



DEVOTIONS
Advent 2019

As an added feature, these devotions have reflection questions for each day's messages. These can be used for self-study or as prompts for discussion when reflecting as a group.

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BIG AND TINY

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:1-3)

Advent for us starts where it always has—with the One who created everything. It starts with God the Father, who made us and loved us—and with God the Son, who came to be our Savior Jesus. And it starts with the Holy Spirit, who gives us faith and life in Jesus.

But it also starts with you in all of your tininess—somebody sitting in a comfortable chair reading in the lamplight; a parent putting the little ones to bed with a prayer and a story about Jesus; a driver with your eyes on the road, watching out for hazards while the back of your mind is preoccupied with work or errands. You are a single speck of human life among billions of others on a troubled planet in an ordinary galaxy of the immense universe. And yet Advent is about you, because you are the reason Jesus came.

You matter to Him. God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God—why should He care about you? And yet He does. He has told you so: “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Luke 12:6-8).

So here we are, in Advent—watching and praying and marveling as we see how the great God Himself, the Most High, comes down to us as a tiny baby Himself, dependent on us for nursing and diaper-changing and holding and singing to sleep. And we rejoice, because we too depend on Him who grew up and suffered and died and rose again for our sakes. Because He loves us, our tiny lives have become infinitely meaningful. He has made us the adopted children of God Himself.

Dear Father, thank You for sending Your Son. Thank You that we matter to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Does the size of the universe and your place in it ever trouble you? Why or why not?
2. How can you be sure that you are important to God?
3. Who is there in your life who needs to know that they matter, too—both to you and to God?

A DEEP DIVE INTO THE ORDINARY

Jesus, when He began His ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli, the son of Matthat ... the son of Esli ... the son of Josech ... the son of Elmadam ... the son of Nathan, the son of David ... (Luke 3:23-31 and following)

Have you ever heard of an underground river? It sometimes happens that a river flows along in the sunshine—and then it suddenly vanishes into a cave, a hole in the ground. We stop and blink. Where has it gone? It is still there, but it is hidden from us. The next time it comes to the surface, it may be miles from here.

Jesus' ancestry in Luke 3 is like this. It doesn't have all the kings and leaders we find in His other genealogy in Matthew 1. No, this side of the family flows from King David through his son Nathan (of whom we know almost nothing). Then it disappears into the ordinary.

Who are these people: Esli, Josech, Rhesa, Elmadam? They are nothing but names to us. They may have been shepherds, farmers, storekeepers, craftsmen. But history tells us nothing about them. They were just ordinary.

And we are just ordinary too, aren't we? We are born, live, love, maybe have children, do our work, and eventually die. Someday our descendants may pore over the family tree, wondering—who was that person? Only a name remains.

And yet God does not forget us. We are connected to Jesus, just as Esli, Josech, and Rhesa are. We are people whom Jesus came to rescue—to bring us out of the power of darkness and into His marvelous light. Because Jesus died and rose for us, we are not *nobodies*. We are God's own children. He loves us dearly, and He calls us by name.

Dear Father, thank You that we matter to You. Keep us in Your Son Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever been interested in family history?
2. How do you feel about being ordinary—does it bother you? Please you? Why do you feel that way?
3. How do you know that you matter to God?

“SHOW US THE FATHER”

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ... No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known. (John 1:14, 18)

“Show us the Father,” said one of Jesus’ disciples on the night before He died. “That will be enough for us” (John 14:8). Leaving aside the jaw-dropping audacity of this—I mean, you don’t ask for much, do you, Philip? Still, I can sympathize with what he asked. It’s not that easy living with an invisible God. Sometimes I yearn to just “see” Him—to get rid of the confusion and fumbling that marks my faith life—to know Him the way He knows me.

To this request Jesus has the perfect answer. “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father ... Believe Me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me!” (John 14:9b, 11a) Paul echoes this: “He is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15a).

That means that one of the reasons Jesus was born among us is so that we can see God—so that, as human beings, we can touch and see and handle and know what God is, in the context of our own lives (see 1 John 1:1-3). Do you want to know what God is like, and what He thinks of you? Look at the baby of Bethlehem. There is God in the flesh, come down to you. There He is—not in power or unreachable glory, but lying helpless in a manger made for animals.

But look further. There He is as a grown man, patiently teaching and healing and answering questions. There He is, providing wine for a couple’s wedding, weeping for a friend who has died, talking to a woman with a bad reputation as if she were His equal. There He is—beaten, tortured, mocked, dying. And there He is—risen from the dead, and promising that same everlasting life to you for free—if only you will take it.

Here is God, up close and personal. Now we can know Him.

Dear Lord, thank You for making Yourself known to us! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. How do you usually get to know someone—a new friend or neighbor?
2. How do you get to know God?
3. What is one thing you have recently learned (or relearned) about God’s personality?

KEEPING PROMISES

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall call His Name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:22-23)

Back in the late 1970s, my future husband was in a prison camp in Vietnam with a friend of his, Ben. Ben was a jeweler, and he promised that one day, if they both survived, he would make the rings for my husband’s marriage.

Nearly 20 years later they met again in Southern California, where both had come as refugees. My husband and I were newly engaged, and Ben did keep his promise—and I remember the story whenever I look at my beautiful rings.

Why do we find these stories satisfying? I think because they remind us that someone is in control of the history of the world—that it isn’t all accident and the march of time. And that is exactly what God’s promise through the prophet Isaiah does for us as well, but in a much greater way—it reminds us that God has the world under control, and it *will* come to a happy ending, in time.

“A virgin shall conceive”—that’s what Isaiah told grouchy king Ahaz in chapter 7. Hundreds of years after both men were dead, God kept His promise, sending His Son Jesus into the womb of a virgin named Mary. A promise made—and kept. A reminder that the course of history is still under the control of a good and loving God. And He will keep all His promises, even the most unbelievable—even the most personal. “I will forgive your sins ... I will make you My own ... I will give you life forever in Jesus’ Name,” says the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Holy Father, thank You that we can always trust Your promises, and not even one will go unfulfilled. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When did someone make a promise to you and keep it? How did you feel?
2. Why do people consider it so important to keep their promises?
3. Which promise of God means the most to you right now?

THE DAYS OF HEROD

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah ... (Luke 1:5a)

“In the days of Herod,” says Luke. It’s easy to skip over those words, to treat them as a date and nothing more. Yet if we do that, we miss something important.

Who was this Herod, king of Judea? Well, he was a genius in some ways—a great builder in particular. But that’s not all he was. Here are some other words that fit. Foreign ruler. Lavish spender. Conniver. Madman. Murderer. Killer of his wife and children. Terrorist.

Given the history of Herod, Luke is probably not just setting a date. He is reminding us what those days were like. Can you imagine living under such a ruler? Dark days indeed. It would be easy to lose hope. It would be easy to feel abandoned by God, left to suffer in a meaningless world.

But that was exactly the time God chose to send the angel Gabriel to Zechariah. “You will have a son,” he said. “Your son will get people ready for the coming of the Lord.” The light is about to dawn in the darkness. God has not forgotten His people!

We, too, live in dark days. War. Abuse. Greed. Ecological disaster. Racism. Terrorism. It’s easy to be terrified at what is coming upon our world.

And yet, God says to us, “Look up. I have not abandoned you. I am sending My Son Jesus to be your Savior. He will destroy the powers of darkness and rescue you from evil. Darkness will not have the last word. My Son shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome Him” (see John 1:5).

Dear Father, when we are afraid, help us to hope in Your Son Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What is frightening to you in our world right now?
2. When you are afraid, what do you do to find comfort?
3. How does Jesus’ death and resurrection make a difference for you when you are afraid?

CHANGE

And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard" (Luke 1:11-13a)

It must have been rough for Zechariah. For years and years he and his wife had been praying for a child. But the years went by, in a house that was quieter than it should have been, two people growing old together. Nothing ever changed.

Until it did. Bang! And there's an angel standing in front of Zechariah. "Don't be afraid," he says. "God has heard your prayer. And here's what's going to happen next!"

Zechariah's life was turned upside down. No more quiet. No more sadness and resignation. Instead, a baby—a son—the forerunner to the Messiah!

"Don't be afraid," the angel said. I think Zechariah must have needed those words. I know I do, when my life changes suddenly—even for good things. Don't be afraid! God has not forgotten you. He has heard your prayers, and He is in control, and He is doing something wonderful.

Is there something in your own life that is changing, either for good or for ill? God is still with you in the middle of it. He will not leave you alone. His very Name is Immanuel, "God-with-us."

No wonder Paul could write, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:31-32, 37-39).

Lord, help me to face change knowing that You hold me safely in Your hands. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do you tend to be someone who likes change, or who resists it?
2. What is changing in your life right now? How do you feel about it?
3. Tell about a time when Jesus helped you deal with a difficult change.

EMBARRASSING

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." (Luke 1:18-20)

Poor Zechariah! Doomed to go down in history as the man who could argue against God's promise, even at the very moment he was face-to-face with an angel. How embarrassing! How undignified!

But notice how God responds. He doesn't dump Zechariah and find someone else to be John's father.

Instead, with considerable patience, the angel says, "Hello! I'm Gabriel, an angel, yes? I stand in God's presence, yes? He sent me, yes? Got all that straight? Okay, let's move forward. This good news is really going to happen!"

Zechariah may pay a price for his foolishness, but God still chooses to work through him. The good news is still true. John will be born—the way will be prepared—and ultimately, Jesus will come to save us.

This can comfort us when we feel like poor excuses for Christians. Jesus has no pride. After all, He is the One who laid aside His glory and came into the world as a helpless human baby, naked and hungry. He is the One who hung on a shameful cross for our sake. He is the One who rose from the dead in power and glory—only to be mistaken for a gardener by the first person to meet Him.

Having done all of that for us, He will certainly take us into His kingdom, even if He has to drag us whining the whole way. He loves us that much.

Lord, teach us to trust in You when believing is a difficult thing to do. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When have you done something silly?
2. Is there something for which you have been praying a long time? What?
3. Do you ever feel like an embarrassment to Jesus? How does His love comfort you?

TAKING IT SLOW

After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people." (Luke 1:24-25)

"If a miracle ever happened to me, I'd be shouting it everywhere!" Ever hear someone say something like that to you?

But John's conception and birth was different. It started with an angel announcing the miracle in private to a single man, John's father-to-be. But when that man wouldn't believe the angel, God struck him mute. No one would be hearing the story from *him*!

And then there was Elizabeth, John's mother. Perhaps her husband managed to write the story down for her. Perhaps not! But when she realized she was pregnant, she kept herself hidden at home, away from people. She wasn't telling the miracle story either! Why?

We don't know, but we can guess. There is value sometimes in taking things slowly—in simply sitting still and watching God carry out His good promises. We don't always have to be running, shouting, announcing what God is doing. There is a time for that; yes, but there is also a time for praying and thinking and rejoicing in the Lord. Elizabeth did that. Zechariah did that. We, too, can do that, as we look forward to the celebration of Jesus' coming into the world.

During this Advent season, take the time to meditate on Jesus' birth—on how God loved you and the whole world so much that He sent His own Son to become one of us, our Savior from death and evil. Think about the One who loves you and lay down His life for you on the cross—only to take it up again. Let that story seep in; let it become part of your very bones.

Then go, tell others the miraculous good news.

Lord, please let Your Holy Spirit help me to comprehend and believe what You have done to save me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Are you mostly a quiet person or a loud person? Why do you think so?
2. How do the quiet times of your life help you?
3. When you need God's comfort and strength, what parts of the Bible—either stories or verses—do you think about?

ON A SCHEDULE

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. (Luke 1:26-27).

I love the way this passage starts: “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God ...” I have an absurd picture in my mind, of Gabriel counting the months of Elizabeth’s pregnancy on his fingers, and then hearing God say, “Time to go.” I know it’s childish, but it reminds me how closely God watches over our lives—even when it looks like He’s not paying any attention at all.

Because we often feel that way, don’t we? We look around at our ordinary lives and find it hard to believe that the Creator of the universe could be bothered to keep track of us, much less be interested. Or if we are suffering through grief or pain, we may feel abandoned—even deliberately abandoned by God. Where is He?

Against our feelings, the Bible tells us that God is in fact watching over us—far more closely than we may give Him credit for. “Even the hairs of your head are all numbered,” says Jesus (Matthew 10:30). “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of My hands,” says God (Isaiah 49:15-16a).

Indeed, He has done this literally. As God come into the world in human flesh, Jesus bears our marks on His very hands—the nail marks of His crucifixion, the guarantee of the great love He has for us. Even now that He has risen from the dead, He still carries those marks. Truly, He will never forget us, and never overlook us.

Dear Lord, help me to truly grasp and believe that You came into this world for me—me personally. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do you ever feel overlooked or forgotten? When?
2. What kinds of things tell you that someone is truly paying attention to you—truly loving you?
3. When you feel lonely and insignificant, what do you do to remind yourself of God’s loving attention?

GREATLY TROUBLED

And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. (Luke 1:28-29)

Mary was greatly troubled by the angel’s greeting. Well, who wouldn’t be? There she was, probably doing her daily work in her mother’s house—cooking, cleaning, carrying water, just like any other day. Then suddenly an angel comes in, and says, “Greetings, O favored one!”

Favored one? There she was, an ordinary girl in a nondescript town in the backlands of Galilee. She might have been holding a broom or a cooking spoon at that very moment. She knew she was nobody special. Favored one? Had the angel got a wrong number?

But he explained right away. “The Lord is with you,” he said. It is as if the angel said, *“You belong to God, and He is pleased with you, and you are never apart from Him. And soon He will be with you in an entirely new way—as a human baby developing inside your own body.”* Favored? Oh, yes!

We too are favored, and for the same reason. Not because we are anybody special, but because the Lord Himself is with us. He has chosen to be with us—to become a human baby, to grow up to save us through His suffering and death, and to rise again. He has joined Himself to humanity forever, and He will never desert us.

Specifically, He has joined Himself to you—for you are a baptized child of God who trusts in Jesus and belongs to Him forever. Yes, you are favored. The Lord of everything has drawn you close to Him.

Dear Lord, help me realize that You are always with me. Bring me closer to You in trust and love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Who do you spend the most time with in your daily life? Why?
2. What are some ways you see that God has favored you?
3. How does it make you feel to realize that God wants you—you, yourself—and has laid down His life to make you His?

JESUS FOR YOU

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall call His Name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:30-33)

Notice what the angel says to Mary—or rather, what he doesn't say. The angel doesn't say, "The pre-existent Son of God, the Source of your existence, is beginning His incarnation and the redemption of the cosmos." Imagine Mary's face if he had said that!? If it had been me, I would have been babbling: "The who, the what?"

No, he explains what God is doing in a way Mary can understand. Mary knows about pregnancy and babies and what it means to raise them. And as a good Jewish girl, she knows all about the coming Messiah, the Savior of her people.

What God is saying to Mary was this: "This Jesus is for you." He is for you personally, not for far-off theologians or professors at some college. He is your Savior. He is God-with-you, both your child and your Lord.

And God goes on saying this to each one of us, doesn't He? This Jesus is your Savior—the One who is with you in your troubled life and sets you free from the power of evil. He is the One who will walk with you even through death. He will raise you—you *personally!*—from the dead on the day that He comes back, because you are His and He is yours.

Lord, thank You that You have given yourself to me as my Savior. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you taken care of a baby? Is it an easy or hard job? Why?
2. What is your favorite name or title for Jesus? Why?
3. What does it mean to you that Jesus is *for you*?

OVERWHELMED

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the Child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1:34-37)

Mary sounds a bit overwhelmed to me. The angel has just listed the great things that her future Son is going to do, and she lets it all pass by. Instead, she grabs the one point she can understand right now: "How will this happen, since I am a virgin?"

Practicalities matter. Mary wants to know what happens next. And the angel is gentle with her. He says, "The Holy Spirit will handle all of that, and the baby will be conceived by miracle." Mary doesn't need to worry. God has everything under His control.

The angel gives her more comfort, though she hasn't asked for it. "Your relative Elizabeth is also pregnant by miracle."

Mary's eyes must have lit up. She will not be alone in this strange situation; she will have a cousin with her, someone who will understand. Mary decided to go visit her immediately.

How kind God is to us! He knows when we are overwhelmed and barely keeping it together. And so He provides helps and comfort for us along the way—whether that's family, friends, or even the kindness of a stranger.

And we have God's best gift—Jesus our Savior, who died and rose for us, and who is always with us. We are not left alone to deal with an overwhelming future. He will keep us safely in His hands.

Dear Jesus, help me when I am overwhelmed and don't know what to do. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Is anything making you nervous right now? What is it?
2. What do you do when you are overwhelmed?
3. If you are willing, tell a story of a time God helped you when you were overwhelmed.

A COURTEOUS GOD AND A WILLING RESPONSE

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:38)

If you stop to think about it, God didn't have to tell Mary what He was going to do. He didn't have to explain anything at all. Oh, no doubt Mary would have been surprised and frightened to find herself pregnant with no explanation of how it happened—but after all, Mary is a human being, and she has to do what God wants. Right?

And yet—that is not the kind of God we have, one who runs roughshod over us, caring about nothing but His own power and glory. One of the old Greek gods would have behaved like that—if they were real. But not this God, not the true God. He asks first.

Why? Because this is God's nature—to be gentle, to show mercy, to treat even the least of His creatures as incredibly valuable. Mary has a high value in God's eyes. You have a high value in God's eyes. God will not treat you carelessly. He loves you. That is why He sent His Son Jesus to rescue you!

God has done everything. Jesus was born among us. He lived and served and taught and healed—and then He lay down His life for us on the cross, to make us God's own. He rose from the dead. And now He offers us eternal life, a free gift to everyone who will believe in Him.

God will not force our hands. Instead, He offers Himself to us. And through the power of the Holy Spirit, we say willingly, "Yes, Lord. I am Yours."

Dear Father, give me Your Spirit's help to respond to You with joy and gladness. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What rules of courtesy and good manners did your family teach you?
2. How do you think courtesy is related to love?
3. When has God treated you with loving courtesy in your life?

TAKE TIME FOR JOY

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ... For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." (Luke 1:41b-42, 44)

No doubt Mary had a lot of things to do: talk to her parents about her pregnancy (scary), tell Joseph (scarier). It would have been so easy to let these things fill up her mind, take over her planning, lead to sleepless nights and worry-filled days. After all, that's what happens to us, doesn't it? The future reaches into our present and overwhelms us.

But it doesn't have to be this way. In the Christmas story, before the suffering, came the joy.

Look at the shining happiness Mary and Elizabeth shared! No sooner did Mary get the good news than she rushed off to see her relative. No sooner did Elizabeth hear her voice than she exclaimed with joy, "Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43) Even baby John jumped within his mother's womb. Future woes were put aside. Now was the time to celebrate and be glad at what the Lord had done.

And God calls us to this in our lives today, too. Oh, we have long to-do lists, and much of what we do is critical: caring for sick relatives, working for a living, dealing with family upset, tending to financial problems. But in the middle of all this, God says, "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:19a) God is sending Jesus to us—His own Son, born a human baby, born to save us all. God is doing this because He loves us—us, not the faceless mass of humanity, but you and me. And God is making us His children through Jesus who suffered, died, and rose again to give us life.

This is the thing the Lord has done; let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Dearest Lord, help me to pause and rejoice in how much You love me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What worries hang over you right now?
2. What specific joy has the Lord given you to think about at this time?
3. Take a moment to think about the joy God has given you and thank Him for it.

WHERE ARE YOU LOOKING?

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ... for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His Name." (Luke 1:46-47, 49)

I'm teaching my son to drive a car, and one of the things he needs to learn is that where your eyes go, the car goes. If you stare at the car that is approaching you on the other side of the road, you may hit it. Better to look at the road straight ahead of you, where you want your car to go.

"What you see is what you get." Mary knew that. Listen to her joy as she describes what has happened to her! She says, "My soul magnifies the Lord ... my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ... He has looked on me ... He who is mighty has done great things for me ... holy is His Name." She is focusing on the Lord. He is the One who means everything to her. Even in the middle of this mighty miracle, her heart returns to the Miracle Worker—to the Lord, who has chosen her.

Mary has her head on straight. There is no danger of her getting lost in the miracle—of making it all about herself—of turning the whole thing into a freak show or tourist attraction. She loves the Lord, and so she keeps the miracle in its proper place—as one more gift of love from her Lord.

Where are your eyes today? Take some time to stop and stare. Gaze at the baby Jesus in the manger—born into humanity for you. Watch as Jesus teaches, heals, comforts, and calls lost people to Himself. Fix your eyes on Him as He hangs on that cross for you. And look joyfully at Him as He meets you after the resurrection—loving you, forgiving you, and sending you out into His world to share His love with others.

What you see is what you get. Let's fix our eyes on Jesus!

Dear Lord Jesus, keep my eyes and my heart fixed on You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When have you run into something? What caused your accident?
2. Are there things in your life right now that are taking up too much of your attention? If so, what?
3. What small habits could you begin that will help you focus on Jesus?

THOSE WHO FEAR HIM

And His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. (Luke 1:50-51)

Have you ever noticed? As Mary continues her song, the Magnificat, the words become more and more revolutionary. This probably isn't what we expect from the young mother of our Christmas cards, the blue-robed virgin with a sweet face and downcast eyes. But Mary is right—for Jesus' coming is going to revolutionize the world.

She sings, "The Lord's mercy is for those who fear Him," but also "He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." What group do we fall into? Are we those who fear and love God, knowing how much we need His mercy? Or do we have proud hearts that deny we need a Savior at all?

Only one group of people will kneel at the manger to see their newborn Savior Jesus. Those who are proud will never come inside to see Him at all—after all, they believe that their own plans and schemes will be enough to get them the life they want. They will stand outside—or go away completely, still looking for their own desires.

But the humble, the broken, the needy—these are the ones who fear the Lord. They know the truth about themselves, and so they know how much they need God's mercy. Jesus is that mercy.

Let us humble our hearts and bend down and enter the room where the baby Jesus is lying. Let us kneel in the dirt and the straw at the foot of His manger. Let us feast our eyes on the proof that God, the high King of everything, truly loves us and has sent His Son to make us into God's own children. This is our Savior—not our own plans and wisdom, but God's. This is Jesus, who will one day hang on a cross for us—and then rise from the dead to give us everlasting life.

Dear Father, help us to fear and love You with our whole hearts, always glad that You have given us Jesus our Savior. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Is there one area of life where you tend to get proud or conceited? Which one?
2. Based on what you know of human nature, who is closer to the truth—the person who is proud or the person who is humble?
3. Why do you think so?

LOOKING AT THE FUTURE

He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty. (Luke 1:52-53)

As Mary continues to praise God, she does something that happens in a few other places in the Bible. She starts using the past tense for events that haven't even happened yet.

Look around you. Do you see the humble exalted, and the mighty brought down from their thrones? Me neither. How about the hungry being filled with good things, and the rich sent away empty? Well ... I can think of a few occasions, but by and large, this hasn't happened yet either. A quick glance at the news tells us just the opposite.

So why does she say it this way? It looks like this is a thing that the Bible does whenever God wants to emphasize that something is true. It is as if He were saying, "Listen up! What I am telling you is so sure and certain, I'm going to talk about it as a done deal. I'm going to put it in the past tense. Have no doubts—this will really happen."

That is what the coming of Jesus means to us—that we can be sure and certain that God is turning the present order of the world upside down. The abuse and corruption and hatred you see today? Look closely, because you will never see it again. God Himself has come to destroy the power of the devil on the cross, and to rise to new life. And He is bringing the human race into that new life along with Him.

That is what Paul means when he uses the same grammatical trick in Ephesians 2:4-6: "God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." We who trust in Jesus have that new life already. And our resurrection and eternal joy with Jesus are so certain, we can talk about them in the past tense.

Lord, thank You so much for what You have done and what You will certainly do for us, because You love us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What are some of the things you are most certain of in your life?
2. When you really want someone to believe you, what do you do?
3. Tell a story about a time you trusted in God even when you were afraid.

FACE THE MUSIC

And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. (Luke 1:56)

God was so kind to Mary. He gave her three months of rest and peace staying with a family who would understand her pregnancy and believe her explanation. Mary had time to think and pray, time to adjust to how God has turned her life upside down. (She also had time to get through the worst of the morning sickness!)

And yet the day came when she had to return home. I wonder how difficult that was for her. She would have to tell her parents—would they believe her? She would have to talk to Joseph—would he divorce her?

She didn't know. All she knew was that God had His hand on her life, and that He was in control, whatever happened. And that was enough.

We too have scary times when we have to “face the music.” And sometimes the hardest bit is the fact that we don't know what comes next. We are moving into the unknown.

But there is one thing we do know: God is already there, preparing our way, caring for us with the same love He showed when He came into our world as our Savior Jesus. The same Lord who lay down His life for us on the cross will also be with us as we face a frightening future. We will not walk alone. The One who rose from the dead will be there walking with us, our hand in His.

Dear Lord Jesus, help me to trust You when I am afraid. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What things frighten you the most?
2. When you are afraid, what do you do to feel better?
3. Does it help you to realize that God holds your future just as securely as He holds your present? Why or why not?

REJOICING IN THE GOOD

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. (Luke 1:57-58)

Hatred. Judgment. Racism. Greed. Self-justification. Self-righteousness. If you've been following the news recently, you've seen all of these.

And it gets old, doesn't it? Eventually I just have to shut it off, close my eyes, and pray. I've done my duty as a citizen and a Christian and a human being—I've prayed and written letters and made donations and volunteered to help—and now I'm just done. Because nobody (but God) can take that barrage of evil, day in and day out.

So what is the cure for that? Elizabeth's neighbors got it right. They "heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her." They set aside whatever negatives were preoccupying them at the moment. They saw a good, pure, lovely gift of God—a baby! And born to parents who had waited so long! And they rejoiced.

Paul recommends that to us, too. He writes, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8).

And what fools we would be if we did not focus on the best Gift that God has given us, the purest, most lovely, most excellent Gift—which is Jesus Christ Himself! There are days in our lives when we just can't think of anything good to focus on. But there is always Jesus. There is always the Savior and Lord who came to us in our great need, who rescued us with His own life-giving death, and who rose from the dead, sharing that victory with us.

Think of His excellence and goodness—whoever saw such kindness? And to people who don't deserve it! Think of His truth and honor—there is nobody like Him, who will never let us down. Think of His pure loveliness—a God so courteous, so willing to humble Himself, that He makes Himself one with His hurting creation and raises us back to Himself. Think on Him.

Dear Lord, help me to find peace and refreshment in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the evil in the world? When?
2. What do you do when you feel that way?
3. What one aspect of Jesus' personality do you love the most, and why?

FOUND OUT

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)

The Holy Spirit never says anything by accident. That's why the words in Matthew 1 are so disturbing: Mary "*was found* to be with child." It doesn't sound like she had the chance to break the news gently. It sounds rather like someone found out—like there was a shocking moment of discovery.

And we know what goes with those moments, don't we? Terror. Anger. Yelling. Disbelief. A great deal of pain. Family upset. I rather doubt Mary's home was a happy place, at least for a while.

Of course, Mary had a perfectly innocent explanation. But we have our "found out" moments, too. Those sickening moments when a friend or family member confronts us with a truth we tried to keep hidden. The evidence they cite—phone calls, text messages, internet searches, the eyewitness of a friend or neighbor. Our own terror and shame, as we wonder what the long-hidden truth will do to our families, our jobs, our reputations.

In times like these there is nothing to do but flee to the One who saves us from shame and fear—to Jesus, who knows the worst about us and loves us anyway. There is no need to worry about being "found out" with Him. He already knows. And knowing, He has already laid down His life for us, doing everything necessary to rescue us and to set us free from our terror and guilt.

He will never abandon us, no matter what we are found to have done. He says, "Come to Me," and He means it. He will not shout at us. He will not ask us unanswerable questions like "Why?" He will receive us, wash us, heal us, and make us new. He will keep us as His own forever.

With Jesus our Savior, there is never any "found out." There is only "found"—we are found safe, in Him.

Dearest Lord, hold on to me when I am terrified and ashamed. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What part do you hate most about being "found out" when you have done wrong?
2. When has someone shown you mercy and compassion when you didn't deserve it?
3. If you are willing, tell of a time when Jesus comforted you when you felt guilty or ashamed.

CONSIDERING “THESE THINGS”

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream ... (Matthew 1:19-20a)

There are many times when I wish God would speak to me from on high. Just open the heavens, shout (or whisper) a little guidance. Or send me an angel—or a letter, or a text message, you know, anything would be good. Because I just don’t know what to do.

But of course, God usually doesn’t do that. Angels are few and far between in my life, and (I’m guessing) in yours as well. Instead, we’re left to do what Joseph did—lie awake, “considering these things” with the best wisdom we have available to us. We have to figure out what to do.

But the good news is that we do *not* have to “consider these things” on our own! Most of us are painfully aware of the limits of our own wisdom. But we have a better resource to rely on, what Paul calls “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24b).

James says this to us as well: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (James 1:5). We can ask for the help we need. We can ask about anything—even a situation as seemingly messed up as Joseph’s, where he thought his future wife had cheated on him. God will not judge us for being in that situation. He will not say, “See, if you had listened to Me, you wouldn’t need to ask for help!”

Jesus is not that kind of person. He listens to us when we are in trouble and cry out. He gives us the Holy Spirit’s help to make decisions, even the terribly tough ones. After all, He knows what our lives are like. Isn’t He the One who became a human being like us, to suffer, die, and rise for our sakes?

*Lord, when I am in trouble, help me to cry out to You for help. You always hear me.
Thank You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

1. How do you think Joseph felt when he found out about Mary’s pregnancy?
2. How do you feel when you just don’t know what to do? How do you handle it?
3. When has God helped you make a tough decision?

CALL HIM JESUS

(The angel said) “Joseph, son of David, 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)

“Do not fear,” the angel says to Joseph. Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, in spite of the problems that will come with that. Don’t be afraid of the gossip—the people who will doubtless decide that you are the one who got her pregnant prematurely—the people who will whisper behind their hands that maybe there was *somebody else*. Don’t be afraid.

But there must have been more than that. Don’t be afraid to bring Mary home as your wife, even though you are about to begin a marriage like no other marriage in history—one which will be overshadowed from the beginning by the coming of the Son of God. Don’t be afraid, even though this baby will be God incarnate—even though raising Him is beyond imagination—even though He will have enemies right and left, and they will break your heart. Don’t be afraid.

Don’t be afraid, because “She will bear a Son, and you shall call His Name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” Take courage and bring Mary home as your wife, because with her comes Jesus, and He is God-with-you. Neither of you will be alone. God Himself is with you in this unborn baby. Don’t be afraid.

This baby is your Savior—the One who will rescue you and all people from the power of death and the devil. God has heard the cries of the human race, and He has come to save us. And you will call Him Jesus, which means “the Lord is Savior.”

Don’t be afraid. Jesus is for you.

Dear Jesus, thank You for coming to be my Savior—and the Savior of all the world. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What would scare you the most about the life Joseph was facing, if it were you in his place?
2. What does the word “Savior” mean to you?
3. What are you afraid of right now? How is Jesus helping you with it?

COURAGE

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a Son. And he called His Name Jesus. (Matthew 1:24-25)

I really admire Joseph. What courage he had, to simply wake up and go finalize the marriage, bringing his wife home—all on the basis of a dream. Mary and Zechariah both got to see an angel face to face. Joseph? Well, like his Old Testament namesake, he got his instructions in dreams.

I think that most of us are a lot more like Joseph than like Mary in this. God speaks to us in less flamboyant ways—through the Bible, through prayer, through consultation with wise Christian friends. God makes Himself known, but He does it in ways that are easier to mistake.

And we worry about that, don't we? What if I get it wrong? What if I think God wants me to do something, and later on it turns into a disaster? We fret and worry, as if knowing God's will were some sort of test we could score an *F* on—as if we could fail, and disappoint God. Sometimes that worries us more than the actual outcome of the decision!

But that is not the case. Because of our Savior Jesus, we are now God's beloved children. We are very dear to Him—so dear that He lay down His own life for us!—and He is certainly not looking to set traps for us. As King David wrote, "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:13-14).

There is no chance that the same God who became a human baby out of love for us would be looking for things to blame us for. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we will make the best decisions we can; and if things go badly (and face it, don't they often?), we will know that God is still with us, and we are still His children. After all, He is Immanuel; He is "God with us."

Lord, You know that I get confused easily. Guide me, and help me to trust in You when I am nervous and afraid. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Are you afraid to make mistakes? Why or why not?
2. Can something "go wrong" from a human point of view and still be used in God's plans?
3. If you are willing, tell about a time when you got something wrong (or thought you had) and still found love and acceptance from another person.

GOD WITH US

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with Child. (Luke 2:4-5)

It could not have been an easy trip. Joseph needed to get to Bethlehem for legal reasons, and he brought Mary with him on the verge of delivery. In spite of the Christmas cards, there's a good chance they both walked. The Bible says nothing about a donkey. And the trip was at least 70 miles.

Why not leave Mary home? After all, surely she would be more comfortable with her female relatives to care for her, and a proper midwife on call. We don't know. Perhaps they remembered the prophecy that Bethlehem would be Jesus' birthplace. Perhaps Joseph just didn't want to leave his wife alone in the hands of gossips.

And then the birth itself—not in an inn, as there was no room for them there. Labor and delivery for a first-time mother—could Joseph find anyone to help? Who knows? An adorable baby, at long last. A manger, to keep Him off the floor so no one could step on Him and the rats wouldn't bite Him. The birth of the Son of God.

This wasn't what Mary and Joseph wanted. It wasn't what they planned. But it was what God chose.

This is how much God loves us, that He sent His only Son into the world under such circumstances. This is how much Jesus our Savior loves us. Our troubles, our suffering, our poverty, our griefs—He shared them all from the beginning, every day of His life. He came on purpose to be the “Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” that the prophet foretold (Isaiah 53:3). He took them to the cross.

And then He rose from the dead, triumphant over all of this—over evil, over sin, over death, over the power of the devil. He did it for you and for me, because He loves us. As He shared our suffering, so now we share in His joy and everlasting life. Jesus came to be Immanuel, God-with-us forever.

Lord, thank You for loving us so much. Draw me closer to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What was your own birth like, if you know?
2. How can you tell when someone really loves you?
3. What does it mean to you, to be close to Jesus?

THE BEST HE COULD OFFER

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 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 2:6-7)

Mary loved her baby. You can see it in her actions. She wrapped Him in swaddling clothes—these were strips of cloth that mothers used to bind their babies so they would grow up straight and strong. And of course, she wanted the best for her baby. So she must have packed them, back in Nazareth, in case of need. They weren't silk or satin, but they were the best she could offer.

Joseph loved the baby, too. We can see that by all the hard work he went to, to keep Jesus and His mother safe. Was it he who brought over the manger so that Jesus could have a safe place to sleep and Mary wouldn't have to worry about Him? It seems likely. He couldn't provide Jesus with a crib or cradle, but he could at least get Him off the floor. It was the best he could offer.

And God the Father? Ah, His love was the best of all. For He also provided the best He could offer—Jesus Himself, our Savior. God did not send us an angel. He did not send a wise and holy man, or a great leader, or an epic hero. He sent His own Son Jesus into the flesh, God incarnate born as a human baby.

Jesus offered Himself up for our sakes—from the first day of His life to the last. He offered Himself at the cross in order to destroy the power of sin, death, and the devil. He brought the whole human race out from under those terrible powers. And when He rose from the dead, He guaranteed that whoever trusts in Him will have the best of the best—will become a child of God and enjoy His love, and deep, joyful, meaningful life, forever.

Who could offer anything more?

Father, thank You for Jesus. Take my heart and help me to trust in Your Son forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What kinds of things would you do for a baby to care for it?
2. Name one thing God has provided for you this week that shows His love.
3. What is one thing, big or small, you choose to offer to God because you love Him?

AN ORDINARY NIGHT

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. (Luke 2:8-9)

I doubt the shepherds were expecting what they got that first Christmas night. Surely, they kissed their families goodbye, took their dinners, and went out to the fields to do the same job they'd been doing every day since they were children—watching the sheep, making sure they were all there, and keeping an eye out for predators. If it was lambing time (which it may well have been), they would be checking the ewes to make sure none of them was having trouble in labor. Other than that, not much. A dark night. Stars, probably. Quiet. Maybe storytelling or a game of dice to stay awake.

And then! And then a glorious light that lit up the fields all around like daytime, and an angel, looking like nothing they had ever seen before—except they knew it was an angel, they had heard the stories, and they panicked. This was not an ordinary night at work after all.

And yet the shepherds were on the spot at the right time to see the angel—why? Because they were doing their ordinary jobs, faithfully, quietly, just as we do ours. God came to meet them on the job—not in the temple, but in the middle of the stink and sweat of laboring ewes and the dirty clothes their wives and mothers would have to launder later. They went to see the baby Jesus dressed like workmen. God came into their real, ordinary lives, just as He comes into ours.

There is no need for us to “dress up” for God. He comes to us where we are. Jesus comes to us as our Savior—not in a storybook, not in a stained-glass picture of events far away, but in reality. He wants the real us, and He gives His own life to make that possible. And He promises us Himself in return.

Dear Lord, bring me close to You in truth, and not in daydream. Be with me in my everyday life, and help me to trust in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Where do you expect to meet God? Where do you *not* expect to meet Him?
2. Have you ever seen God at work in an unexpected part of your life?
3. Why do you think God chose shepherds to hear the good news first, and not someone else?

BORN TO YOU

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11)

It's a strange phrasing the angel used: "unto you is born" a baby. That's usually what we say to a parent, right? Not to some set of strangers who've never so much as met the family. But the angel had it right, because this was the one baby who was born to every human being in the world—every person in need of a Savior. He is ours, as closely and intimately as He is Mary's. God planned it that way.

The ancient Israelites had a concept we usually translate as "redeemer" or even "kinsman-redeemer." This was the person you needed if you got into trouble or lost all your money. The kinsman-redeemer had the legal right to buy your property back from the new owner. He could buy you back as well, if you got sold into slavery. He was allowed to do this because he was related to you. The closer the relationship, the more right he had to rescue you. Of course, you still had to hope he had the money to redeem you! Otherwise, he could do you no good.

A kinsman-redeemer is exactly what we need as human beings. Once all of us were under the power of the devil, living as slaves to guilt and shame and sin. We needed help. But who could do it? We got ourselves into that situation—by rights it ought to be fixed by a human being. But no human being was in a position to pay. God could pay—but He was not human. By being born into our human family, Jesus fixed that problem. He became our Kinsman-Redeemer, our blood relative who has the right and the ability to buy us back out of slavery.

So yes, Jesus is born to the shepherds—and to me—and to you. He is born to all of us, as close kin as our own children, as generous and loving as the best relative you ever had or dreamed of. And because He became our kin, now we can become His kin—children of God, sharing His everlasting life and joy.

Dear Lord, thank You for coming to be my Redeemer. Thank You for being born to me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do/did you ever have a favorite relative? Why?
2. Have you ever helped out a relative or close friend? Has one helped you?
3. What does it mean to you, that Jesus is your relative?

SIGNS

“And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:12)

I’ve always thought signs were to help you find things. But the angel’s words to the shepherds bother me: “This will be a sign to you,” he says ... and then goes on to tell them something basically useless for finding Jesus! Think about it: by the time they come face-to-face with the baby in a manger, *they’ve already found Him*. They’ve already blundered through the dark streets of Bethlehem, knocking on doors, asking random sleepy householders: “Hello. Have you heard of any newborns tonight?” This “sign” is useless for finding anything.

There are other signs like this in the Bible. “The Lord Himself will give you a sign,” says Isaiah to King Ahaz. “A virgin shall conceive ...” (Isaiah 7:14b). Fine—except that both men were centuries dead by the time Jesus was conceived! And then there’s God’s promise to Moses during the burning bush episode: “This shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain” (Exodus 3:12). I want to say, “Fine, Lord; after I see You send ten plagues and split the sea and rescue us all by miracle, when I no longer doubt You, *then* You will give me this sign!”

God is no fool. He knows these signs aren’t going to prove anything to us, or offer us much practical guidance, while we are still on the way. So why give them at all?

Maybe these signs are something other than road signs. Maybe they’re more like *signatures*—God’s way of signing His Name to whatever great work He has done. The signs aren’t there to show us the way. They are there to point to the One who is our Way—and to underline the fact that He has done it—*all of it*, all the guiding, all the saving.

We are used to thinking of Jesus’ birth as a beginning. But perhaps the baby in a manger is an ending—an ending to God’s long-hidden plan for overcoming the devil and rescuing His people. Wait no longer. Travel no further. Here He is—the sign, the signature, the baby in a manger.

Lord, help me to recognize and thank You for the great salvation You have prepared for us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What are the silliest directions anyone has ever given you for travel?
2. What is a situation in your life where you wished God would give you clearer guidance?
3. How did God resolve that situation? Were you surprised?

REJOICE AND BE GLAD

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!” (Luke 2:13-14)

I love these angels. They are just so extremely happy about this wonderful Gift God is giving the human race—the Savior, Jesus, Christ the Lord. It’s as if they can’t control themselves, and once the lead angel has given his message clearly and carefully to the shepherds, they all burst onto the scene, celebrating and singing and praising at the top of their lungs. It’s party time!

And they are right to do it. The book of Ecclesiastes reminds us that “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die ...” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2). Well, and so there is also a time to party, a time to be glad and celebrate—and this is it. This is not a time for sour faces, not a time to pick over old grievances or worry about the future.

That’s a reminder I can use. By nature I am a worrywart. I can find something to be anxious about on the happiest occasion. And if I’m not anxious, I can become anxious about the fact that I’m not anxious! It’s like an emotional snake swallowing its own tail.

To this God says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ... The Lord is at hand” (Philippians 4:4-5). Oh yes, Jesus is definitely at hand—as a tiny baby sleeping in a manger; as the Lord of life who died and rose again to save us; as the One who has promised to come at the end of time and take us to be forever with Himself. This is good news!

And so we gladly say, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, that He might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for Him; let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation” (Isaiah 25:9).

Lord, I am so glad You have come. Thank You for that. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do you remember any times when someone was cranky or pouting at a party?
2. What kinds of worries steal your joy in the Lord?
3. What might you do to remind yourself to take time to enjoy God’s goodness and celebrate?

DRAGGING FEET?

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. (Luke 2:15-16)

When I was a child, almost every day I would hear these words: "Hurry up! You're going to be late! Are you a turtle? Get down here right now!"

Those words did not inspire me with joy, to say the least. They meant I was about to get in trouble. They meant the speaker was mad at me. And so I was even less willing to hurry up, because doing that would only mean I got to be around an angry adult that much faster.

But nobody had to hurry up the shepherds in this story. "They went with haste" to Bethlehem, the story says. They hurried themselves up. They were looking forward to getting to their goal—finding the baby Jesus that God had told them about. And when they saw Him, they were happy.

It's still like that for us now, isn't it? Tell us to "hurry up" to something unpleasant and it's just not happening. Our feet may move quickly, but our hearts stay behind. But give us a reason to move—a party, a new movie, an all-you-can-eat buffet—and it's amazing how quickly everyone takes off. The house is empty in seconds.

God knows this about us. And so He calls us to Him with love and mercy, not with anger and threats. Jesus says, "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

In another place He says, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38).

You are wanted by God—deeply, truly wanted. He calls you to Him. He is not planning to scold or punish you when you get there. Instead, He is giving you a Gift—the best gift of all—our Savior Jesus, to be your own.

Dear Lord, bring me to You with trust and joy, to receive Your blessings. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Are you the kind of person who is always late or always early?
2. What motivates you to get somewhere as quickly as possible?
3. If Jesus appeared to you visibly today, would you run to Him, walk, or stand still? Why?

TREASURED

And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this Child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. (Luke 2:17-19)

A couple of weeks ago, I was cleaning out the top drawer of my dresser, looking for my son's Social Security card. It was amazing what we found: report cards from first grade; baby teeth, carefully kept; a birthday candle (age 3); a silver teething ring. And of course, there were any number of "Do you remember?" conversations that night.

Parents treasure things related to their children, and Mary was no exception. In her case, she treasured less tangible things—what Gabriel said when he told her she would bear a Son; the shepherds' story and the angels' song; the sights and sounds of Jesus' birthplace. Many years later, she would share these stories with other Christian believers, and they found their way into the Gospels.

Why do we treasure these things—these objects, these stories? Probably because they are the only way we can hold on to the people we love. Children grow up and go out into the world; friends and relatives grow old and die. We suffer loss. And so we treasure the links we still have to those we love. It is the best we can do.

But God can do better than that—and He does. There was a time when God faced losing us, the people He created and loved. And it wasn't just to the ordinary process of growing up, but to something worse, to death and hell. Faced with that, God took action. He came into the world as our Savior Jesus. He fought the powers of death and the devil for our sake. And He rose victorious from death three days later, with the prize He wanted firmly grasped in His hands. We are that treasure.

Because of Jesus, God doesn't have to treasure objects or stories related to us. He treasures us directly and forever, as His own children.

Dear Father, thank You for treasuring us and making us Your own forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What is one object or story you treasure about someone you love?
2. Why is it so valuable to you?
3. What does it mean to you, that God treasures you?

INCOMPREHENSIBLE

And at the end of eight days, when He was circumcised, He was called Jesus, the Name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. (Luke 2:21)

It is not easy to see your child suffer. I remember taking our newborn to the doctor to get his first shots. That was not a fun experience for parents or child!

Mary and Joseph must have had a difficult time with Jesus' circumcision as well. They had to go through with it, of course; this was a requirement of God's law, and it was necessary for Jesus to be properly brought into God's people. In many ways, circumcision was like Baptism; it was not a thing Jewish parents could imagine leaving out.

And Jesus? Well, no baby could possibly *like* the pain of circumcision. And yet this was a weird case, for what we have here is a baby who is God Himself come as a human being. In fact, the same God who commanded circumcision to His Israelite people is now having to suffer it under His own command!

It's mind-boggling. And yet it's a good preview of the future, isn't it? Because this is exactly what Jesus is going to do on the cross, 30-some years in the future. He is going to suffer and die a death that He Himself chose before He was ever incarnate as a human being. God chooses to suffer what God ordained ahead of time. It blows my mind.

No wonder they called His Name Jesus. It means "The Lord is Savior," and that's exactly what Jesus is. He is our Savior from all eternity, as God who planned all along to save us. And He is our Savior in human time, in His life, death, and resurrection—where He carried out the plan made from eternity.

David had it right when he said, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it" (Psalm 139:6). I just can't grasp the wonder of what Jesus has done for us. But that doesn't matter. He knows what He is doing; and He invites us, not to understand, but to trust Him.

Lord Jesus, help me to trust myself to You, my Savior. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What is one thing in your life that you have a hard time understanding?
2. What is one thing about God that you have a hard time understanding?
3. How do you deal with that thing you cannot understand about God?

REDEEMED AND PURIFIED

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice . . . (Luke 2:22-24)

It was time to head to Jerusalem. Jesus was 40 days old, and the firstborn son of His mother. The Law of Moses said that such children belonged to the Lord, on account of God having saved them from death during the days of the Exodus from Egypt. Firstborn animals like sheep and goats were used as sacrifices, but that wasn't going to work for human beings. They had to be redeemed by their parents: “bought back” from the Lord (see Exodus 13).

Mary was also there for another reason—for purification after childbirth. To get back into ordinary life, she needed to make an offering. Usually this would be a lamb and a bird, but for poorer women, it could be two birds—a pair of doves or pigeons (see Leviticus 12). Mary and Joseph brought birds for this offering, which tells us they weren't wealthy.

Once the offerings were completed, the young family could head home—everyone safely redeemed and purified, ready to begin their new life together. The offerings made the difference.

And that's what we need as well. We need purification. We need to be made clean and ready for a new life. We also need redemption. We need to be bought back, ransomed, and set free to live that new life. Only then can we begin life as a family—the family of God.

But where is our offering? It is right there—the baby Jesus Himself. God sent His own Son to become our offering, to redeem us and make us pure by His own self-offering on the cross. The minute details of God's Law are not just trivia; they point us to Jesus. He is our offering. Because of Him, we too begin a new life in the family of God.

Dear Lord, thank You for giving Yourself for us as an offering so that we might be God's family. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What rituals do people in your culture carry out when a baby is born?
2. What kinds of offerings do you make to God in your own life?
3. What words would you use to describe Jesus' offering of Himself for your sake?

HIDDEN SAINTS

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. (Luke 2:25)

What do we really know about Simeon? Not much, I'm afraid. We know that he "was righteous and devout," and that the Holy Spirit was upon him. We know that he was waiting for the Messiah. But was he a priest or an ordinary man? Was he married? Did he have children? We don't know. We don't even know for sure if he was old or young. We assume he was old because of the promise about him not dying until he saw Christ—but we can't be sure, because the Bible doesn't tell us.

Simeon is another in the list of people God describes almost entirely by character. Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph himself—Anna, the old woman who welcomed Jesus at the temple at the same time Simeon did—who were these people? All we really know is that they were believers. They were faithful—people who loved God—people who were waiting for Jesus to come. The rest of their biographies doesn't really matter. God mentions the important stuff.

And this gives us a good idea of what God is looking for in our own lives, too. He isn't much interested in whether we're rich or powerful, whether we have no children or many children, whether we are well-known or pretty much unknown. God looks at the heart. What is our relationship to Jesus? That makes all the difference in the world.

The good news for us is that the Holy Spirit—the same Holy Spirit who was upon Simeon—is willing and happy to work in our hearts as well. We don't have to turn ourselves into saints in order to please God. Jesus has already taken care of that through His death and resurrection. Now the Holy Spirit works in us every day. He will give us trust in Jesus. He will make us people who love and rejoice in our Savior.

Dear Holy Spirit, work in my heart and make me the kind of person You want me to be. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Describe a person you know well. What words leap to mind?
2. Do you know any quiet, hidden saints like Simeon? Describe one.
3. How do you think God would describe you, and why? (Keep in mind that He has forgiven and adopted you!)

CHRIST BEFORE DEATH

And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ... And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus ... he took Him up in his arms and blessed God. (Luke 2:26-28)

Simeon had it in the right order. "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ." What a comfort that promise must have been to him!

We know that death is waiting for all of us, unless the Lord returns first. We try to keep this fact in mind, to plan wisely, to have insurance and guardianship papers and funeral plans laid out. We think about the serious illnesses that may precede death, and try to plan for that as well.

But in the end, that's all we can do: plan. We cannot stop death. In most ways we can't even make it easier, either for ourselves or for the people who will go through the dying process with us. Money, talking, plans—they only do so much. And it's not enough.

But what we cannot do, the Lord did. He sent His own Son, His Christ, into human flesh as a living, vulnerable baby. Simeon rejoiced to see Him, and so should we. Because that baby is the One who actually did something about death—who grew up to overcome sin, death, and the devil—those enemies of the human race. He did it through His own personal suffering and death. By laying down His life for us, He set us free from the power of death. And by taking up His life again forever, He gave us that same everlasting, joyful life.

Death is the one thing no Christian has to do on his or her own. Jesus has already been through suffering and death before us. He knows the way through death and the way back to life, too. Our friends and family cannot go with us—but Jesus can. He will never let go of our hands. And He will bring us back to life with Him, because He has promised, and He will never lie.

Lord, be with me when my time comes to die, and keep me with You forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What plans have you made concerning the end of your life?
2. Are you afraid to die? Why or why not? Is it okay to be afraid?
3. How does Jesus help you when you think about death?

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." (Luke 2:34-35)

Mary loved her baby, so she must have been chilled to hear Simeon predict Jesus' future, even in the most general terms. "A sword will pierce through your own soul also"—that is not exactly what you want to hear about your baby's future!

I imagine Mary felt the first stab of that sword long before Jesus ever grew up. She probably felt it whenever Isaiah 53 was read in the synagogue—whenever Jesus said or did something that her mother's heart told her was going to lead to conflict with the corrupt authorities some day—whenever she cooked the sacrificed lamb at Passover every year. Did she realize it was a symbol of her Son's coming death?

I think it must be easier for us who live on this side of Jesus' death and resurrection. We can look at the tiny baby lying in the manger at the same time we remember His sacrificial death on the cross—and His glorious resurrection. Looking back, we can see that it was worth it—that Jesus' suffering and dying gave us new life—that His resurrection means that evil loses in the end. We know the happy ending. We know that Jesus is with us forever, and we will never lose Him. It is all worth it.

Mary had to take the future on faith, trusting that God would guide their family to the final goal He had planned for them. We have to do this, too, about our own lives. Our future is largely unknown. But we have the added blessing of knowing exactly *Who* has our lives in His hands—our Savior, Jesus—and we know that He will never let us down. How could He? He has already given everything He had to make us His own.

Dear Lord, help me to trust You when the future is frightening and unknown. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What good things do you think will happen in the future?
2. What troubling things do you worry about that might happen in the future?
3. When you are afraid and worried, how do you seek help from God?

THE LONG, QUIET TIME

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon Him. (Luke 2:39-40)

Eventually it was all over. Jesus' birth, circumcision, presentation—done. The visit of the wise men—done. The flight into Egypt (which Luke doesn't mention, but Matthew does), the time living as refugees, and the return to Jewish soil—done. Now it was finally time to go home to Nazareth—to get settled in to ordinary life—to pick up the threads of family and work and community.

We don't know much about those years when Jesus was growing up in a small town in Galilee. We know about one family trip to Jerusalem, and that's it (see Luke 2:41-52).

Chances are good that the reason we have nothing written about Jesus' early years is because they were pretty ordinary—no miracles (see John 2:11), no strange family arrangements, no fame. As far as we can tell, Jesus worked in Joseph's carpentry shop, helped Mary around the house, went to Hebrew school, and did all the things a normal boy does. It was a long, quiet time.

And that's good, isn't it? Because by that point, the whole family needed some quiet time. They needed time to just be with each other—time to live, work, play, worship. They needed the ordinary life that would serve as Jesus' launching pad when He was 30 years old and ready to burst into the incredible years of His public ministry.

Quiet times can be gifts from God, as anyone knows who is not experiencing one—and wishes to be! If that's you, hold on and trust God. But if you are in a quiet time in your life right now, ask the Lord to use it to strengthen you—to help you to mature in your Christian faith and life. Crazy times will come again, no doubt—but now is a great time just to breathe—and to spend time with God and the people you love.

Dear Father, watch over my life and make me strong in Your Son Jesus, regardless of what comes to me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Can you think of a quiet stretch in your own life? When was it?
2. Are you currently in a rough stretch or a quiet stretch, and why?
3. How does God use the quiet times of your life to bring you closer to Him?

NOTES

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