

rejected orphaned sold  
used unwanted forsaken  
trafficked neglected  
bound hated  
**SO CHOSEN**  
**LOVED**  
lost broken  
despised **PRECIOUS**  
**TREASURED**  
expl **FREE** used  
w **WELCOMED**  
oppressed

At its heart, Advent is about longing. Longing for healing, for hope, for home. For Christians, Advent invites us to suspend hindsight, step into longing, and look to the future expectant that rescue is coming, but uncertain how it will arrive.

For more than 140 million orphans and vulnerable children, advent is their day-to-day reality. They are longing for safety, for food, shelter. But even deeper, they are longing for the One who can bind up their broken hearts and set them free.

This One, who offers them what they most need, was also a vulnerable child.

*Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*

- PHILIPPIANS 2:5B-7

Jesus emptied himself and chose vulnerability.

These reflections will invite you into his vulnerability - a world in which unwed mothers were stoned, despots waged war on babies, and violence drove families to flee their homes. In looking at the circumstances of his birth and childhood, his story should have been one of 140+ million children.

But the Father used a man, a woman, dreams, and the lives of innocents to change his story.

Jesus' story was changed so that he could change my story and change your story.

*And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

- PHILIPPIANS 2:8

Jesus' death changed our story. And now we are invited to partner with the Father to change the stories of others.

In these reflections, you'll read the stories of children whose vulnerability was not chosen, children who are orphaned, living on the streets, and impacted by war. You'll learn about the realities these children face - facts, figures, and statistics that would overwhelm if there were not hope. You'll learn about the unique ministry that RiverCross is doing to change the stories of these children. And you'll be invited to consider how you can join us in changing their stories.

If you have questions or comments, or would like to interact with me about what you read, feel free to email me at [cfinley@twr.org](mailto:cfinley@twr.org). I'd love to connect!

With longing,

**Cindy Finley**

Global Ministry Director, RiverCross



**Thank you so much  
for downloading our  
Advent devotional,  
Change Her Story!**

# week one

*“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.”*

- MATTHEW 1:18

Her story was ridiculous. Pregnant by the Holy Spirit? Who would believe that? Joseph didn't. By law, he could have had her stoned, killing her and killing the baby in her womb. He chose a more humane route – divorce. But divorce would have left her branded and vulnerable. It would take a miracle to **change her story**. But a changed story is the one God wrote from the very beginning.

God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream. *“Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”* (Matthew 1:20b-21)

**God used Joseph to change Mary's story, to change her baby's story, and to change our story.**

God is in the business of changing stories. And he often uses people as his agents of change.

A young girl named \*Belia lived with her family in a rural village in Africa. Although her family was poor, Belia was happy, healthy, and loved.

In the neighboring village, Jelani began to get sick. First, he was nauseated and unable to keep any food down. He began to lose weight and soon his body was racked with fever, chills, and night sweats. Jelani went to the traditional healer who first delivered the bad news. Jelani was sick, and unless he could pay the healer for a cure, he would die.

Jelani gladly paid more money, and this was the cure given to him by the healer. “Sleep with a virgin child and you will be healed.”



UNWANTED  
ALONE  
DISPOSABLE  
TREASURED

That night, Belia walked the four kilometers to get water for her family. It was a familiar route, one that she had taken countless times. As she walked, she sang to herself and swung the five-gallon jug that would soon be filled with 40 pounds of water. But tonight, she was being stalked.

Jelani, hidden by the foliage, followed her. Once Belia had the jug balanced on her head, he attacked and raped her. He left her in the dust broken, battered, and bleeding, but also infected with HIV. And in a few months, it became clear that Belia was pregnant. She was kicked out of her home, and out of her village.

God had a “Joseph” in place to **change her story**. A doctor, George, found Belia wandering the streets and had compassion on her. He and his wife took her in, started her on antiretroviral therapy, and several months later, Belia gave birth to a healthy baby girl. Even though George lives in a community where adoption is uncommon, he and his wife adopted both the baby and Belia. **God used George to change her story.**

*Have you ever been vulnerable? In need of a “Joseph?” How did God provide you with protection or care? Thank God for the ways he has changed your story, and look for an opportunity today to “change her story.”*



## holding esther

The story of Belia is found in our radio drama, *Holding Esther*. In discussion groups with trained facilitators, listeners to *Holding Esther* discuss child marriage, the virgin cleansing myth, adolescent pregnancy, and traditional practices that traumatize girls. They assess the prevalence of these issues in their communities, develop an action plan, and execute their plan.

Listen to all seven episodes:  
[twrrivercross.org/holding-esther](http://twrrivercross.org/holding-esther)

## WHY RADIO DRAMAS?



Radio dramas are an effective means of inspiring and equipping people in Africa to “change her story.” According to a 2017 UNESCO survey:

- Radio is the most accessible and used medium in Zambia.
- Radio is said to be the most reliable and affordable medium of exchanging information and knowledge in many communities where access to electricity, internet, and television is not all possible in Africa.
- (Radio) offers an opportunity for small communities whose voices are not heard on wider medium, to express themselves on touchy subjects which affects their country or community, while being at the same time protected behind “a voice.”

“At a time when many are pointing to a breakdown in civil, constructive discussion, and when the very idea of truth is increasingly being called into question, radio is uniquely-positioned to bring communities together and foster positive dialogue for change,” said Tim Francis, Associate Program Specialist for Media Development and Society at UNESCO.

## DID YOU KNOW?

The “virgin cleansing myth” is the belief that having sex with a virgin girl will cure a man of HIV/AIDS or other STDs and is a potential factor in infant rape of HIV-positive men in South Africa.

Globally, complications in pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death in girls aged 15-19.

When a mother is under 20, her child is 50% more likely to be stillborn or die within its first weeks of life than a baby born to an older mother.

1 in 7 of all new HIV infections occur among adolescent girls, and this rate is increasing.

# week two

*“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”*

- LUKE 2:6B-7

We take it for granted that Mary survived childbirth. But her survival is a miracle. She was a child giving birth to a child, without a midwife, and in a foul environment. She should have died. She should have died leaving Jesus without a mother, and in the care of a father who was not his biological father.

But Mary didn't die. And Jesus wasn't orphaned. That was not his story.

**But it is the story of a little boy named Gift.\*** Gift was born in an African city. His mother lived on the street, gave birth on the street, and died on the street when Gift was a toddler. Miraculously, he survived. He survived in a community of street dwellers and from them he learned to beg, to run, to hide, and to **scavenge his meals from the garbage.**

Gift was brought to an orphanage when he was five. A resilient little boy with a winsome personality, he was welcomed. **Surely his story was changing.** But adjusting to orphanage life was a struggle. Unaccustomed to structure, he chafed at his freedom being limited. And he found it hard to accept even the good things he was given.

Gift slept under his bed rather than on it. He preferred dirty clothes to clean. And he ate from the garbage.

He didn't eat occasionally from the garbage. He ate only from the garbage. **He clung to his old story.**

These behaviors, particularly his refusal to eat at the table, irritated his caregivers. First they scolded him, and then they punished him. But no matter what they did, Gift left his plate untouched and rummage through the garbage for leftover scraps.



REJECTED  
ABANDONED  
ORPHANED  
CHOSEN

Then his caregiver, Lesedi,\* went through training with RiverCross and learned to **change Gift's story**. She learned that his irritating behaviors were connected to his life on the streets. She learned to be patient with him, and to give him steps toward appropriate behavior rather than punishing him.

Now Gift sits at the table for meals, his annoying behaviors are diminishing, and he is coming to trust Lesedi as she cares for him with love and patience. Eating from a plate may seem like a small thing, but for a little boy who survived on the streets, it's a big deal.

### **God used Lesedi to change Gift's story.**

*Have you ever been like Gift, clinging to an old story when God has invited you to begin a new one? God is patient with you. He's inviting you to come to the table and taste and see that he is good. Would you join him there?*

\*Gift is not his real name and Lesedi is not her real name. Some of the details of the story have been changed, but the story is true. And now he has a new story.

## **HOW RIVERCROSS HELPS**



Our not-yet-released radio drama, *Jabota Bridge*, is being designed for use with orphan care ministries, including shelters that serve street children. The drama features an of-the-street kid named Captain. Children will be able to listen to the drama with trained caregivers and discuss what they hear.

The first eight episodes of *Jabota Bridge* are currently in post-production and set for release in the summer of 2019. But these episodes are only the beginning. Because it takes time to change thinking, attitudes, and behaviors, we intend to produce 156 episodes that will provide a steady stream of content designed to help vulnerable children heal from their trauma, thrive in life, and come to trust Christ.

## **DID YOU KNOW?**

A child who has lost one or both parents is considered an orphan. This dates to biblical times. When a father died, his child was labeled "fatherless" or an "orphan," and the mother a "widow." Both widows and orphans were extremely vulnerable, often unable to provide for themselves, and in developing countries this is still true today.

The World Bank depicts childhood vulnerability as a downward spiral. With each shock (the loss of a parent, abandonment, street life, illness, and so on), the child sinks to a deeper level of vulnerability. At each level she or he is exposed to a host of new risks. When intervention occurs higher up in the spiral, the child is more likely to gain health and wholeness.

There is a difference between of-the-street children, who have no contact with family and rarely, if ever return home, and on-the-street children, who often sleep at home but are based on the street during the day. Both are vulnerable, but on-the-street children can be assisted by efforts to come alongside the adults in their lives, whereas of-the-street children, like Gift, need more direct care.

Around the world there are an estimated 100 million children living on the streets today.

The vast majority of street children (83 percent) say they steal in order to live. Over a third said they have engaged in prostitution.

Street children become accustomed to the freedom they have and need to be gradually acclimated to structure. Practitioners accomplish this through shelters where the children can get a meal, but are free to go. The goal is that the children gradually choose to receive the help offered and exchange perceived freedom for genuine care.

# week three

*An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him."*

*So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt.*

- MATTHEW 2:13B-14

When you know the end of the story, it's hard to enter into the terror of it. But imagine the story as if it were unfolding in your life.

Your toddler is finally sleeping soundly, you are in bed with your husband, and in the middle of the night your husband shakes you awake.

"Honey, we've got to leave."

You're drowsy and confused. "What do you mean? Leave? Let's talk about it tomorrow."

"No. We've got to leave. Now." He's already up turning on the lamp, packing, and heading toward the baby's room.

You're fully awake now. "What are you doing?"

He's tossing clothes your way. "I'm serious. We've got to leave now. God came to me in a dream. Someone is hunting for our baby. You get our son, and I'll finish packing."

And while the moon is still high in the sky, you, your baby, and your husband become refugees, running from the despot who is determined to kill your child.

God used a dream to change their story. And while he still uses dreams, most often God uses people to change stories. And he wants to use you and me.



EXPLOITED  
BOUND  
OPPRESSED  
FREE

Salem\* is a young girl who arrived at a refugee camp with her brother, Matthew. Fleeing an attack on their village, they traveled for days. In their flight they experienced, hunger, injury, and attack all while processing what they had seen as their village was attacked, their mother slaughtered, and their older brother abducted by the rebel faction.

The refugee camp brought some relief for the children. They had one meal a day and shelter. But they were still subject to violence and abuse. Life in the refugee camp brought more trauma to them both, hardening Matthew and breaking Salem's heart further.

God chose a local woman named Naomi to change Salem's story. Naomi, who ran a safe house for girls, frequently visited the refugee camp. She recognized Salem and Matthew as unaccompanied minors and built a relationship with them.

Sadly, Matthew was abducted into a rebel faction, leaving Salem even more alone and vulnerable. An older man first offered protection, but then made it clear that he expected to get more in return, threatening Salem if she did not comply.

As Salem's trauma compounded and her grief deepened, she withdrew into herself, becoming a shadow of the girl she had been.

One day, Naomi spied Salem. As Naomi spoke with her, the voice of Salem's abuser rose above the crowd shouting for her to come now. Naomi knew that Salem was in grave danger and convinced her to come with her.

Salem now lives with Naomi and a group of girls who have experienced trauma. She is safe and slowly she is sharing her pain. Eventually, she'll come to see that there is One who can bind up her broken heart.

### **God used Naomi to change Salem's story.**

*Consider your deepest pain, your deepest loss. Is it a story you've shared with someone? If not, identify a safe person in your life and begin to unpack your story. If you have begun a journey of healing, ask God how he can use your story to bring healing to someone else. You can change her story.*

\*The story of Salem is found in our not-yet released series, *Jabota Bridge*. While  *Holding Esther* is for adults serving traumatized children, *Jabota Bridge* is for the children themselves. An orphanage director in Uganda tells us, "I envision a day when our children are gathered around the radio listening to and discussing every episode of *Jabota Bridge*. We can't wait until it is available."

## **DID YOU KNOW?**

According to the UN Refugee Agency, more than 25.4 million refugees have fled their homes to escape conflict and persecution.

**52%** of refugees are children

**173,800** are unaccompanied children, like Salem.)

Developing regions, such as Zambia, host 85% of the world's refugees.



## **WHY RADIO DRAMAS?**

According to the International Orality Network, 80% of the world's population are oral preference learners. This means that they learn best through stories.

The research of Melanie Green, professor at the University of Buffalo, has identified a correlation between an immersive narrative experience and changed thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors.

Research by Michelle Miller-Day and Michael L. Hecht confirms that narrative engagement framework is more effective than a didactic approach to impact health outcomes. Because radio dramas are scripted purposely and produced for multiplication, the potential to bring about community change in cultures where radio is the preferred mechanism for media consumption is high.

# week four

*“Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:*

*‘A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.’”*

- MATTHEW 2:16-18

Jesus was born into turbulent times. A raging despot was on the throne - one whose paranoia and quest for power drove him execute his wife, three of his sons, his brother, and anyone else who provided a perceived threat.

The report of a newborn King of the Jews stirred his psychosis. But he kept it in check until the wise men failed to return with the exact location of the newborn King. The cauldron of his paranoia boiled over and spilled into the streets of Bethlehem. While Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fled to Egypt, Herod's soldiers raided house, after house, after house killing every precious boy child, two and under.

The horror is astounding. Why did God allow these boys to be killed? And where were the people to **change his story, and change his story, and change his story?**

God used these boys to **change the story** of the One who wrote theirs. They died satisfying the blood lust of Herod and protecting Jesus from his pernicious rage. **They changed Jesus' story.**

Children around the world live in war-torn countries where rulers greedy for power, and factions vying for position, tear communities and families apart. It often seems that every story of rescue is set against a backdrop of 20 stories of tragedy.

## DID YOU KNOW?

There are more than 300,000 child soldiers in the world. Not only are they used to fight, but these children are also used as spies, couriers, cooks, cleaners, and as sex slaves.

Forty percent of child soldiers are girls who are taken as “wives” of the combatants. Humans Rights Watch has reported girl soldiers being impregnated by their commanders and having to fight with children strapped to their backs.

When child soldiers escape, many are unable to return to their communities. Even if their community is still intact, they are often shunned. Without help, most will return to military life.

This is Luca's\* story. Luca is a 14-year old boy living in rural Africa. Abducted by militants, Luca finds himself with a group of teens and children, some as young as eight, trudging through the jungle surrounded by men laughing about their slaughter of innocents.

Over the next months Luca is brainwashed through a steady barrage of psychological torture, numbed by drugs and alcohol, and desensitized to violence as he watches killing after killing after killing. Until the day comes for his first kill. It's either kill or be killed, and so he takes the shot.

Months pass and he has become so traumatized that he is detached from the violence. But one day, in the middle of a fire fight, Luca comes face-to-face with his brother, Matthew. Together they escape, but only Luca makes it out of the jungle to be reunited with his sister Salem.

While Salem is safe, she is still so very broken. She needs her brother. And **her need changes his story.** Out of compassion for her, he steps out of self-loathing, rejects his desire to run away, and steps onto his own path of healing. Luca lays down his life for his sister, and this is the key to his healing. **She changes his story.**

*Can you relate to Luca? Has your death to self and compassion toward another helped you heal? Or perhaps expressing your need to an unlikely someone will help change her story. Perhaps God wants to use you today to change her story.*

\*Luca's story is the story of more than 300,000 children. Although the details are different, they all experienced extreme trauma. Unless we change their stories, they are likely to return to military life, perpetuate violence, die themselves, or even become "recruiters" of child soldiers.



**SOLD  
TRAFFICKED  
USED  
PRECIOUS**

## HOW RIVERCROSS HELPS



Research shows that broadcasting in conjunction with community listening groups, interpersonal support, and trained facilitators is an efficient and effective way to bring about change.

A key feature of African mobile-phone use is its convergence with radio listening. Among regular mobile users in Zambia, 33 percent said they listen to the radio via their handsets weekly, and 25 percent said they listen daily. Unlike the use of mobile internet, radio listening is more evenly spread across urban and rural users.

With funding, we will broadcast *Jabota Bridge* in areas of Africa where there are reports of political unrest, factions vying for power, and child soldiers. *Jabota Bridge* will be broadcast to raise awareness, equip those who are working with former child soldiers, and pave the way for former child soldiers to be reunited, when possible, with their communities.

# week five

*See what kind of love the Father has given to us,  
that we should be called children of God.*

- 1 JOHN 3:1A

On Christmas Day, the most vulnerable child was born.

- His birth was risky.
- His life was threatened.
- His country was violent.
- His people were oppressed.

**Jesus was the most vulnerable child.** An enemy bigger than Herod sought to destroy him. An enemy who sought to devour him through temptation and terror. And one day, on a hill far away, this enemy claimed success.

As the darkness swirled and the ground shook, Jesus was filled with sin, yours and mine. In his greatest pain, his Father turned away. Jesus hung on the cross - bound, despised, forsaken, rejected, abandoned.

And in that moment, **he changed your story.**

Before you knew him, you were:

- Dead in your sin
- Separated from God
- Blind to your need
- Captive to your desires
- Enslaved by your passions
- Without hope
- Orphaned and cut off from your heavenly Father

Whether you knew it or not, your story was hopeless. But in the moment that you received his death for yours, he **changed your story.** You have hope. You are no longer a slave, an enemy, an orphan. **You are a child of God!**

- Free
- Chosen
- Loved
- Precious
- Treasured



**FREE  
CHOSEN  
LOVED  
PRECIOUS  
TREASURED**

Now you are free to love your Father and to love others. He changed your story so that **you can change her story, and his story, and their stories.**

In that moment when the enemy danced around the cross, his demise was secured. But for now, he continues to prowl, and our world groans under the weight of it all, and children like Salem, Matthew, Luca, Best, and Belia, are still ...

- Trafficked
- Exploited
- Abused
- Abandoned
- Orphaned
- Abducted
- Bound
- Sold

The pain sears our hearts and we plead, "Come, Lord Jesus! Make it right!" And one day he will. The traffickers, and the pimps, and the war lords, and the abusers will face justice. The enemy will meet his destruction. But the Father's children will be welcomed. Every tear wiped. Every wound healed. Every fear calmed. Every thirst quenched. Every brokenness made right.

**All because a vulnerable child changed your story, changed my story, and changed their stories.**

*Today, as you celebrate Christmas, thank Jesus that he chose vulnerability and changed your story, and now invites us to partner with him to change their stories.*