to waiting at Advent

BY BECCA EHRLICH

### WEEK 1: THE “MORE” MYTH

📖 **Read:** Luke 12:13–21

A few years ago, a TV commercial for AT&T featured a network executive in a suit, sitting on the floor in a circle with a bunch of young kids. He asked the kids, “Who thinks more is better than less?” All the kids raised their hands.

“OK, why?” he asked them. One little girl talked about how upset she would get when her parents said she couldn’t have more of something she wanted. “We want more. We want more. Like, we really like it. We want more,” she said.

Then a voice-over narrator took over: “It’s not complicated. More is better.”

Every time I saw this commercial when it originally aired, I felt uneasy. The kids were cute enough. The commercial made sense for the company’s message of “the nation’s largest 4G network.” But I’d get a weird feeling in my stomach every time I saw the commercial.

Later I realized why that commercial made me so uneasy: More is not always better. In fact, more can be incredibly detrimental for our lives and the lives of those around us.

We Americans often have way more stuff than we actually need. The average American home has 300,000 things in it. As a country, we are constantly adding to our possessions, and building bigger and

bigger homes to fit everything. No matter how much we have, we tend to think we need more.

As the AT&T commercial shows, the “more is better” mentality is instilled in us at a young age. The children in the commercial were no more than 6 years old. With this thinking already established in childhood, is there any question as to why so many of us adults have a constant want for more?

### ALL THAT STUFF

Of course, the human desire for more and more is nothing new. We see it in Luke 12, when Jesus shares a parable about a guy whose farm is doing really well. So, the guy decides he’s going to tear down his old barns, build bigger ones and then basically stockpile all the food so he can relax, eat, drink and be merry. You can almost hear the catch phrase “More is better” as this happens.

What does God then say to the man? Here’s a paraphrase: “Guess what? You actually die tonight. What’s going to happen to all that stuff?”

What’s going to happen to all that stuff, indeed. We spend our lives accumulating it, but when we die, what happens to it? In most cases, our friends and family end up spending days, even weeks, getting rid of it. Don’t get me wrong: They may keep a few things that have meaning to them. But the bulk of it? Thrown out or donated. Same as the guy in Jesus’ story—he spent all his time stockpiling stuff, and now, it’s all going to be given away or thrown out.

You see, it’s not just about the waste of material resources. When we are so focused on accumulating stuff, we miss out on the most important things in life. The guy in Jesus’ parable misses out on spending time with God and loved ones. And what’s left when he’s gone? Just a pile of stuff rather than shared memories, which would mean so much to his family and friends.

It’s the same for us. Because of our sin and brokenness, we believe more is always better. And

our consumer society helps us buy into that (pun intended). Over and over, we hear messages that we must buy something more in order to make us prettier or more respected, or to feel like we belong. Every day we're told: More is better.

Jesus, however, tells us there is a different way to live. Jesus knew our human tendency to think that more is better. Jesus wants us to know that being a Jesus follower means to live counterculturally—not to live our lives for the purpose of accumulating more stuff. Jesus is very clear when he says: “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

As Jesus reminds us, God is what really matters. When we put God first in our lives, our priorities are in the right place. Then we are more likely to prioritize our loved ones, our health and our calling from God, rather than chasing the next sale item.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

1. How do we get taken in by the “more is better” myth?
2. In what ways can we put God first, rather than the desire to always accumulate more?

**Activities to try:**

- Make a list of ways you might accumulate less this Advent season, especially around gift-giving. Talk with friends or family about the ideas on this list.
- Pray about your urge to accumulate more. Ask God to help you to put life in perspective and prioritize what's most important rather than always looking for more.

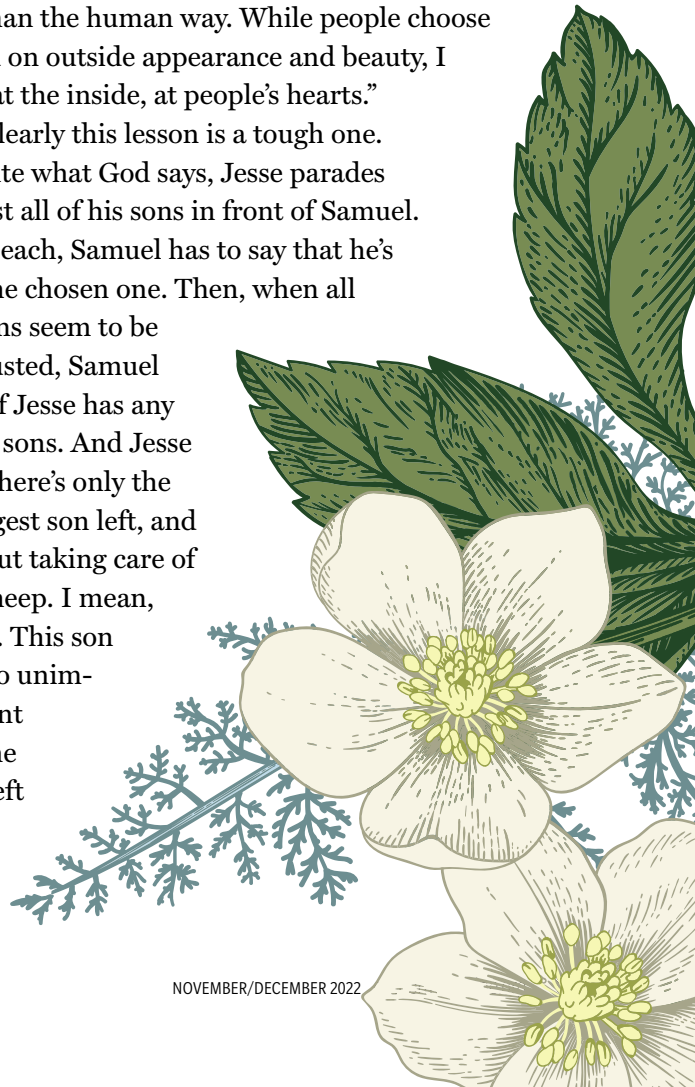
**WEEK 2: THE APPEARANCE ILLUSION**

📖 **Read:** 1 Samuel 16:1–13

In 1 Samuel, we hear of a young person who was not expected to become much of anything. After King Saul loses favor with God, God tells the prophet Samuel to go to Jesse's house to anoint the new king God has chosen. Once God has given Samuel a convenient excuse to travel (so that Saul doesn't find out and kill him), Samuel arrives at Jesse's house and sees the oldest son. Samuel is sure that this is the one God has chosen—he's tall, he's handsome, he's ready to be king, right?!

God tells Samuel otherwise, basically saying: “Pay no attention to his good looks, winning smile and dashing height. My way of choosing is different than the human way. While people choose based on outside appearance and beauty, I look at the inside, at people's hearts.”

Clearly this lesson is a tough one. Despite what God says, Jesse parades almost all of his sons in front of Samuel. After each, Samuel has to say that he's not the chosen one. Then, when all options seem to be exhausted, Samuel asks if Jesse has any other sons. And Jesse says there's only the youngest son left, and he's out taking care of the sheep. I mean, really. This son was so unimportant that he was left out there



working while the other sons were being considered. Imagine everyone's surprise when Samuel tells them that the youngest son, the one who took care of the sheep, is the chosen one. He is the one who will be king, who will be anointed with oil as royalty. And when David is anointed by Samuel, the Spirit of God comes upon him and stays with him.

The story of this unimportant, easy-to-forget individual reveals a reality different from what humans see. In David's time—and still today—we humans judge others based on how they look, what clothes they wear, whether they fit in. But God sees differently than we see. God sees what's inside, what is in our hearts.

And yes, I know, that sounds very *After-School Special*. How many times have we been told in school or as children, "It's what's inside that counts," right? But seriously, how often is this something we live out as true? Far too often, we judge others based on how they look, and others judge us based on how we look.

How good it is to know that God sees differently! God doesn't judge us based on how much our clothes cost, how good-looking we are, how tall or short we are. God sees us for who we are. On my worst bad-hair days, I remember to be grateful for this!

More than that, God calls people to act based on what God sees, not what we see. Sometimes the person picked by God to do something is the very last person we'd expect. David, a youngest son not expected to amount to much of anything, except maybe a shepherd, was chosen by God to be king of God's chosen people—and not just a king, but one of the most beloved kings in the history of the Israelites.

And if all of that weren't enough to show that appearances aren't everything, David becomes part of Jesus' lineage. Jesus, God in human form, the one who redeems the world, is born into the line of David. Not bad for a young guy who was almost forgotten when Samuel was anointing the next king!

#### Share aloud or reflect:

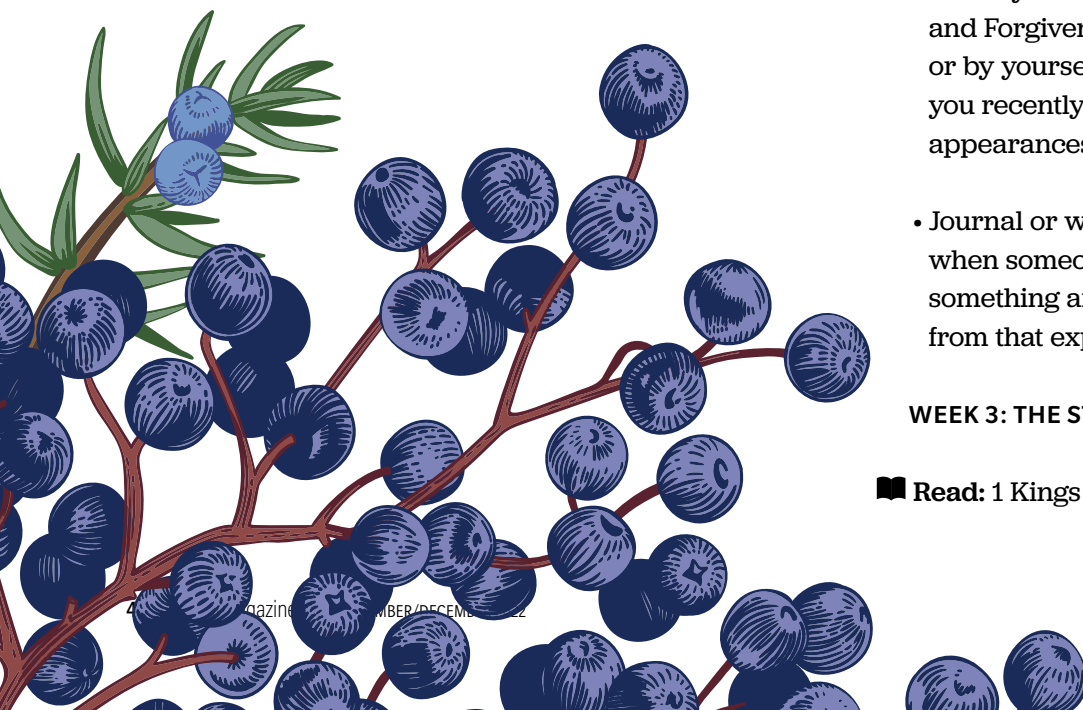
3. In what ways do we typically judge people based on outer appearances?
4. What is something about you that people sometimes judge right away?

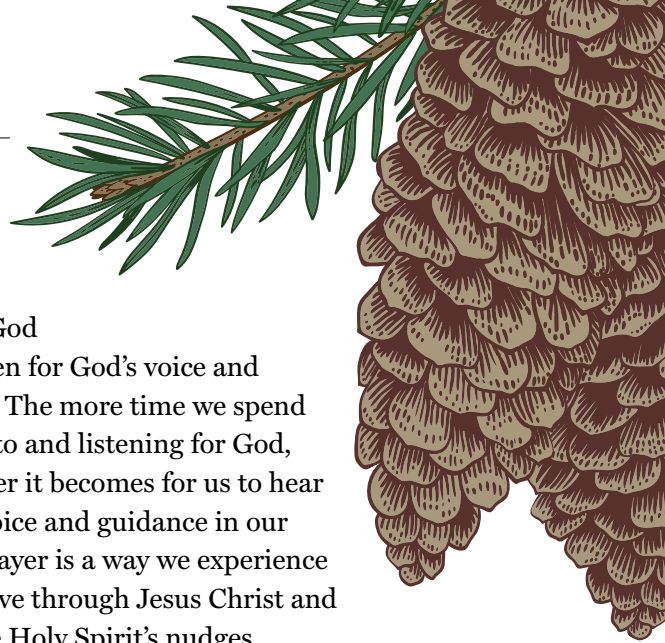
#### Activities to try:

- When you next take part in Confession and Forgiveness (in a worship setting or by yourself), silently name someone you recently judged based on outward appearances. Pray for them.
- Journal or write briefly about a time when someone you least expected did something amazing. What did you learn from that experience?

#### WEEK 3: THE STILL, SMALL VOICE

■ Read: 1 Kings 19:11-13





The months of August 2011 through September 2012 were among the hardest times of my life. I was waiting for a call as a pastor to a Lutheran congregation. Due to circumstances beyond my control, it was just not happening. One by one, each of the congregations I was being considered for fell through, for various reasons that had nothing to do with me.

God felt far away to me. I began to question and doubt if God even wanted me to be a pastor anymore. My husband, Will, and I had gotten married in the middle of all the turmoil, and we were trying to pay the mortgage on a house with income from my three-quarters-time position at the church where I worked and Will's new job, which came with a huge pay cut. To make ends meet, we had to have housemates for the first few months of our marriage. (What a way to start married life together!) The situation was frustrating at best and seemingly impossible at worst.

I came out of that time with my faith and sanity intact, partly thanks to the support of family and friends. But it wasn't only that. What really got me through? Prayer.

Even when I felt like God was far away, even when I was angry with God, confused and doubting, prayer kept me going. I forced myself to pray, even when I wasn't feeling it. And when I couldn't pray, there were people who prayed for me, as well as a prayer partner who was willing to pray with me. At the time, I wasn't fully convinced that prayer was really doing much. Now I can look back and see the ways that, even when I couldn't see it, God was listening to me and others who prayed, answering the prayers in God's own time.

Prayer is something that our culture doesn't typically value, perhaps because it doesn't seem productive. From an outsider's perspective, spending time with God in prayer looks kind of like you're doing nothing.

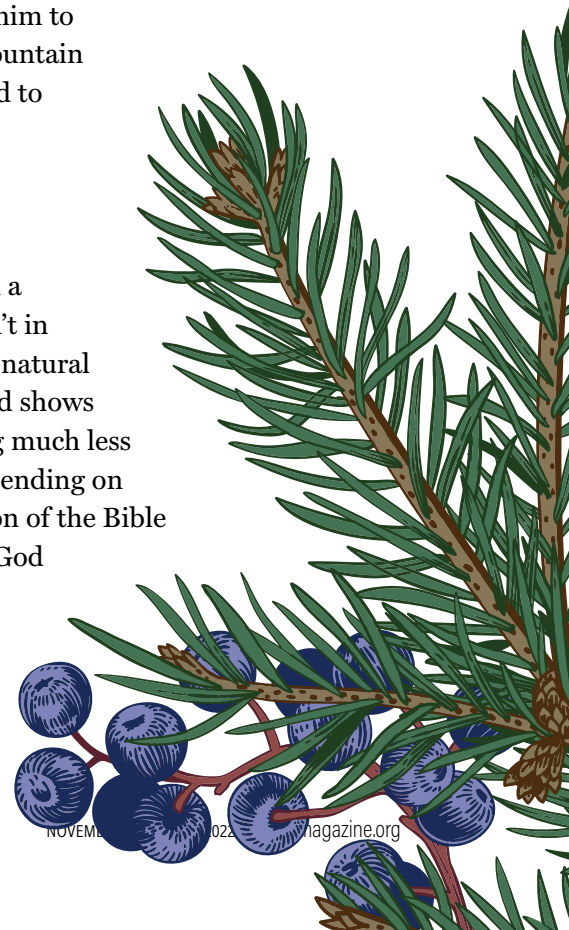
But Christian prayer isn't nothing: It's taking

time to talk to God and listen for God's voice and leading. The more time we spend talking to and listening for God, the easier it becomes for us to hear God's voice and guidance in our lives. Prayer is a way we experience God's love through Jesus Christ and hear the Holy Spirit's nudges.

Prayer can easily fall by the wayside in our busy lives, but as I discovered, in times of trouble or calm, prayer is a lifeline to God. God wants to speak to us, hear from us, connect with us and show us love through prayer.

In 1 Kings, we learn some things about how prayer often works. The prophet Elijah is running for his life—the current king and his wife are out to kill him. Elijah runs, hides and prays to God about what he should do.

We are told that Elijah hears the word of the Lord tell him to stand on the mountain and wait for God to “pass by.” So, he does. There's a great wind, and then an earthquake, and then a fire, but God isn't in any of these big natural experiences. God shows up in something much less impressive. Depending on which translation of the Bible you're reading, God finally shows up in verse 12 in “sheer silence” or “a gentle







whisper” or “a gentle blowing.” My favorite is when God shows up in a “still, small voice” (New King James Version).

Sometimes God speaks to us in intense ways. In the Bible, there are many such times. But in this 1 Kings passage, God isn’t in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. Elijah’s conversation with God takes place in sheer silence. And that’s how God speaks to us much of the time—not in a flashy way, but in a still, small voice.

#### Share aloud or reflect:

5. This Advent season, what are some ways you can connect with God through prayer?
6. What does God’s “still, small voice” sound like to you?

#### Activities to try:

- Spend some time in silence this week, listening for God’s “still, small voice.”
- Consider how quiet, less flashy people and activities in your life can be a source of God’s love and peace.

#### WEEK 4: THE BEST THING CAME IN A SMALL PACKAGE

📖 **Read:** Luke 2:1–20

Many of us know this story well: Mary and Joseph must travel to Bethlehem to be counted in the census, and she is about to have her baby. Mary is on the verge of becoming a teenage mother, shamed by society because the baby was conceived before she and Joseph were married. While we know she is pregnant with God’s Son, the people back then didn’t know that. She and Joseph travel alone, even though her due date is drawing near. They have hardly any money because they both come from poor families.

When they arrive, this tiny little town of Bethlehem is packed because of the census, and they end up having to stay in a stable, most likely with animals. We usually picture a stable like the ones depicted on many a Christmas card—a nice, cozy-looking wooden structure, where well-behaved animals gather around Mary, Joseph and an angelic-looking Jesus.

But first-century stables were usually just glorified caves, dug into the face of a rock wall, not well lit and probably cold. Any animals were likely smelly—have you ever been in a barn? There’s manure *everywhere*. It was not a great place to stay, let alone give birth to a baby. Health workers today would freak—talk about an unsanitary birth!

If that weren’t enough, the first people to hear about Jesus’ birth and to show up are shepherds, who are also smelly and dirty since they spend all their time outside chasing their sheep around. Usually, they weren’t even allowed in town. Yet they were the first to see Jesus and praise God.

This is *nothing* like how we’d like to picture the birth of our Savior and Messiah. Left to our own devices, we might picture a beautiful house (maybe even a mansion or palace!) with a designer crib and lots of baby supplies and toys. The new parents

would be surrounded by all the important people of that time—kings, queens, high priests—as well as all their loved ones, each more than ready to receive Jesus as their newest addition.

In real life, Mary and Joseph experienced the birth of Jesus in a dirty, cold, cave-stable with smelly animals, the loneliness of being without their families for this important moment, and the sudden arrival of unexpected first visitors who turned out to be disgusting shepherds—that's how our Lord Jesus was born and came to us.

It makes me think of the TV cartoon *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, in which Charlie Brown brings back a very unimpressive Christmas tree. It was this small, frail tree, surrounded by fancy aluminum trees, that caught his eye. While Charlie Brown says at one point that he has no idea what Christmas is about, I like to think he picked this small, struggling tree because he truly understood the message of Advent and Christmas. Our Lord Jesus comes into this world, not in shiny, fancy, aluminum trappings, but as a tiny, frail, newborn baby, born to teenage parents who live in poverty and must stay in a cave-stable.

Jesus, our Lord and Savior, shows us that the most amazing examples of God's power and love aren't always flashy and big. Sometimes they come in small, seemingly powerless things, like a baby lying in a manger.

It's often said that good things come in small packages. How fitting then, that the best thing of all, this world's Savior, comes in the smallest of packages. You can't get much smaller than a newborn infant!

During this last week of Advent, as you prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, remember how something so tiny and frail—something the world might think of as less, but that is actually much, much more—is the truest meaning of Christmas. We celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ—a small baby who grew up to save the world from our sin. Remember:

God in Christ comes to us as a human baby, ready to do anything and everything, just so that we can be close to him.

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

7. Reread Luke's story of Jesus' birth. What part stands out to you the most? Why?
8. How have you seen God showing up, even in small ways, this Advent season?

#### **Activities to try:**

- Tell someone the story of a time God acted in your life in a small, unexpected way.
- Find a way this week to share God's love with children in your community, such as donating Christmas presents, volunteering at a family shelter or babysitting for someone you know. 🌿

