



START *the* PARTY

Celebrate the Good News

LEADER DEVOTIONALS

Times are hard right now, aren't they? Most days, being inundated with bad news feels largely unavoidable. Whether you tend to mindlessly scroll through stories and newsfeeds on social media, or you choose to tune in to your favorite daily podcast or news network, the majority of messages feel heavy. Perhaps, even heartbreaking.

Even though we can be overwhelmed with feelings of anxiety for this next generation coming behind us, I believe the struggles of 2024 aren't actually all that different than they always have been. There's nothing new under the sun, after all. And there has always been a reason to celebrate in the midst of it all.

People who follow Jesus will always have a reason to celebrate.

And VBS is, indeed, a celebration! It's an annual opportunity to gather with a captive audience of young ones, pointing them toward the God who loves them and sent His Son to have a relationship with them. But perhaps the piece you may not have realized when you said, "YES!" to volunteering was that this week is actually for you, too. Because just like every single kid who you are selflessly choosing to "Start the Party" with this week, I'm convinced you also need to be reminded of . . .

Friendship
Belonging
Forgiveness
Life
and
Purpose

So as you begin each day, we want you to embrace the snazzy, silly, and spirited vibe that any good party requires. Wear all the bright colors! Snap on that pointed party hat! And absolutely make plans to travel by way of conga line as you move from station to station! But also take a moment—before all the hype begins—to check out the Leader Devotionals we've written specifically for YOU each day. They've been carefully crafted with you in mind. Every party needs a planner. But every planner needs assurance of how valuable they are.

The next generation needs you. Thank you for choosing to show them what it means to celebrate. When the week concludes, you'll be ready to put the fiesta on hold for a bit to take a long, well-deserved siesta!

(Until you find yourself recovered and ready to plan the next party. There are many other guests out there who are waiting for an invite!)

JESUS IS A GOOD REASON TO HAVE A PARTY.

READ LUKE 5:27-32

Parties these days are next level. Wouldn't you agree? As a child of the 80s, I think back to the birthday celebrations I had as a kid. Most years were simply your run-of-the-mill soiree with cake and ice cream, a handful of friends, and a few party games my mom threw together with an assortment of basic craft supplies. I'm pretty sure we played some form of BINGO every year. There was, of course, that one time we branched out a bit, and my big sister put on a magic show for our audience of eight-year olds.

In 2024, however, are parties even complete without an Instagram-worthy portfolio of posted pictures to prove the existence of magnificently themed foods, over-the-top games, and darling decorations? I mean, don't even bother to throw a party if you're not planning to adorn it with a fancy balloon arch.

If we truly peel back the layers of influencer-style intricate details, the most important element of a celebration is actually the reason for celebrating, right? There's no point in throwing a Sweet 16 if someone isn't, in fact, turning 16. A bridal shower with no bride-to-be would be peculiar. Or how about a graduation party where no one actually graduated? We'd have a group of terribly confused guests.

Here in Luke, we see that Matthew threw a banger of a banquet that would have certainly been newsfeed worthy. But it wasn't a birthday he was celebrating. It wasn't a shower or a graduation. And he didn't even need a balloon arch.

All Matthew needed was the love Jesus had for him. This was reason enough to celebrate. Because Jesus saw Matthew's value, regardless of his mistakes. Jesus carved out time to spend with Matthew, in spite of what others had to say about it. And He invited Matthew to follow Him and be His friend.

This week, you have been handed a unique responsibility to see and connect with the kids that cross your path. I assure you, they'll be ready for the party that VBS always is. But you might be the catalyst for helping them understand and believe that Jesus is a good reason to keep celebrating long after the week ends.

(And can I give you some inside scoop from the Party Planning Committee? Jesus loves YOU and wants to party with you, too! Believe it or not, this week isn't only about the kid guests who show up.)

EVERYONE IS INVITED TO THE PARTY.

READ MATTHEW 22:1-14

Last year, we packed up our family of five and moved to a new city. After having lived in the same place for nearly a decade, it was a learning curve for us all as we transitioned to becoming anonymous everywhere we went. It felt weird . . .

- taking walks in the neighborhood without running into anyone we knew.
- attending school open houses at the end of the summer, minus our typical reunion with staff and faculty we had known for years.
- scooting in and out of the worship service at church without anyone stopping us to chat.

After having served on staff at a church for many years, that last one felt particularly odd.

In some ways, it was a welcomed change of pace after emerging from a lifestyle where our calendars were spilling over with invites and commitments. The anonymity was a breath of fresh air, but only for a season. Because eventually it felt lonely.

I think we're all wired to want the invites, don't you think? I'm convinced that even the most introverted of us still craves to feel included to a certain degree. I believe God created us with a need for belonging.

This will certainly be the case with the kids you see this week. While their words probably won't articulate it, their actions may give a glimpse of their deep need to feel like they belong. And you have the opportunity to help them believe they do.

Before you kick off Day 2, take time to think about a time when you were invited to something that provided you with that same sense of belonging. Was it your first job offer? Was it an invite to grab dinner with new friends? Maybe it was an acceptance letter to the college you were hoping to attend? How did you feel?

Jesus made it clear that everyone is invited to the party He's got planned. And you get the privilege of extending that invite to young ones you'll see this week. Ask God to help you know the right things to say and do that will draw kids in and help them feel invited.

CELEBRATE THE GOOD NEWS.

READ LUKE 15:11-32

I remember it like it happened yesterday. My husband sat in a chair next to me, as I lay on the examination bed in that dim ultrasound room. Our wide-eyed toddler curiously stared at all the computers and equipment, wondering if there were any buttons he'd be allowed to press. The technician did her thing, searching for that tiny blob that resembled more of a bean than a baby.

"Well, it looks like Oliver is going to have a little sister!" she proclaimed, and the room erupted with equal parts cheers and tears.

But only for a moment. Because we quickly heard that same voice gasp, "Oh, no!" The gigantic smile vanished from my face. My heart dropped. And I immediately assumed the absolute worst.

You see, I had only recently emerged from a painful journey of multiple miscarriages. The words, "Oh, no," in the ultrasound room were never an indication of news to celebrate. In fact, in my experience, they were only used to preface something devastating.

But just before the emotions evolved from heartbreak to hysteria, the sweetest of sentences turned our sudden mourning into dancing. "It's not a little girl! Oliver's going to have a baby brother!" So after sharing my sidenote advice with the technician to never EVER use the words, "Oh, no," in an ultrasound room, I transitioned back into celebrating the best news ever.

More than likely, you've experienced extraordinarily outstanding, life-changing news before, too. Maybe it wasn't a baby. But a promotion at work, perhaps? Or a notice in the mail stating you've paid off your student loans? How about that sizeable tax return check? The truth is, we've all experienced celebration-worthy news at some point. And if we've made the decision to believe in who Jesus says He is, then we have a reason to celebrate the greatest news every single day!

Today we'll be focusing on the forgiveness we receive through the ultimate sacrifice Jesus made on the cross for us. Sure, you'll probably find there are kids who've heard the story many times before. But it's likely you'll also come across some who are hearing it for the very first time. Don't hesitate to start an equally exciting party for both scenarios. (Much like whether you're discovering you're having a baby boy, rather than a baby girl.)

God's forgiveness will always be the greatest news we could ever celebrate! Take a moment to celebrate what He's done for you before you kick off Day 3, and pray for the conversations you will have with those around you.

JESUS IS THE LIFE OF THE PARTY.

READ JOHN 4:1-26, 39-42

Do you have that family member who is always the life of the party? You know the type. They're charismatic, witty, and uniquely gifted at making sure everyone has a good time. They have a matchless ability to bring fun to any festivities. Often, the party doesn't really even start until they arrive.

For me, this person has always been my older brother, Cody. And as we grew up, his presence took shape in various ways. After he left for college, the holidays became cherished parcels of time when the house would be filled with his loud voice and silly jokes again. There was that weekend he visited me in my freshman dorm at the University of Delaware. We attended a football game. Who do you think was found, running back and forth at the base of the student section, waving the blue and yellow flag to rally cheers from the crowd?

After Cody completed four years at the United States Military Academy, he was obligated to serve for five years in the Army. His first couple tours were no walk in the park, as he kicked off his commitment stationed at the Korean DMZ, and then Iraq. It would have been understandable if he opted to remain emotionally absent during those days of plowing through a complicated time on the other side of the world. But once the life of the party, always the life of the party, I suppose.

He would remain present by faithfully writing me letters, checking in on life back home. How is school? Is your boyfriend treating you well? Make sure you eat an extra slice of pie for me this Thanksgiving. He would send videos of himself for our family to watch when we were together. He would inevitably make us laugh every time. He'd make us cry, too.

The thing is, Cody has brought so much joy to my life, regardless of his location, simply because he has always helped me believe I matter. For me, that's all I really need in order to feel like I want to participate in any party. Don't you think we all need to feel that way, too?

Perhaps VBS Day 4 feels a bit daunting. You're wiped out. I'm certain the Samaritan woman who found Jesus at the well was tired, too. But Jesus has a unique way of helping us see our worth. And that can breathe life directly into our souls, giving us no other choice but to celebrate.

Take a moment to thank God for those "life of the party" folks in your life. And then ask Him for extra ounces of energy that come as a result of the life we're given when we have a relationship with Him.

YOU CAN BE A PARTY STARTER.

READ MATTHEW 5:14-16.

The room is dark. Bright streamers are carefully twisted and draped from corner to corner. Balloons are inflated and scattered around the floor. The table is full of party food favorites. And most importantly, if you listen carefully enough, you'll hear hushed whispers of loved ones, gathered and hiding in various nooks of the room, doing everything they can to contain their excitement until the right moment.

The door slowly opens.

Someone switches on the light.

"SURPRISE!" everyone shouts at once, as they all jump to their feet and reveal themselves to the person at the door whose expression is filled with both shock and gratitude.

There's nothing quite like a surprise party! I think one of the things I love most is that the party doesn't really even begin until those lights come on. After all, what's the purpose of a surprise party without the guest of honor? The room doesn't illuminate until they enter it.

As believers, we've been given the charge to start the party every single day as we choose to turn on the light for this world. We can do this by how we live, love others, and point them to the guest of honor: Jesus. Unfortunately, this is a lot more challenging than making tasty food and hanging a few fancy decorations.

You know this because you selflessly set an entire week aside to start the party for the kids who came to VBS. You put your own schedule and obligations aside. You might have had to shuffle some things around to make it work. Perhaps you even gave up a week of vacation time in order to serve. More than likely, at the end of it all, the last thing you want is a party. Instead, you'd probably prefer a quiet room or your comfy bed to collapse in. You deserve rest, my friend!

But chances are, you'll continue looking back on this week. Consider how you turned the light on for so many. Ponder how you've pointed them to the ultimate source of joy: Jesus. And then take time to listen to God's voice. He may possibly be prompting you to keep starting the party for kids on a regular basis.

Thank you for everything you did this week. Thank you for making a lasting impact on the lives of the kids you were with. And thank you for how you will continue to let God fill you with His joy, in order to spread His light to the world around you.