



## Advent by Candlelight

*by Kristi Meyer*

### Introduction and Opening Prayer

“Who are you?” On the surface, it’s a very simple question: three short words in English, words that are well within the vocabulary of a young child. It’s a question that can be answered adequately with just your name. And yet when I started today’s program by asking the question, I’m guessing more than just your name came to mind.

“Who are you?” Although your name is an unchanging answer to that question, the additional information you provide is shaped by the setting in which the question is asked. At work, you might give your job title and describe your duties and responsibilities. At a grade school soccer or basketball game, you might identify your child and talk about your role as their mother. On vacation, you might mention where you are from and recap the places you have visited so far. And at church, you might discuss how long you have been a member and perhaps comment on some of the areas where you serve.

“Who are you?” Today we will be asking that question of Lydia. Lydia is not a major Bible character. She appears only in one chapter of the book of Acts. Therefore, many of the answers that Lydia will share with us today are fictionalized and embellished beyond her brief description in Acts. From the few details we have been given and from a study of the world in which she lived, we can infer some of what she will tell us.

“Who are you?” We know Lydia was a seller of fine purple cloth. We know she had a house in Philippi and likely also a family. We know she came to Philippi from Thyatira, a city in western Asia Minor. We know she was one of the women who gathered at the river in prayer. Beyond these basic facts, we know virtually nothing about Lydia. But like all of us, Lydia is much more than the name her parents gave her. And although much of today’s program is speculation, we need not speculate about Lydia’s most important answer to the question.

“Who are you?” Lydia was a believer in the one true God. Through the apostle Paul’s preaching in Philippi, she came to understand that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and she trusted in him as her Savior. As Lydia speaks to us across the centuries today, listen for how that understanding and trust changed her answer. Listen for the same doubts, the same struggles, the same belief, the same joy, and the same conviction that you as a believer share. Listen to her story as it has traveled to the ends of the earth and hear within it your own story as well. Let’s open with prayer.

Dearest Lord, be with us today as we learn from the story of Lydia. Remind us that although she is far removed from us in time and space, she is still our sister in Christ and a fellow member of your family. Speak to us through her words and use them to help us remember who we are: your redeemed children who have a story to share as well. Help us to take her story—and yours—to the ends of the earth. Amen.

## Opening Hymn

Christian Worship 14: *Arise, O Christian People*

Christian Worship 19: *O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?*

*Here I Am, Lord:* [Find Music Here](#) or [Here](#)

## SCENE 1: Who are you? A provider

By all outward appearances, I had a good life. I lived in Philippi, a Roman colony in eastern Macedonia. Originally from the city of Thyatira in western Asia Minor, I came to Philippi a number of years ago because Philippi offered a lifestyle that was unattainable in Thyatira. Since Philippi was a Roman colony on the trade route between Italy and Asia Minor, living there almost felt like living in Rome. We enjoyed the same rights and privileges as the citizens of any Italian city. We were even afforded the right of self-governance. Many retired soldiers lived among us, and their presence made us feel safe.

I enjoyed a certain status in Philippi. While in Thyatira, I learned the art of making and dyeing cloth. I honed my craft and eventually became a seller of fine purple cloth. Purple garments were a status symbol, and the cloth that I sold was fit for a king. My work was well-known throughout the city. People came from far away to purchase my wares. The time and resources I invested throughout my younger years were finally paying off in a successful business and a high social standing. Despite being a woman, I moved with ease among the merchant class of the city. People looked up to me, and I relished their admiration.

In addition to being a merchant, I was also a homeowner. Providing for my family was one of my greatest joys in life. The money I earned from selling cloth allowed my family to live in a way that I never dreamed of growing up in Thyatira. At first, some of the men of the city viewed me with distrust and even disdain for being a successful woman. But as time went on, they began to treat me with more respect and eventually came to see me as somewhat of an equal. It helped that I was generous with my resources and always willing to help those in need or looking for a place to stay. Throughout Philippi, my household was renowned for its charity.

I was a provider. Life was good, or so it seemed. Yet despite my comfortable life, my fulfilling work, and my desire to help others, there was something missing. A sense of incompleteness, an internal longing—I couldn't quite put words to it. Whatever it was, I hoped I might find it by leaving Thyatira. And although I found material success in Philippi, that emptiness remained. I continued to search for just the right thing to fill it, having no idea that I would need to go to the ends of the earth to find it.

*For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect (1 Peter 1:18,19).*

## Musical Selection

Christian Worship 27: *O Jesus, Lamb of God, You Are*

Christian Worship 484: *Brothers, Sisters, Let Us Gladly*

*Make Me an Instrument:* [Find Music Here](#)

## SCENE 2: Who are you? A seeker

In Philippi, I continued to seek out something to fill the void in my life. My life as a merchant brought me into contact with a wide variety of people throughout the city. Each conversation initially held the promise of showing me what I lacked—and each conversation ultimately failed to provide that missing piece. Then one day, I heard of a group of women who met outside the city at the river to pray. Because Philippi was a religiously diverse community, I was familiar with prayer to any god under the sun. But their praying sounded different.

I began talking with the women and listening to what they had to say. They taught me of the Jewish faith: of holy days to observe and foods to avoid, of Sabbath laws to follow and sacrifices to make. I came to understand that their God was different than the pagan gods of my youth. He was the creator of the universe, the ruler of the world, and the protector of his people. Although I was not one of his people by birth, I believed what the women were teaching and worshiped their God. To the Jews, I became a God-fearer: not yet a full convert to Judaism, but one who believed in the God of Moses and the prophets and who attempted to live according to his commands.

That was the hard part: living according to God's commands. Because I did not live in Jerusalem, I could not offer the sacrifices required to appease the anger of a holy God. I hoped that God might overlook this shortcoming brought on by geography. However, I didn't know how he could overlook my other shortcomings. This God demanded complete obedience to his commands. How could I, a sinful human being, possibly hope to satisfy this requirement of absolute perfection? I tried to live a good life, to be kind to people, to help anyone in need. But deep down in my heart, I knew that all my acts of charity weren't enough for God to want me and love me.

I was a seeker. My seeking brought me to the God of the Hebrews, a powerful deity who seemed to love his people as long as they lived according to his commands. I tried to be one of his people and attempted to obey his commands. But something was still missing, something that made me feel as though there was more to God's story. I kept searching for that missing piece, having no idea that I would need to go to the ends of the earth to find it.

*I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. ... I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy (Leviticus 11:44a,45).*

### Musical Selection

Christian Worship 32: *When Sinners See Their Lost Condition*

*Lord, Make Us Worthy:* [Find Music Here](#)

*Father, Forgive Us:* [Find Music Here](#)

### SCENE 3: Who are you? A listener

I treasured my Sabbath time of prayer and meditation at the river with the women, but that still was not enough to fill the void in my life. Not enough, that is, until an unexpected visitor arrived. His name was Paul, and he was a tentmaker by trade. In recent years, however, he set aside his tent making skills and took on the role of traveling missionary. He completed his first journey several years before and was now on the road again. A most unusual vision brought him to our region of Macedonia: a vision of a man pleading with Paul to come and help. So Paul came.

It was unusual for a Jewish man to seek out the company of a group of women, especially a group of women made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Under normal circumstances, Paul would have visited the local synagogue and engaged in theological discussion and debate with the men there. But since there were not enough Jewish men in Philippi for a synagogue, Paul came to the river instead. We were both honored and humbled by his presence. We were even more honored and humbled when he treated us as equals and began to speak to us about spiritual things.

Paul's message was like nothing I had ever heard before. He began by preaching about the God of Moses and the prophets, a God I knew well. He spoke of God's requirement for absolute perfection and our complete inability to meet this standard. But Paul's message didn't stop there. He went on to speak of God's Son: Jesus Christ, the Messiah. He told us about Jesus' miraculous birth and holy life, his unimaginable suffering and innocent death, his victorious resurrection and glorious ascension. Paul declared that this Jesus had fulfilled God's requirement for absolute perfection—not only for himself, but for all people of all time.

I was a listener. I heard the words spoken by this strange man I just met, and they gave me a glimpse of hope. Could this message truly be for me? Could this Jesus be the One to fill the void in my life? Could he be the Messiah, the Anointed One, the once for all sacrifice that satisfied God's demands? Could Paul's preaching about Jesus be the missing piece that I had so desperately been seeking? As Paul shared more about this amazing story, I listened, having no idea that his words would take me to the ends of the earth.

*This is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. ... And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers (Acts 3:18,25).*

#### Musical Selection

*Christian Worship 25: The King Shall Come*

*Christian Worship 338: I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say*

*Jesus Paid It All: [Find Music Here](#)*

#### **SCENE 4: Who are you? A baptized child of God**

Paul’s message touched my heart. What an amazing story to hear—that the God of Moses and the prophets loved me enough to send his Son for me! What an amazing relief to be assured of—that I no longer needed to worry about the impossibility of perfectly fulfilling God’s commands! What an amazing gift to be given—that I had been clothed with the riches of Jesus’ perfect obedience! As a seller of purple cloth, I dealt in fine fabrics and costly materials. But my expensive garments were filthy rags compared to the Messiah’s robe of righteousness that Paul so powerfully declared.

I knew that just as I could never hope to attain perfection, I could also never hope to believe Paul’s message on my own. My study of Moses and the prophets made it perfectly clear that I would always fall short of all the demands of a holy God. But once again, this God demonstrated his mercy and grace. Just as he demanded perfection and then in Jesus provided everything I needed to attain it, so he also provided everything I needed to satisfy his demand of believing. I don’t have words to describe what happened. I only know that through the Holy Spirit, I came to faith in the Messiah and found the peace I had been seeking so desperately.

Paul and the other women celebrated my newfound faith with me, and then Paul baptized me right there in the river. I was reminded of the many times I washed clothing in that same river. I now felt as clean as someone putting on one of my fine garments for the very first time. As Paul continued to preach and teach, I felt a deep desire to share this message with the other members of my household. They too needed to hear the Messiah’s story and learn of his sacrifice on their behalf. I invited Paul and his companions to my home and persuaded them to stay. Through their teaching, my entire household believed and was baptized.

I am a baptized child of God! I didn’t know it at the time, but my status as a God-fearer prepared me perfectly for Paul’s arrival that day by the river. He spoke of the same things I had studied. He spoke of them with such passion that I knew this message had changed his life. And then he spoke of the final chapter of the story and filled in the void that I could never fill on my own. Through Paul’s message—a new ending to an old story—I understood how the demands of God could be fulfilled. I rejoiced in my new status as a baptized child of God, beginning to suspect this new status would take me to the ends of the earth.

*One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home (Acts 16:14,15).*

#### **Musical Selection**

Christian Worship Supplement 737: *God’s Own Child, I Gladly Say It*

*Amazing Grace with My Chains Are Gone:* [Find Music Here](#)

*Arise, My Soul, Arise:* [Find Music Here](#)

## SCENE 5: Who are you? A member of the body of Christ

I wish I could have sat at Paul's feet forever, but that wasn't to be. While staying at my house, he and Silas continued to preach and teach throughout Philippi. On one occasion, Paul drove an evil spirit out of a slave girl. As a result, Paul and Silas were accused of throwing the city into an uproar. Even though both men were Roman citizens, they were beaten and imprisoned. After a miraculous midnight earthquake and the conversion of a terrified jailer, they were released—with apologies for their mistreatment—and were asked to leave Philippi. Before leaving, they came back to my house and encouraged us all. Then they departed for Thessalonica and new fields ripe for harvest.

Our small community of believers felt Paul's absence intensely. We had grown so much in such a short period of time, but there was still so much more to learn! We banded together and did our best to study the Scriptures, viewing the God of Moses and the prophets in the light of what Paul had taught us about his Son. We grew in our faith and our understanding, knowing that a time might come when we would be persecuted as Paul and Silas were. We supported each other in our times of need and generously supported Paul as well, sending an offering when we heard that he had been imprisoned in Rome.

The letter we received from Paul thanking us for our offering brought us great gladness. His imprisonment had changed neither his spirit of encouragement in the face of trials nor his joy in knowing the gospel. He encouraged us to share in his joy and rejoice in the Lord always, to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ no matter our earthly circumstances, and to look forward to our promised citizenship in heaven—a citizenship worth infinitely more than our prized Roman citizenships. We grew as a church and were privileged to see Paul several years later on his way to Troas. He spent one final Passover with us, a Passover made even more meaningful because we knew the sacrifice made by the true Passover Lamb.

I am a member of the body of Christ. The small community of believers I first found at the river grew into a thriving congregation. We were a family. We shared in each other's joys and sorrows, trials and tribulations, defeats and victories. We came together around the Word of God, the waters of Baptism, and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. We rejoiced in the forgiveness of our sins. We celebrated each time one of our number fell asleep in the Lord, and we looked forward to a reunion in heaven. I thanked God for my brothers and sisters in Christ, knowing that the hope we shared needed to be carried to the ends of the earth.

*I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:3-6).*

### Musical Selection

Christian Worship 532: *God Is Here! As We His People*

Christian Worship Supplement 773: *In Unity and Peace*

Go Forth: [Find Music Here](#)

## SCENE 6: Who are you? An evangelist

Who are you? There are so many ways I can answer this question. I am a provider, taking care of my family and the other members of my household. I am a seeker, looking for fulfillment and finding it in the person of Jesus Christ. I am a listener, striving to grow and mature in my faith. I am a baptized child of God, delighting in my newfound status as one redeemed and at peace with my heavenly Father. I am a member of the body of Christ, encouraging and building up fellow believers and receiving strength and encouragement from them as well.

Most importantly, I am a person who knows the good news about my Savior—good news that needs to be shared. Sharing this good news is not easy, and it comes with a cost. I am eager to use my personal wealth to support the work of Paul and other preachers as they take this good news to places I cannot go. Although I cannot travel with them, I constantly remember them in my prayers and plead earnestly for their safety and success. I wait eagerly for reports and news from them and pray that through their message, many more will be saved.

I have more than my material wealth to use, though. I have my status in Philippi and my reputation as an honest seller and a trustworthy woman. I still sell my purple cloth and make business connections, but I do it for a different reason now. Buyers receive more than a fine piece of cloth from me. They also receive the message of my Savior and the reason for the hope that I have. Some will reject this message. Some will ponder and think on it. Some will believe. And some will carry this message to places far beyond the reach of my humble cloth business.

I am an evangelist. I bring the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, to the people I meet in Philippi. This good news has changed my life, and I need to share that with others. I know that persecution may come, perhaps even imprisonment and death. I do not ask for these trials, but I will rejoice in them if they come. In the end, whether I am a merchant or a slave, the owner of a house or the occupant of a jail cell, I am always a Christian. And until the day I meet my Savior face-to-face in the glory of heaven, I will spread his message wherever I can and pray that it will travel to the ends of the earth.

*“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).*

### Musical Selection

Christian Worship 562: *I Love to Tell the Story*

*To the Ends of the Earth:* [Find Music Here](#)

*We Are Sent by the Lord:* [Find Music Here](#) (Movie Worship Resources Downloads)

## Conclusion

You might be thinking, “This was supposed to be an Advent by Candlelight program. Lydia’s story is interesting, but what does it have to do with Advent? We’ve only heard a passing reference to Jesus’ birth, and we haven’t done any sort of preparing our hearts for the upcoming Advent and Christmas seasons.” You might not have sung your favorite holiday songs. You might not have heard the story of the baby in the manger. You might not have seen any candles on the Advent wreath lit. In short, you might feel like this program didn’t really do anything to get you into the holiday spirit.

And yet, is there a better way to prepare for Christmas than by hearing the story of salvation? Our society views Christmas differently than you and I do. To the world, Christmas means trees and presents, travel and family gatherings, and traditions old and new. But we know that Christmas is more than that. Christmas means the birth of our Savior, the first New Testament step in the fulfillment of God’s plan of salvation, and the beginning of the spread of this message through the shepherds and the Wise Men.

We have the peace our world needs so desperately. Through the faith that God worked in our hearts, we know the answer for the empty feeling so many experience at this time of year. Because of who we are, and the unique experiences God has used to shape our lives, we are prepared to share this answer with those around us. And like Lydia, God has equipped us to spread this good news of sins forgiven and lasting peace with God to the ends of the earth—this Advent season and always. Let’s close with prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for giving us the peace that comes only through your Son. During this Advent and Christmas season, help us share this peace with the broken and hurting world in which we live. Remind us of your answer to the question of who we are: children of God who are now at peace with you. Bless us as we share this answer with those around us and bless our witness so that your gospel might travel to the ends of the earth. Amen.

## Closing Hymn

Christian Worship 2: *Savior of the Nations, Come*

Christian Worship Supplement 707: *Peace Came to Earth*