



Important Dates

December 3: First Sunday in Advent	December 24: Christmas Eve
December 10: Second Sunday in Advent	December 25: Nativity of Jesus Christ
December 17: Third Sunday in Advent	January 6: Epiphany of the Lord
December 24: Fourth Sunday in Advent	February 14: Ash Wednesday

The Epiphany

Historically, the Epiphany celebration predates the Christmas celebration by two centuries. The Christmas celebration began in the western church during the fourth century, whereas Epiphany can be traced to Egypt in the late second century. Originally, on this day of Epiphany, three different stories of the New Testament were celebrated in which the appearance of God is told:

1. The visit of the wise men (Magi), where God appears in the star (light that guides).
2. The baptism of Jesus, where God appears as a dove.
3. The wedding at Cana, where God's presence was made known by the miracle of the water turned into wine.

The Eastern and Orthodox Christian churches continue to celebrate Epiphany with special traditions, symbolic meals,

giving of gifts, and use of lights. In medieval times, the Feast of the Star was a play performed outside the church. Kings were dressed in robes and crowns and would lead a processional following a star to bring cups of myrrh, incense, and gold as an offering to the Creator.

The Gospel of Luke (2:1-20) relates the actual birth of Jesus with the story continuing when, in accordance with Jewish law, Jesus is taken to the temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised eight days after his birth (Lev. 12:3). It was in Jerusalem where the encounters with Simeon (Luke 2:25-35) and Anna (vss. 36-38) took place.

Most scholars agree there was a large gap of time between Luke 2:38 and Luke 2:39, giving time for the Matthew account of the Magi in Bethlehem before the flight into Egypt.

Matthew's account of Jesus' birth was written primarily for the Israelites and gives the genealogy from Abraham, through King David and to the line of Joseph, the husband of Mary (Matt. 1:1-16). Luke, however, was targeting the Gentiles and so traces the genealogy through the line of Mary back to Adam to stress that Jesus came for all peoples (Luke 3:23-38).

Not much is known about the wise men. The Scriptures tell us that they came from the East, but not precisely where, nor how many there were, nor who they were. Tradition says they came from Parthia, near ancient Babylon, and may have been descendants of the Jews who remained there after the Exile with access to oral prophecies and written manuscripts. Or they may have been astrologers who had studied the ancient manuscripts left by the Israelites centuries before. Or they may have

received special words directly from God.

We do know from the Scriptures that they went to Bethlehem and went into the house and worshiped Him before giving Him gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh (Matt. 2:8-11). It is assumed that because the Magi traveled thousands of miles to reach Bethlehem, and they found Jesus in a house, that Jesus must have been between one and two years old when they visited.

Both Gospels (Luke 2:39-40 and Matt. 2:19-23) agree that after the death of Herod, the family returned to Nazareth, where Jesus lived until He began His ministry.

The church celebrates Epiphany as the day the Magi came to worship the Christ. The liturgical color for Epiphany is white, changing to green for ordinary time on the thirteenth day after Christmas.





Adapt these activities for your toddlers, preschoolers, and early elementary students. Consider sending them home for families to use together.

The Star

You will need:

- A copy of the star template (on page 6 of this supplement) for each child
- Coloring utensils
- Scissors
- Craft sticks (1 per child)
- Craft glue or masking tape

Give each child a star to color. Help the children cut out their star and attach a craft stick to the back. As you tell the Epiphany story, have the children hold up their stars each time you mention the star.

A Present for Jesus

You will need:

- A heart cut from white construction paper for each child
- Coloring utensils
- Small box for each child
- Bow for each child

Give each child a heart to color and write his or her name in the center of the heart. Give each child a box and a bow. Ask them to put their heart inside their box and attach the bow to the top. Talk about the presents the wise men brought Jesus and what gift Jesus really wants (their hearts).

Story Apron

Children love to see what is in your pockets! You can create great excitement in your classroom by putting on your “Story Apron.” Sew several pockets on an apron and put an object in each pocket. As you tell your Bible story for the morning, take out the objects one at a time to illustrate each point of your story. Once the children learn the story, they can pull the objects out of the pockets or bag and tell it in their own words.

Alternative: Use a special sack or bag instead of an apron.

Jump into Celebrating the Epiphany with Elementary Students

Adapt these activities for your elementary students. Consider sending the ideas home for families to use together.

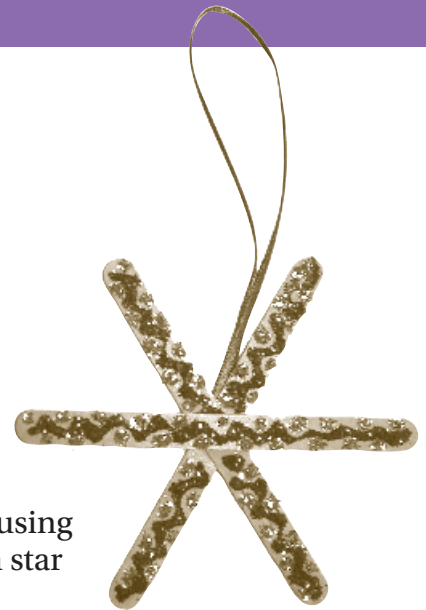
Six-Pointed Star

You will need:

- 3 craft sticks per child
- Craft glue
- Paint brushes for spreading glue
- Small paper plates or bowls for glue
- Rhinestones, small pieces of aluminum foil, or other materials to decorate the stars
- Yarn or twine

Give each child three craft sticks to arrange in a star pattern. Have them glue the center of the sticks together. Decorate the stars using rhinestones or the material of your choice. Tie yarn or twine to each star so it can be hung.

The Magi (wise men) followed a star to Jesus. What gifts did they bring Jesus? If you could give one present to Jesus, what would it be? Why?



The Greatest of These is Love

You will need:

- Scissors
- Pink, red, and white construction paper
- Ribbon
- Tape
- Writing utensils

Have your students each cut three medium-sized hearts from the construction paper. Write several verses about love on a whiteboard or have them available for the students to copy. Ask your students to choose three of the verses and write them on their hearts. Have the students attach the hearts together using the ribbon taped on the back so they can be hung.

The wise men showed love and honor to Jesus by giving him gifts. How do you show love to God? As Christians, how do we show our love to one another? How is our view of love different than the world's view of love?



VERSES ON LOVE:

Matthew 22:37-39
John 13:34-35
John 14:15
1 Corinthians 13:4-5
1 Corinthians 13:6
1 Corinthians 13:7-8
Philippians 2:3-4
2 Thessalonians 3:5
1 John 2:5-6
1 John 3:1

Epiphany: Youth Style

Bring in perfume to represent myrrh and a reed diffuser to represent frankincense. (Myrrh smells musty or earthy, and frankincense has a pine-lemon scent.) Use these objects to enhance your students' understanding of these two unfamiliar materials.

Epiphany means that something is revealed or made clear in a way we had not seen before. On Epiphany we tell the story of the Magi, or wise men. The new star they saw was created for them to see and led them to Jesus. The Magi were most likely knowledgeable about subjects such as philosophy, medicine, and astrology. They brought gifts to the young Jesus to celebrate his birth. Each gift connects to His mission on earth and His death.

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh—why these gifts?

■ **Gold**—it is very precious and rare and is the most malleable and ductile metal. These two factors make gold very expensive. The wise men believed that a new king had been born. Gold, a very valuable gift, was often given to kings or other important people. Jesus, unlike his forefather David, did not lead armies or govern politically while on earth. But, as this gift indicates, Jesus was and is King.

■ **Frankincense**—this substance had many uses. In the temple, priests burned it on the altar, which was just in front of the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. The rising smoke symbolized the prayers of the priests for the people rising up to God. The people believed God was pleased with the fragrance. This priestly gift from the wise men was an indication of how Jesus intercedes for us before our Father.

■ **Myrrh**—myrrh was often made into a beautiful and expensive perfume. In Jesus' day even very poor people would buy it when someone they loved had died. They anointed the body so that it would cover the smell of the body as it was turning to dust and bones. It was a way of honoring the person they loved—it showed they cared. This gift foreshadowed Jesus' death. He was born to die.

The Bible does not give a lot of detail about the wise men and their gifts. We don't know how many Magi visited or the quantity of each gift. However, we do know that the Magi were looking for the Christ, which means "anointed one." They were looking for someone of great importance, and their gifts fit their purpose. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh—these gifts are full of special meaning and symbolism.

Read the Epiphany story together (Matt. 2:1-12). **What do the gifts the Magi brought tell us about Jesus? All of the gifts the Magi brought were precious and symbolic. What gifts would you bring to Jesus if this happened today? What can we learn from the gifts of the Magi for our lives?**



TEACHER'S DEVOTIONAL

Advent is a time of year to reflect on and think about Jesus' birth. During His time on earth, Jesus provided a perfect example of love, grace, and service. As we strive to imitate Jesus, we can take encouragement because, "God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you'" (Heb. 13:5).

The Advent season is a very exciting time of the year but also one of the busiest. Give yourself time to reflect and dwell upon the awesome character and majesty of Jesus and His time on earth; consider purchasing or creating a journal specifically for the Advent season. The suggested readings can provide a great place to start thinking about the birth and life of Jesus.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

- » Luke 2
- » Matthew 24:36-44
- » John 14:1-14
- » Philippians 2:5-11
- » Colossians 1:15-22

FAMILY ACTIVITY

Celebrate the Advent season as a family with these activities:

The Advent Wreath: Each Sunday, as you light a candle, talk with your family about the meaning of that candle and the Advent season as a whole.

- December 3: "Prophecy Candle" represents hope. Read Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7; 53:1-12
- December 10: "Bethlehem Candle" represents love. Read John 3:16, Luke 2:4-7
- December 17: "Shepherd's Candle" represents joy. Read Luke 2:8-20
- December 24: "Angel's Candle" represents peace. Read Luke 1:26-38; 2:8-15

Advent Wreath Cookies

As you bake your Christmas cookies this year, consider adding Advent Wreath Cookies into the mix.

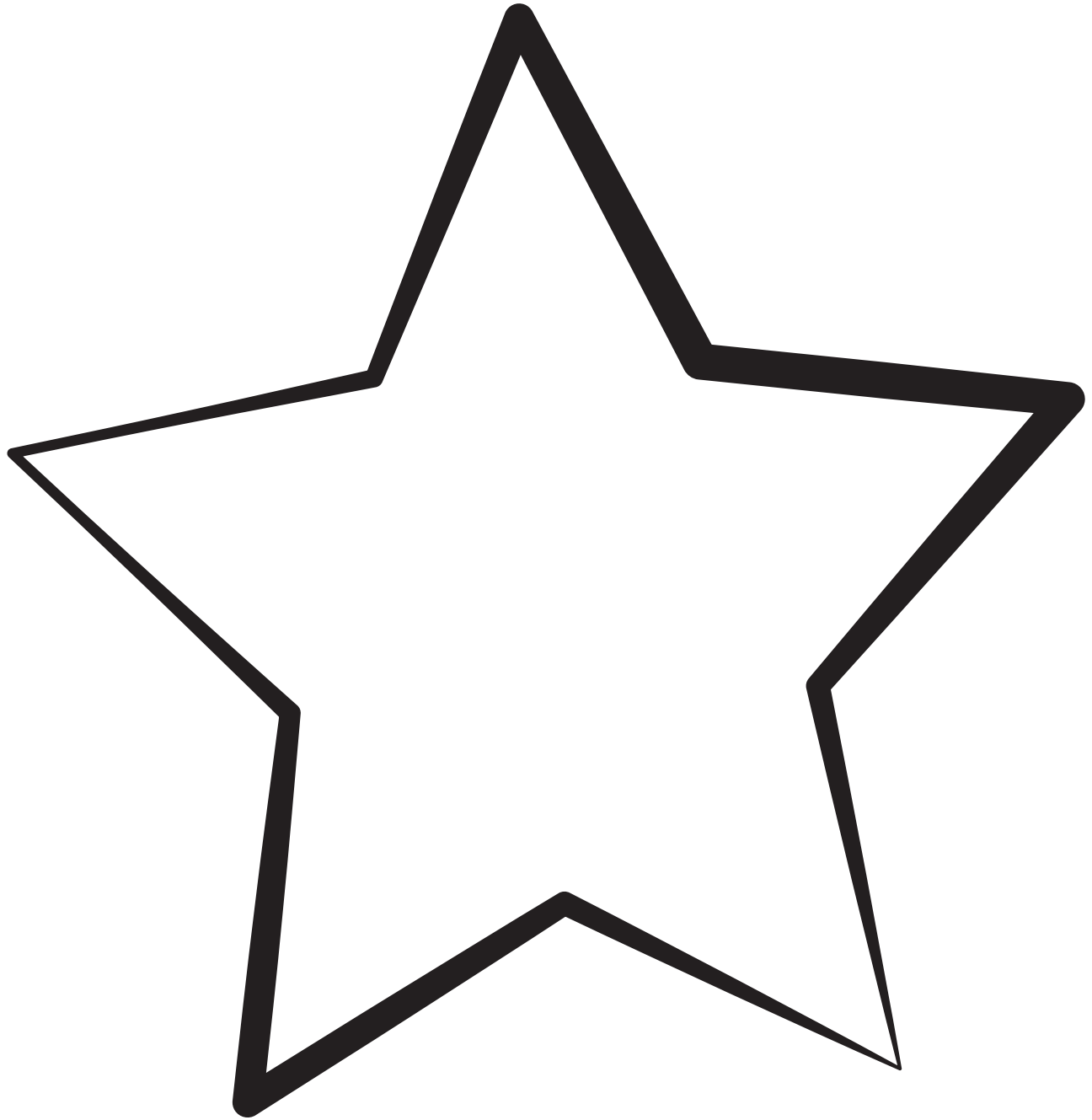
Ingredients (3 dozen)

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| • 1/2 cup (1 stick) butter | • 1 egg |
| • 1/2 cup sugar | • 2 cups flour |
| • 1/4 cup brown sugar | • 1/4 teaspoon salt |
| • 1 tablespoon molasses | • 3/4 teaspoon baking powder |
| • 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract | • 30-40 hard candies, preferably red and yellow |

Pre-heat oven to 375°F. In a large bowl, use an electric mixer to cream together butter and sugars until fluffy. Add molasses and vanilla extract, mixing until incorporated. Add egg and mix until light and smooth, about 1 minute on medium speed. Sift together dry ingredients, and fold into wet mixture. Use electric mixer to blend just until flour is incorporated. Divide dough in half and flatten into two disks. Wrap disks in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least an hour and up to 2 days. Remove any wrappers on candies and separate them by color into plastic bags. Use a mallet to crush candies. Place one disk between two large sheets of waxed paper and roll to 1/4-inch thickness. Use a cookie cutter or the top of a glass to cut the cookies into circles. Transfer cookies to baking parchment lined baking sheets, about 1 inch apart. Cut out the center of the circle (use a smaller cookie cutter or do it free hand, making sure the hole is at least 1 inch in diameter). Use a spoon to sprinkle the crushed candy into the hollowed-out centers of the cookies, filling to the edges. If cookies will be hung as ornaments or decorations, poke a small hole in the top of each cookie before baking. Bake 7 to 10 minutes. The candy should be melted and the cookies just barely beginning to brown. Allow cookies to cool completely on pans. String with ribbon if you want to hang as an ornament.

Note: You can also use refrigerated sugar cookie dough or your favorite sugar cookie recipe and achieve the same effect.

Star Template



Threads in the **ROYAL ROBE**

Scripture reveals to us who God is, what He requires of us, and how He shows His love to us in mighty saving acts of grace. We can never begin to know all there is to know of Him, but our gracious God is able to show us enough of Him in order to have life, health, and peace.

Through the written Word of God, the Holy Spirit teaches us all we need to know of the triune God. We learn what He desires to make known to us.

The Bible does not teach us in neat theological categories. Rather, God makes Himself known through accounts of His work in the lives of real people, through prophecies and prayers, doctrinal teaching, and wise sayings.

When we follow all these threads of truth, we see a pattern emerging—a royal robe woven from the gathered truths of Scripture adorns our King and displays His love.

To see God more clearly, we express what we learn from Scripture in a coherent way, known as the essentials of faith. The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed both express the essentials of faith.

The great Reformation confessions of faith further laid out the teaching of Scripture in a

systematic way, weaving together the Golden Threads of Scripture, bringing forth the royal robe that glorifies Jesus our King. By studying them, we grow in our understanding of God. Such knowledge leads us to put on the robe of Christ by faith. This means that we take our place in union with Him, growing in love and obedience by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The essentials of faith are not all Scripture has to say about God, but they represent the Golden Threads around which the whole royal robe is woven. Under the heading of "Teacher Devotionals," every Bible lesson in this curriculum is keyed to the Golden Threads it expresses. The Stray Threads section picks up additional ideas or notes the ways in which the Golden Threads may get distorted.

Believers in the Reformed tradition are a people who celebrate that God can be known because He has graciously made Himself known. A crucial part of our faithfulness is learning and studying the essentials that have been revealed. So, we offer these in hopes of enriching every Bible lesson, enabling you as a teacher to trace the threads of Christ's Royal Robe in the teachings of Scripture.

1 ESSENTIAL NUMBER ONE: The One True God is the Triune God of Grace—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—Whom Alone We Must Worship and Serve.

In the Old Testament, we learn that the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is the creator of the entire world and the constant redeemer through the mighty acts of the people Israel. In the New Testament, we see the LORD, Israel's God, actually is the Triune God, who reveals Himself to be the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He has entered into covenant faithfulness with His people and will not leave us or forsake us.

3 ESSENTIAL NUMBER THREE: Holy Scripture is the Word of God Written, Through Which, In the Power of the Holy Spirit, We Truly Meet the Triune God.

One of the great achievements of the Reformation was the recovery of Scripture as our sole authoritative source for knowledge of God and its return to the ordinary people of God. The traditions of the church could be helpful in interpreting the Bible, but must always remain beneath the written Word of God. The Reformers affirmed at the same time that what needs to be known about God from Scriptures can be known by ordinary people who engage in a plain reading of the Bible. The Bible is clear enough in its essential teaching for all who read with prayerful reliance on the Holy Spirit to speak through the Word.

4 ESSENTIAL NUMBER FOUR: The Triune God is Sovereign Over All.

Our religion is not simply a human invention nor is it subject to human whims for change and supposed corrections. We do not have the freedom to decide who we would like the Lord to be. God is, and He has made Himself known to us, in Jesus Christ and the Scriptures. While what we may know of the triune God is true and reliable, we always recognize that we never know all there is to know about Him. The Lord God is high and holy, completely other, beyond our grasp and control, and splendid in His glory. God is moving history toward its appointed end. The triune God of grace is in control. He reigns. He alone is Judge. He alone is worthy of our praise. We never have dominion over Him. God alone reigns.

2 ESSENTIAL NUMBER TWO: The Eternal Son of God Came to Us as a Human Being in Jesus Christ.

In the fullness of time, God the Son took up our humanity as He came to us as Jesus, the man from Nazareth. Jesus is both fully God and fully human. He is all that God has to say to us, in word and deed, about who He is and how He loves us. And Jesus is all we have to say to God, as the one man who lived a life of perfect obedience to Him, on our behalf. In Jesus' relationship with His Father, and in His promise of the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, we come to know that the one God is triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

5 ESSENTIAL NUMBER FIVE: Humanity Has Fallen Into Sin.

The Scriptures teach us that, although God created us good, through our own willful choices, humanity sinned against Him. The sin of our first parents rocked and wracked the world with terrible consequences. Now, by nature, we are prone to suppress the truth and to choose against our God and our neighbors again and again. There is nothing we human beings do in this world that is not without the taint of our sin. We are helplessly lost in our sin. This means the death of ever hoping to get to the Father on our own. Such a realization is the beginning of crying out in repentance and faith for the rightness and goodness that only can come from the Lord Himself. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who comes to us as a man, has enacted perfect obedience, free from sin, on our behalf.

6

**ESSENTIAL NUMBER SIX:
We are Made Right with
God by Grace Alone through
Faith Alone.**

Our salvation from our sins and our sinfulness is all from Christ Jesus. We never can earn our way into God's favor, whether by our good works, zealous worship, or many prayers. The Father forgives our sins by the work of Jesus Christ alone. Christ's death alone takes away the guilt of our sin. Christ's faith and obedience alone, the living sign of His covenant faithfulness, comprise our reconciliation with God. He gives us Christ's righteousness. Our record before God is replaced with Jesus' record! When this happens, we believe in who Christ Jesus is and what He has accomplished. We confess that He is our Lord and Savior. But even this belief and confession is a gift of God, the result of the Holy Spirit's work inside us. Salvation is all of God. We simply rest in what He has done for us.

7

**ESSENTIAL NUMBER
SEVEN: Election: God
Chose Us to Be His
Children and Servants.**

God chose us to believe in Him now that we might spend the rest of our lives serving Him and telling others about Jesus. The essential teaching of election is the awareness that we do not make our way to the Father; He has come all the way down to where we are to claim us. Election, then, is not to a life of ease but to one of service. Those whom He calls, He sends to bring His message to a lost world. If we know Him, it is because He chose us. If He chose us, He sends us to tell others, "Believe the good news and discover your chosenness!"

8

**ESSENTIAL NUMBER EIGHT:
The Holy Spirit Makes Us More and
More Like Jesus.**

Sanctification means "to make holy," and it refers to the work of the Holy Spirit to form Christ in us. For we not only receive a new record of righteousness in Christ, we receive a new nature. God places His own Spirit within us and a wonderful series of benefits begins:

- » The Holy Spirit unites to Jesus Christ so that all that belongs to Him comes to belong to us (John 16:14-15).
- » The Holy Spirit comes to dwell inside us, fashioning us more and more in the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29).
- » The Holy Spirit opens our hearts and minds to the Scriptures so that we might be transformed by hearing the Word (John 14:26).
- » The Holy Spirit prays within us, crying out to the Father for us and through us (Gal. 4:6).
- » The Holy Spirit assures us that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16), and His presence is the guarantee of our salvation (Eph. 1:13).
- » The Holy Spirit gives us the power to be faithful witnesses to Christ (Acts 1:8) and enables us to do the ministry and works of Jesus (see Matt. 10:1 and John 14:12).

Of course, the old, sinful nature still remains in us and, thus, the new and the old are in conflict. Christian growth involves a hard struggle. We can never do it on our own. We live in constant need of "the sanctifying work of the Spirit" (1 Pet. 1:2). The person of the Holy Spirit, then moves us to live in obedience and empowers us to keep going even after we fail or when the way is difficult. His work will continue until we meet Jesus in heaven at last.

9

**ESSENTIAL NUMBER NINE:
We Are Called to A Life of Obedience.**

The people of God, Christ's Church, bring His Word and His love to a broken world. We are in the world, even though we do not belong to this world (John 17:16). We serve the world even though we are aliens and strangers here, passing through on our way to our heavenly homeland. Psalm 84 notes that those who "have set their hearts in pilgrimage" to the city of God cause the dry, desert lands to become a place of springs as they pass through. With the Holy Spirit prompting us and empowering us, with the grace of Jesus cleansing us, with the love of the Father beckoning us, we both gather for worship and move out in service to God. So, even though the church does not belong to the world, it strives to love the world as Christ did.