

Journey to Bethlehem: Searching for Our Savior and King

by Treva Kigar

November 1, 2017 was a great day in Houston history – the Astros won the World Series! The whole city celebrated! After waiting for 55 years, the championship trophy finally came to the Bayou City!

What would happen if the World Series was played at the beginning of the baseball season? That would not make sense, would it? Before the big event, there were months of preparation. Pitchers and catchers reported to spring training on February 14, and the position players reported three days later. The first spring training game was played on February 25, and the Astros finished the preseason with 15 wins, 14 losses, and 3 ties. If the World Series was played at that point in the season, the Astros would not have qualified to play in it. The regular season ran from April 3 to October 1, and the Astros finished with a record of 101 wins and 61 losses. After playoff wins against the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees, the Astros were ready to take on the Los Angeles Dodgers in the 2017 World Series. The two teams played seven hard-fought games, and on November 1, eight and a half months after the players reported for spring training, the Astros became the World Series Champions!

Why this walk down memory lane? What do the World Series Champion Astros have to do with Advent or Christmas? The answer is simple. The Astros were victorious in the World Series only because they prepared for those games for years. The players began preparing long before they reported for spring training. Most, if not all, of them played baseball since they were children, and their dreams of the ultimate baseball victory were realized when the Dodgers hit into the third out in the ninth inning of the seventh game of the World Series.

As soon as we wash the dishes after Thanksgiving dinner, we want to begin singing *Joy to the World* and *Here Comes Santa Claus*. In fact, the stores started playing Christmas music weeks before then. We want to jump into Christmas – the next big event. However, just as the Astros needed a season to prepare before the World Series games, we need a season to prepare for Christmas.

WOW! We really know how to prepare for Christmas! We decorate our homes inside and out, bake cookies and make candy, make lists and then shop for and wrap gifts, address Christmas cards, attend parties, host family dinners, and the list goes on and on. By the time Christmas arrives, many of us are exhausted.

Despite the emphasis our culture places on the material trappings of Christmas, Christmas is first and foremost Jesus' birthday. Christmas is not about us; it is not about all the stuff; it is about God and His great love for us. Christmas requires our spiritual preparation. That is the purpose of Advent. Advent is a season, a time of preparation as we await the coming of the Christ Child. It is a time to remember God's plan for salvation. It is a time to acknowledge our sin and our need for forgiveness. It is a time to

set aside our temporal earthly expectations and focus on God's eternal plan. It is a time to yearn for the hope, peace, joy, and love that only Jesus can bring. It is a time to slow down and experience God. It is a time to quiet ourselves before God and search for our Savior and King.

This series of daily devotions for the Advent season was written with the prayer that the Scriptures and meditations will focus your thoughts on the true meaning of Christmas: God and the incredible gift of love He gave to each of us. Take time each day during this season of Advent to find a quiet spot, read your Bible, pray, meditate, and let God speak to you. God promises that as you draw near to Him, He will draw near to you. As you encounter God during this holy season, may your relationship with our Lord and Savior grow stronger and may He prepare you to share the Good News of Jesus' birth with every person you meet.

Sunday, December 3

Read: John 1:1-5

Key Verse: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."
(John 1:1)

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Using these words, John began his Gospel with a stunning affirmation of who Jesus is. Jesus was not created; He was with God before the creation of the world. Jesus is not like God; He is God. In *The Gospel of John (Volume 1)*, William Barclay writes, "When John said *the word was God* he was not saying that Jesus was identical with God; he was saying that Jesus was so perfectly the same as God in mind, in heart, in being that in him we perfectly see what God is like."

Since the beginning of time, God has revealed Himself to His people and sought a personal, intimate relationship with them. The ultimate revealing of God's self was when the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. Galatians 4:4 tells us that when the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son to be born of a woman. Through Jesus, the baby born of Mary in Bethlehem, we see fully and completely who God is and has always been.

Light illuminates everything in its path, and Jesus came to be the light of all people. He came to help us see the character of God and His will for our lives. When we look through the light Jesus shines, we see ourselves, other people, and the world around us differently. When we let Jesus' light shine in us, we are changed; as we experience His love, we are transformed. The more we know and understand God, the more we know ourselves and understand our identity in Him.

Today, over 2,000 years since the birth of Jesus, God continues to reveal Himself to us. Whether you are five or 105, or whether you are an unbeliever, a new Christian, or a mature one, God wants to deepen His relationship with you. He wants you to experience Christmas this year as if it was your first Christmas – with the wide-eyed wonder of a child. Spend time in prayer today asking God to reveal

Himself to you in a new and powerful way this Advent season as you journey to Bethlehem in search of our Savior and King.

Monday, December 4

Read: Exodus 3:1-15

Key Verse: "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.'" (Exodus 3:14a)

The Bible tells the story of God's desire to be known and to reveal Himself to humankind. God does not hide. He does not avoid us. He wants to be known. In the late 1600's, Brother Lawrence, a French monk whose life emphasis was cultivating a keen sensitivity to the presence of God in everyday life, wrote in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, "Let us occupy ourselves entirely in knowing God. The more we know [God] the more we will desire to know [God]."

These verses from Exodus describe the way God revealed Himself to Moses. Their conversation was powerful, dynamic, relational, and conversational - exactly how God desires our relationship with Him to be. After getting Moses' attention with a burning bush, God identified Himself as the God of Moses' father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and then He called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Just like many of us do when God calls, Moses looked for a way out. When Moses questioned his ability, God responded not by listing Moses' qualifications, but by assuring Moses that He would be with him. The deliverance of Israel depended solely on the character and power of God, not on Moses' strength or ability. Moses objected again saying he did not even know God's name, and he implied the Israelites would not believe or follow him. God's response was, "I AM WHO I AM."

What a cryptic response! Surely God could have given a more straight-forward answer. The meaning of "I AM WHO I AM" was that God would be known by His actions on behalf of His people; to know God and His character the people needed to remember His faithfulness to Abraham Isaac, and Jacob. God was known as He chose to reveal Himself. Perhaps one reason God gave a mysterious answer was to encourage people of all generations to search for and seek after Him.

"I AM WHO I AM" reminds us that just as God was with Moses, He is with us in the here and now. His name is not "I was" or "I will be." It is "I AM." God is timeless, He was and is and will always be "I AM" regardless of the date. Who is God to you? How has He revealed Himself to you through the events of your life so far? In what ways is He your "I AM?" What will you do this Advent season to follow Brother Lawrence's lead and occupy yourself in knowing God?

Tuesday, December 5

Read: Isaiah 9:2b-5

Key Verse: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined." (Isaiah 9:2b)

Darkness. Can you imagine how frightened Adam and Eve must have been when night fell for the first time? We learned as young children that when darkness falls at twilight, the light of dawn will follow in a few hours. However, Adam and Eve must have been terrified until they learned that there is a pattern in the world and that the darkness of night is always followed by the light of day.

Perhaps you have felt like Adam or Eve during times when it seemed as though the darkness would last forever. Most of us have experienced those times. Perhaps your period of darkness followed the death of a loved one, the diagnosis of a serious illness, the estrangement of a family member, the struggle against addiction, the pain of abuse, the burden of unconfessed sin, the loss of a job, or the destruction caused by Hurricane Harvey. Regardless of the cause, these periods of darkness do not end after a few hours and may continue for weeks, months, or even years.

The people of Israel knew what it was to live in darkness; sin repeatedly separated them from God, they wandered in the desert for 40 years, they were taken into captivity by their enemies, and they were forced to live in exile. In today's Scripture reading, the prophet Isaiah spoke a word of hope to the people of Israel and promised a light would shine into their darkness and they would find joy.

That light came to earth in the form of a tiny baby. John wrote, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:5) Jesus' light continues to shine as brightly today as it did many years ago. He wants nothing more than to illuminate the dark places in our lives and bring healing to our brokenness. Take time today to think about the dark places in your life where you need the light only Jesus can shine. Make a list of them and pray daily for God to walk beside you in the darkness until He guides you to the dawn of a new day.

Wednesday, December 6

Read: Isaiah 9:6-7

Key Verse: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)

The *Messiah* has been one of the most well-known and frequently performed choral works since the time of John Wesley. George Frederic Handel often receives all the credit for this brilliant work, but he "only" composed the music. The idea for *The Messiah* began with Charles Jennens, a friend of Handel. Jennens compiled the beloved words from the King James Bible, and in July 1741 he sent the words to Handel. Around the same time Jennens wrote a letter to another friend saying, "I hope [Handel] will lay out his whole Genius & Skill upon it, that the Composition may excell all his former Compositions, as the Subject excels every other subject. The Subject is the Messiah." After receiving the text, Handel composed the score of *The Messiah* in just 24 days. Handel finished his manuscript by writing "SDG" – *Soli Deo Gloria* meaning "To God alone the glory."

Part I of the *Messiah* is often heard during the Christmas season as it includes prophecies about Jesus' birth from the Old Testament and the announcement of His birth to the shepherds. Today's reading

from Isaiah is included in this part of the *Messiah*. Isaiah announced the coming of a child and shared His names: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

As a Wonderful Counselor, Jesus guides, encourages, and serves as our advocate and advisor. Mighty God denotes the divine power and presence of Jesus in whom we find safety and protection. As the Everlasting Father, Jesus gives us a sense of belonging to the family of God and promise of eternity. There is no earthly substitute for the Prince of Peace's ability to bring wholeness, well-being, and tranquility in the midst of the storms of life.

Which name given Jesus best describes how you know Him today? Which name seems most distant? Ask God to open your heart this Advent season to welcome Jesus and to help you more fully understand the meaning and significance of each of His names. There are many performances of the *Messiah* in the Houston area each December. Invite a friend to join you at one of them and experience the Scriptures come alive through music. *The Messiah* never disappoints because, as Jennens wrote many years ago, "the Subject excels every other subject."

Thursday, December 7

Read: II Samuel 7:1-29

Key Verse: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." (II Samuel 7:16)

King David was living in a house of cedar, and the ark of God was in a tent, so King David decided to build a house for the ark of God. That sounds like a great idea; certainly God would approve of David building a proper home for the ark of God. However, even though King David's idea was a good one, it was not a God idea. God didn't want a house of cedar; He had other plans for the man He chose to be king.

The prophet Nathan delivered God's message to David in the form of a five-fold covenant. God promised to make David's name great, to provide a permanent homeland for His people, to give the Israelites rest from their enemies, to raise up an offspring from David who would build a temple for the Lord, and, finally, to establish King David's house and kingdom forever. As Christians living in the 21st century, we know God's promise to establish David's house and kingdom forever was ultimately fulfilled in the coming of the Christ Child.

Think of a time when you had a good idea that was not a God idea. How did God get your attention and turn you back to His plans for your life? When our plans differ from God's plans, it is often because our plans are too small. In this example from King David's life, King David wanted to build a house; that is, an earthly dwelling place built of cedar. God's definition of *house* was much bigger; He intended for King David's dynasty to endure forever. When have you been astonished to discover that God and His plans for you are far greater than you ever imagined?

King David led a life that was far from perfect, but he always returned to God. He was a man after God's own heart; David knew who he was in God, understood God's call on his life, and trusted God's hand to lead and sustain him. The Bible gives us a clear picture of who we are in Christ. Who does it say you are? Take time today to explore your identity in Christ, to pray and to seek God's direction; He will help you distinguish between your good ideas and the God ideas He has for you.

Friday, December 8

Read: Isaiah 11:1-5

Key Verse: "Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins." (Isaiah 11:5)

In yesterday's Scripture reading, God made a covenant with King David to establish David's house and kingdom forever. Today we see the prophet Isaiah tell the Israelites of the one who would come from the stump of Jesse, David's father. Isaiah described the one who was to come as being full of wisdom, understanding, counsel, and might, and said He would judge with righteousness, equity, and faithfulness. The prophet Jeremiah also foretold the birth of a king: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David, a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." (Jeremiah 23:5)

Jesus is the King who came to rule with righteousness and faithfulness, and we see both of these attributes when we look at His character. Jesus was righteous and that impacted the way He interacted with the people He met on a daily basis. Jesus extended grace to the woman caught in adultery. He angrily overthrew the tables of the money changers in the temple, and He honored the widow who put two small copper coins in the temple treasury. Jesus was also righteous in a way no other human being ever has been or ever will be. He was completely free from guilt and sin; and, therefore, Jesus was the only one who could atone for our sins.

Jesus' faithfulness was demonstrated in His obedience to God; He always acted in accordance with God's divine law and will. He said, "for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me." (John 6:38) Even when facing the cross, He remained faithful to the purpose for which He was born. As Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, "And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:7b-8)

As humans, we will never be as righteous or faithful as Jesus. We are far from righteous when we judge others while turning a blind eye to our own sin or when we fail to respond to the needs around us or when we rebel against God's command to bend our will to His will. Our faithfulness wavers as quickly as the wind changes direction. Still, God calls us to move toward righteousness and faithfulness. As Paul wrote to Timothy, "But as for you, man of God, shun all this [false teaching and the love of money]; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness." (1 Timothy 6:11) Thankfully, by the help of the Holy Spirit, we can grow and become more like Christ. How will you pursue righteousness

and faithfulness during this season of Advent? How can searching for the Christ Child help you to be more like Him?

Saturday, December 9

Read: Isaiah 11:6-9

Key Verse: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6)

In these verses Isaiah painted an idyllic scene of a peaceable kingdom in which there is harmony within all of creation. Wolves and lambs, leopard and goats, and lions and calves are natural enemies, and we would never expect to see them lying together. And, certainly, no responsible parent would ever leave a child with wild animals or let them play near a deadly snake. The picture described by the prophet is one of peace that only Jesus can bring.

When we think of peace, we usually think of the absence of conflict between people and war between nations; however, the Biblical meaning of peace is much deeper. The Hebrew word for peace is *Shalom*. It means peace, wholeness, healing, safety, rest, and well-being for both individuals and the community at large. That is the peace Jesus came to bring.

As Christmas approaches this year, the wolf has yet to live with the lamb, but Isaiah’s words continue to offer us hope. Over the centuries, God’s messengers of peace have included the prophets, the angels, and Jesus himself. Who are God’s messengers of peace today? It is easy to look to professional diplomats or world leaders to be peacemakers; yet, as children of God, each of us is called to be a peacemaker. Invite God to open your eyes to the relationships in your life needing reconciliation and peace and ask Him to give you the wisdom and courage to seek it. Be a peacemaker.

Pray also for peace in our world. Pray for the peacemakers from every walk of life. Pray for God to strengthen and encourage the world leaders who seek peace and to bless their efforts. Pray also for the leaders and terrorists who seek war and destruction – may God open their hearts to receive His gifts of grace and mercy during this holy season and turn their hearts to Him. Pray with confidence knowing “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” (James 5:16b)

Sunday, December 10

Read: Isaiah 53:3-6

Key Verse: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5)

The Scandal of Christmas is the title of J. Ellsworth Kalas’ book *Christmas from the Back Side*. What is the scandal of Christmas? It must be Mary’s pregnancy, right? After all, no respectable unmarried Jewish teenager would get pregnant. However, that is not the scandal Kalas had in mind; he says the

scandal of Christmas began way back in Genesis when Adam and Eve first sinned against God. God's desire from the beginning of creation was an intimate relationship with each person He created. However, when Adam and Eve used their God-given freedom of choice to disobey God, sin entered the world, and the relationship between God and humankind was changed forever.

Like Adam and Eve, each of us is a sinner, and our sin separates us from God. Through sins of commission we do things we know we should not do; we act against God's laws, God's creation, or God's purposes. Through sins of omission we fail to do the things we know we should do. Kalas says, "When we live below our best potential, when we're mediocre when we ought to be fine, cheap when we ought to be noble, shoddy when we should be upright – this is sin."

The scandal of sin was, and still is, the reason the world needed, and still needs, Christmas. Kalas wrote, "Christmas didn't come to our human race because we worked ourselves up to it, or because we evolved to a state of deserving such a favor; Christmas came because we're a scandalous lot. Christmas is, indeed, a Gift, the ultimate Gift, because it is a Gift undeserved and unjustified." God in His infinite mercy sent Jesus who was without sin to atone for our sins. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6-8)

Today's reading is one of four passages in Isaiah commonly called the Servant Songs. Christians traditionally view this passage as one of the Messianic prophecies of Jesus, and it reminds us that God sent Jesus to earth for a specific purpose – to suffer and die on the cross for our sins. Spend time today thinking about the sin in your life. How do you sin against God's laws, God's creation, and God's purposes? How do you live below your full potential and fail to do those things God calls you to do? How does your sin look or feel different when you think of it as a scandal? Draw close to God, seek Him with all your heart, and confess your sins knowing that "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

Monday, December 11

Read: Micah 5:2-5a

Key Verses: "And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the end of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace." (Micah 5:4-5a)

Prior to the birth of Jesus, Bethlehem was a small, insignificant town about five miles south of Jerusalem; it was known primarily as the hometown of David. The Bible tells us David was tending his father's sheep near Bethlehem when God sent Samuel to anoint him as king over Israel.

Did you know that sheep are mentioned over 200 times in the Bible? They were the most important domesticated animals in Biblical times; sheep provided milk, wool, hides, and their horns were used as

containers for oil or made into musical instruments. Boys began training to be shepherds at a very young age, and the sheep became their closest companions. Shepherds were responsible for ensuring the flock had food and water; they were entrusted with keeping the sheep safe from wild animals and thieves even if that meant defending the sheep with their own lives.

Psalms 23 and Ezekiel 34 both portray God as the shepherd of Israel who protects and cares for His people. In today's reading, Micah foretold the coming of a ruler from Bethlehem who would be a shepherd for all God's people. Isaiah 40:11 also compares the long-awaited Messiah to a shepherd, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."

Take time today to read John 10:1-19. The people who heard Jesus say, "I am the good shepherd" would have known immediately that He was claiming to be the Messiah. How does seeing Jesus as the good shepherd help you to better understand the relationship He wants to have with you? Jesus said the sheep followed the shepherd because they knew his voice. How do you recognize Jesus' voice? How can you shut out the secular voices during this Advent season to focus on God's invitation to enter into the abundant life that He wants to give you?

Tuesday, December 12

Read: Luke 1:5-25

Key Verses: "Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years." (Luke 1:6-7)

Children were highly valued by the Israelites and having many children was considered a divine blessing. Conversely, barrenness was considered a curse at best and divine punishment at worst. In Biblical times, a husband had valid grounds for divorce if his wife could not bear a child, and childless women were often mocked and ridiculed by their family and friends.

Several stories in the Bible illustrate the anguish of women who were heartbroken because they were childless – Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. After many years of waiting to have a child, each of these women gave birth to sons who played major roles in the history of Israel. God made a covenant with Abraham to make his descendants and numerous as the stars in the sky; God's promise was fulfilled when Sarah, who was in her nineties, gave birth to Isaac. Rebekah gave birth to Jacob and Esau 20 years after her marriage to Isaac. Joseph was born after a brokenhearted Rachel was childless for many years while her sister, Leah, gave birth to six sons. Hannah gave birth to Samuel, who became a great prophet and anointed Kings Saul and David, after going to the temple of the Lord and weeping and praying for God to give her a son.

Perhaps knowing the stories of their ancestors in the faith gave Zechariah and Elizabeth hope as they prayed that one day God would bless them with a child. Still, the angel's announcement came as quite a

surprise to Zechariah, and, in these verses from Matthew, we see his shock and momentary doubt: “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” (Luke 1:18) The angel Gabriel’s words were true. Elizabeth became pregnant and gave birth to a son whom we know as John the Baptist.

Our God is in the miracle business! We are bound by human limitations, but God is not. We may not always understand God’s plan for our lives; but, if we remain faithful to Him, He will work in and through us to accomplish His good and perfect will. What is the truest desire of your heart? Have you been waiting for days, months, or even years? Don’t lose heart! Pray for God to help you to remain faithful during your time of waiting, to replace your doubt with hope, and to remember that still today He is in the miracle business.

Wednesday, December 13

Read: Luke 1:26-38

Key Verses: “The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’” (Luke 1:30-33)

Have you noticed in the Bible that when an angel appears his first words are often “Do not be afraid”? Who would be afraid of a cute little cherub or a beautiful woman with wings? Those may be the images of angels we see in drawings or figurines in a gift shop, but they are far from the Biblical description of angels. Hebrews 1:14 tells us that angels are spirit beings who serve God and often act as His messengers. Angels are glorious, supernatural beings who reflect the holiness of God. However, when God sent them to earth to deliver a message to His people, angels took on the form of a male figure. Isaiah described the angels in his vision; they had six wings – two covering their faces, two covering their feet, and two with which to fly. Daniel described his vision of the angel like this: “I looked up and saw a man clothed in linen, with a belt of gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like beryl, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the roar of a multitude.” (Daniel 10:5-6) And, when the women found the stone rolled away from Jesus’ tomb, the angels who greeted them were dressed in dazzling clothes.

No wonder that fear was the typical reaction at the sight of an angel; they were frightening creatures because they were completely different than anything the people had ever seen. The splendor and majesty must have been overwhelming! None of us will likely encounter an angel this Advent season, but we can still be filled with fear of the unknown. Maybe you are facing a situation that is as frightening as Daniel’s encounter with the angel. Maybe God is leading you into a new chapter of life – one that you have chosen or one that has been thrust upon you. Maybe you are overcome with the glory of the presence of God and are excited, yet apprehensive, about where He is leading you.

The Good News is that we never walk alone. As God commanded Joshua when He called him to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land following the death of Moses, “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9) What better time of year than during Advent, when we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, to remember that God is always with us. I John 4:18 tells us that “perfect love casts out fear,” and we look forward to rejoicing in the most perfect gift of love ever given to humankind.

Take time today to reflect on your life and walk with God. Make a list of how He has made His presence and love known to you in the past. Make another list of your fears. Spend time sharing that list with God and ask Him to surround you with a deep and abiding sense of His presence with you. Then, face your fears knowing He walks beside you each step of the way. May Mary’s humble words to the angel be your words to God: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)

Thursday, December 14

Read: Luke 1:39-45

Key Verses: “And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.” (Luke 1:43-44)

After learning from the angel Gabriel that she was going to give birth to the Son of the Most High, Mary went to visit her relative Elizabeth who was pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth greeted Mary as “the mother of my Lord” and said, “The moment the sound of your greeting entered my ears, the babe in my womb skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.” (Luke 1:44 from *The Message*) How remarkable that the unborn child in Elizabeth’s womb experience such delight being close to the baby Jesus in Mary’s womb! When was the last time you experienced sheer joy at being in the presence of Jesus?

The word *joy*, or a form of it, is found over 200 times in the Bible. Luke uses the word six times in the first two chapters of his gospel. So, what is joy? How does it differ from happiness? Why is joy important in our Christian walk?

Many common everyday occurrences make us happy – the sight of spring’s first bluebonnets, the sound of children singing, the smell of cookies baking in the oven, the taste of our favorite foods, and the feel of a warm blanket on a cold night. But happiness is fleeting. The bluebonnets fade, the children stop singing and start fighting, the cookies and our favorite foods are loaded with fat and calories, and sometimes even a warm blanket cannot keep the chill away. Joy is different; unlike happiness, it is not an emotion. Joy is a state of being.

“Rejoice always” (I Thessalonians 5:16a) was Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonians, and it is God’s desire for us today. Each of us will experience times of happiness and sadness, but Jesus came so our joy may be complete. Because of God’s great gift, each of us can have an inner joy which no one or any situation can take away from us. While they were both unborn children in their mothers’ wombs, John

the Baptist leaped for joy being in the presence of Jesus. Throw aside your inhibitions and experience the sheer joy that comes from being in the presence of our Lord and Savior.

Friday, December 15

Read: Luke 1:46-56

Key Verses: “And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.’” (Luke 1:46-49)

Mary’s song of praise, often called the Magnificat, was her response to the news that she would bear God’s Son. Mary could not have expected Gabriel’s announcement; after all, she was a virgin. It must have been a scary and confusing time for the teenager who knew that a woman pregnant outside of marriage was in danger of being stoned to death. How would she explain the pregnancy to Joseph and her parents? Joseph would know he was not the father. What would happen to her if Joseph broke off their engagement and her father kicked her out of the house? Would anyone believe an angel came to visit and that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit? Israel had been waiting for hundreds of years for the coming of the Messiah, a long-awaited King to rule from David’s throne. Who would believe that an ordinary unmarried teenager from Nazareth would be His mother? What would the neighbors say behind her back? Everyone knows how the gossip mill works!

Regardless of any fear or apprehension Mary had, she turned to God with a song of rejoicing. Through her song, we see Mary’s deep faith and trust in God even though her world had been turned upside down. She counted herself as favored even though the road ahead would be difficult. In his commentary, *The Gospel of Luke*, William Barclay writes, “To be chosen by God so often means at one and the same time a crown of joy and cross of sorrow. The piercing truth is that God does not choose a person for ease and comfort and selfish joy but for a task that will take all that head and heart and hand can bring to it. *God chooses us in order to use us.*”

Mary celebrated God’s decision to use her even though it turned her world upside down, and her words show that she understood the child she was carrying would turn the world upside down. Through His Son, God would scatter the proud, bring down the powerful, lift up the lowly, fill the hungry, and send the rich away empty. We see this throughout Jesus’ ministry as He did and said the unexpected. He ate with sinners, engaged in conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, and healed the lepers. He brought new meaning to the Law. He told His disciples that “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” (Mark 10:43-44) Finally, in the ultimate example of love and sacrifice, the King of kings willingly laid down His life and died on the cross for our sins – quite the opposite of earthly kings who sat on their thrones and sent soldiers to die in battle. Jesus came to turn the world and its values upside down.

Spend time in prayer today asking God to turn your world upside down. For most of us, that is not an easy thing to do, but God has chosen you in order to use you. “For we are what he has made us, in

Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2:10)
Open your heart, mind, and soul during this Advent season to the possibilities God places in your path. They may be frightening, confusing, or difficult, but God wants to turn your world upside down so He can work through you to turn this world upside down.

Saturday, December 16

Read: Luke 1:57-80

Key Verses: “And you child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.” (Luke 1:76-77)

As the Jews waited for the coming of the Messiah, they expected a forerunner to come before Him and announce His arrival. Isaiah’s prophecy was well known. “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’” (Isaiah 40:3-5)

Many Jews believed Elijah would return to announce the arrival of the Messiah, but Gabriel told Zechariah that his son, John (later known as John the Baptizer or John the Baptist), would be the forerunner of the Messiah. In his prophecy following John’s naming and circumcision, Zechariah spoke of the Savior to come and how his son would go before the Most High to prepare a way for Him.

The hand of the Lord was with John; he grew up and became a colorful character. He lived in the wilderness, wore clothes made of camel’s hair, and ate locusts and wild honey. John the Baptist had a way of drawing crowds to him. He could have been a rock star, but he did not seek the center stage for himself; he was solely devoted to pointing the Jews to Jesus. When people began questioning if he was the Messiah, John answered them saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Luke 3:16)

John’s ministry called the people to confess, repent, and be baptized. Very often we use the words *confess* and *repent* interchangeably. However, they are very different. Confess means to acknowledge our sins. Confession is when we speak openly with God about our sin and sincerely express regret for those times we defied Him in thought, word, or deed. Repentance goes a step farther; it means to turn away from sin and dedicate ourselves to changing our heart, thoughts, words, and actions. David understood the need to change his ways; he pleaded for forgiveness and prayed “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” (Psalm 51:10) Follow John the Baptist’s call and David’s example. Repent! Be honest with God about the changes you need to make in your life and trust Him to create a clean heart in you. With God’s help, your new life in Him can begin today.

Sunday, December 17

Read: Matthew 1:1-17

Key Verse: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”
(Matthew 1:1)

Another list of names! The Old Testament is full of them, and the New Testament begins the same way. Many of the names are strange to us; we find it difficult to pronounce them and almost impossible to spell them. Who are these people, and why did Matthew begin his gospel with them? First and foremost, Jesus’ ancestors are named to eliminate any doubt as to His identity. The history of the Jewish people began when God promised Abram He would make a great nation of him, and Abraham, as he was later known, was widely regarded by the Jews as the father of the faith. God promised David that his kingdom would be eternal. Establishing Jesus as a descendent of these men clearly identified Jesus as the Messiah and showed the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham and David.

One of the interesting aspects of this genealogy is that it includes women. In Biblical times, women had no legal rights; they were the possessions of their fathers and then their husbands. Jewish men thanked God each morning that they were not Gentiles, slaves, or women. Because women were deemed unimportant, they were rarely included in genealogies. Matthew included five women in his list of Jesus’ ancestors: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba), and Mary. The inclusion of women tore down the barrier between male and female. It signified the importance of women in the Kingdom of God and foretold the role they would play in Jesus’ ministry and the early church.

The list of Jesus’ ancestors also reminds us that God can use anyone to accomplish His will. Many of Jesus’ ancestors had questionable pasts. David was a great leader, but he was also an adulterer and a murderer. Rahab was a prostitute. Everyone on the list was a sinner, but God used them to bridge the gap between saint and sinner. Ruth was a Moabitess; her inclusion in the list signified that Jesus came to tear down the wall between Jew and Gentile.

Paul wrote to the Galatians, “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. . . There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:26,28) Even though Jesus came to break down barriers, our human nature is to erect them. What barriers have you placed between yourself and others? How can your search for the Christ Child help you begin to tear those barriers down? After all, we are all brothers and sisters in the family of God, and He created us to live in community with one another.

Monday, December 18

Read: Matthew 1:18-25

Key Verses: “Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the

child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:19-21)

A life interrupted. Joseph was just an ordinary guy whose life took an extraordinary turn. We do not know much about Joseph. He was a carpenter betrothed to Mary when he learned she was pregnant. He must have been a kind man because he planned to divorce her quietly to minimize her public shame. In all of Scripture, Joseph never spoke, but he listened and he acted. Every time an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him what to do, Joseph immediately obeyed even though the angels’ instructions always interrupted his life.

After the angel told Joseph to take Mary as his wife, he did it. Being warned in a dream that Herod wanted to kill the baby Jesus, Joseph got up and left for Egypt with Mary and Jesus while it was still night. After Herod’s death, Joseph followed the angel’s instruction and journeyed home to Israel. Finally, after being warned in another dream of danger in Judea, Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Nazareth in Galilee. Perhaps we can learn from Joseph’s example what it means to be obedient, to follow God’s directions even though they interrupt our plans.

Joseph was also devout; he kept the Jewish laws and ceremonies. We know that he took Jesus to be circumcised and named when He was eight days old. About a month later, He took his family to the temple in Jerusalem for Mary’s purification after childbirth and the presentation of Jesus to the Lord as was required for each firstborn male child. The Bible tells us that when Jesus was a child Joseph and Mary faithfully took Him to Jerusalem each year for Passover. Perhaps we can all learn from Joseph what it means to be faithful to God.

A life interrupted. That is not in any of our plans, but our God is a God of unexpected interruptions. How do you respond to divine interruptions in your life? Do you make excuses like Moses did, or run in the opposite direction like Jonah? What can Joseph teach us about how to manage the divine interruptions in our lives? Joseph stepped outside his comfort zone and acted in faithful obedience to God’s call on his life. Will you do the same?

Tuesday, December 19

Read: Luke 2:1-5

Key Verse: “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” (Luke 2:1)

Luke’s gospel is the only account of Jesus’ birth that relates it to a date in history. Augustus was the first Roman emperor and ruled from 27 B.C. until his death in 14 A.D. Augustus was the great-nephew and adopted heir of Julius Caesar. He ushered in the golden age of Roman literature and architecture; it is often said that he found Rome in brick and left it in marble. He was an effective military leader, but chose peaceful negotiation when possible.

In the Roman Empire, censuses were taken about every 14 years, and citizens were required to travel to the hometown of their ancestors to register. The purpose of a census was two-fold – to identify citizens for compulsory military service and to assess taxes. The Jews were exempt from military service, so the purpose of the census in Palestine was strictly for tax purposes. When Augustus, the most powerful ruler in the world, ordered a census be taken, he could never have guessed the important role he would play in the Christmas story.

Hundreds of years before, the prophet Micah foretold the holy birth: “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” (Micah 5:2) Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, and Mary likely expected to give birth there. However, Scripture said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem which was about 80 miles and a difficult four-day journey away. Augustus’ decree forced Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem, and, during their time there, Jesus was born and Micah’s prophesy was fulfilled.

What can we learn from Emperor Augustus’ small, but important role in the Christmas story? First, God can use anyone to further His will. Augustus was a pagan king, but God used his need for soldiers and tax revenue to fulfill an ancient prophecy. Who are some of the non-believers you know, either personally or through history, whom God has used to accomplish His will? Second, Herod had no idea God was using Him. To Herod the census was just something he ordered in the normal course of business, but God took that ordinary decree and used it for extraordinary purposes. When has God worked through you even though you did not know it at the time? Finally, God works in the details. We are quick to label things as coincidence or mere chance, but the timing of those events is often God at work in the details of our lives or the world at large. When have you experienced God’s perfect timing?

Wednesday, December 20

Read: Luke 2:6-7

Key Verse: “and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths, and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:7 from the New International Version)

No room. It is not surprising that lodging was in short supply when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem. Many other people traveled there at the same time to register in the census. Travelers stayed in private homes with an extra room or in a public shelter. When those options were full, other accommodations needed to be found. Mary and Joseph likely found shelter in an animal stall attached to a private home, in one of a series of open stalls along a common courtyard, or possibly a cave – all places that normally provided shelter for livestock. It was there that Mary gave birth to Jesus and laid him in a manger, a feed trough for the animals.

No room. The circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth seem to be a foreshadowing of His life. As Jesus began His public ministry, the people made it clear there was no room for Him in His hometown of

Nazareth. Later, after He healed two men possessed with demons, the whole town of Gadara begged him to leave the area. Jesus was unwelcome in a Samaritan village, and the people of Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum, and Decapolis rejected His teaching. And, throughout His ministry, the scribes and the Pharisees made it clear that there was no room for Him among the religious establishment.

No room. Some things have not changed in over 2,000 years. As modern-day Christians we may not reject Jesus in the same way the people of His day did, but we reject Him in other ways. How many times do we fail to make room for Jesus in our lives? We get busy with family, work, and school activities, and we “don’t have time” to spend with God. Before we know it, days or weeks have passed and we suddenly realize we cannot remember the last time we read the Bible or prayed. We stay out late on a Saturday night so we decide to skip worship on Sunday morning; after all, we “need” one day a week to sleep in late. Before we know it, a month or two have passed and we still have not returned to church.

No room. Sadly, one of the times when we most often fail to make room for Jesus is during the Christmas season. There is room on our calendars for decorating our homes, shopping for gifts, baking cookies, attending parties with friends, and gathering with our families, but there is no room for Jesus. How will you make room for Jesus this holiday season? How will you make room for Him every day in the coming year? Make a plan and commit to follow through.

Thursday, December 21

Read: Luke 2:8-20

Key Verses: “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’” (Luke 2:10-11)

Did you ever wonder why the first people the angels told about Jesus’ birth were the shepherds? Shepherds were looked down upon by almost everyone and despised by the elite. They were uneducated, unsophisticated, and at the bottom of the socio-economic scale. The demands of their job rendered them unable to keep Jewish ceremonial law and observe all the rules and regulations, especially those concerned with ritual cleanliness. Shepherds certainly were not religious experts or well-versed on the coming Messiah. None of that mattered to God. He sent His angels to deliver a personal invitation to the shepherds to seek the Christ Child.

On second thought, maybe the fact that the shepherds were the lowest of the low, the weakest of the weak, and the poorest of the poor did matter to God. Maybe that is exactly why He sent His angels to proclaim the Good News to them! Because, as the angel said, the Good News was for all people. God was already at work turning the world upside down by lifting up the lowest of the low.

Can you imagine the excitement of the shepherds as they hurried into Bethlehem to see the baby? The long-awaited Messiah had been born, and they were going to be the first people to see Him!

Afterwards, their joy was uncontainable! They quickly spread the word of the Savior's birth, and everyone who heard them was amazed.

The Good News for us today is that the Good News the angels proclaimed to the shepherds is, and will always be, the Good News for all humankind. The Good News is for you! God extends a personal invitation to you to seek Jesus. Your invitation will not come from a multitude of angels appearing in the night sky, but it is as real as the invitation extended to the shepherds on that first Christmas night. Will you accept the invitation? Will you go with haste to find Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger? What do you expect to find there? Will you experience the same overflowing joy as the shepherds did? How will you share the Good News of Jesus' birth with everyone you meet? May your joy at the birth of the Christ Child be contagious!

Friday, December 22

Read: Luke 2:21-38

Key Verses: Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'" (Luke 2:28-32)

The roles of Simeon and Anna in the Christmas story are often overlooked; however, they were among the first people to affirm Jesus was the Messiah and there is much we can learn from them. Luke tells us Simeon was a righteous and devout man who waited for the comfort and hope the Messiah would bring to Israel. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. When Joseph and Mary entered the temple with baby Jesus, Simeon was guided to them by the Holy Spirit; he knew immediately that Jesus was the Messiah. Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God for the gift of salvation that came through Jesus Christ.

James wrote to the early Christians: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." (James 1:17 from the New International Version) God gave the gift of Jesus, and He was the perfect gift to a world engulfed in darkness, brokenness, sin, and death. James' words remind us that God's character is unchanging. God was and is and will always be the God of love. God's love was made manifest in the gift of Jesus. "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:9-10)

The life cycle of a gift is not complete until it is received and accepted. God gave the gift, and Simeon willingly received it. Anna, an elderly widow, also received the gift with joy. She was a prophet who had spent many years in the temple worshipping, fasting, praying, and waiting for the Messiah. Like Simeon, she knew immediately that Jesus was the Messiah, and she responded by praising God and sharing the Good News.

When have you been so excited to give a gift to a loved one that you could hardly contain your excitement? You wanted them to embrace the gift and enjoy it as much as you delighted in shopping for the gift, wrapping it, and giving it to them. Have you ever considered that God is also an eager gift-giver? He wants us to experience Christmas each year as if it was the first time and to rejoice as we receive and accept His gift of love. God gives the gift. How will you receive it?

Saturday, December 23

Read: Matthew 2:1-8

Key Verses: “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.” (Matthew 2:3-4)

Much of what we know about King Herod comes from Jewish and Roman accounts of history rather than from the Bible. Herod was half Jewish and half Idumaeon (from the area of Edom). He gained the trust of the Romans during civil wars in Palestine and was rewarded by being appointed governor, and later king, over Judah. Herod’s reign was known for its building projects including amphitheaters, monuments, and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem; but the people generally saw these projects as an effort by Herod to make a name for himself. He tried to pacify the Jewish people by allowing them to worship their God in the temple, but angered them by assuming the title “King of the Jews.”

Herod had a very dark side. In their book *God is in the Small Stuff at Christmas*, Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz call Herod “one messed-up dude.” Herod had a major character flaw. He was insanely suspicious and fearful of anyone he suspected as a threat to his power or position as king. He killed everyone he perceived as a threat including priests, political opponents, his wife, mother-in-law, and three of his sons. Herod’s savage, brutal, and evil ways were well known, and Emperor Augustus is reported to have said it was safer to be Herod’s pig than his son.

Matthew tells us that when Herod heard the wise men were searching for the child born “King of the Jews” he became frightened. Paranoia got the best of him, and he perceived the baby Jesus as a danger to his reign as king. Herod lied to the wise men and told them to report the location of the child back to him so he could worship the child; however, his true intention was to murder Jesus. When he learned the wise men returned to their own country without reporting the location of Jesus to him, he ordered the massacre of all children under the age of two living in or around Bethlehem.

How do you deal with fear? Herod chose to embrace his fear and sought to destroy its source. Mary, knowing she faced stoning for being pregnant outside of wedlock, did the opposite; she embraced the challenges before her in spite of the danger. We are able to face our fears in a God-honoring way, as Mary did, when we remember that God is always with us. That promise comes directly from Jesus whose last words to his disciples before he ascended into heaven were, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20) Take time today to search the Bible for other verses that reassure you of God’s constant and faithful presence with you.

Christmas Eve, Sunday, December 24

Read: Matthew 2:9-12

Key Verse: “On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” (Matthew 2:11)

We know very little about the wise men, and in many ways this passage from Matthew invokes more questions than answers. The wise men were from the East – probably from Persia, Arabia, or Mesopotamia. They were most likely astronomers or astrologers who watched and studied the stars. They are often referred to as kings, but Matthew does not indicate they were of royal blood. We assume there were three men because of the gifts they brought, but there could have been more. Likewise, we know little about the star. It is often thought to have been Hailey’s comet or a close conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. Or, it could have been a special star God placed in the sky for the sole purpose of guiding the wise men.

Early readers of Matthew would have known immediately that the wise men were pagans or Gentiles; they were certainly not Jewish. Why, then, do you think the wise men sought Jesus? What were they looking for? How do you think they knew they found the right child? Do you think they were surprised when they learned the King of the Jews was born into a peasant family? This story invokes more questions than answers, so why did Matthew include it in his gospel? Matthew wrote his gospel for the Jews, and his primary purpose was to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah. However, Matthew was also very inclusive of Gentiles in his gospel, and there are numerous references to them throughout his account of Jesus’ life. Through the story of the wise men’s search for the Christ Child, Matthew continued to show his readers that Jesus came for all people – Jew and Gentile alike.

When the wise men found Jesus, they worshipped Him and offered their gifts. Each gift had a special meaning. The first gift was gold. Gold was the gift for kings; it denoted Jesus’ royalty and symbolically crowned Him as the King of kings. The second gift was frankincense. Frankincense, a sweet perfume used in the temple during worship and sacrifices, was the gift for a priest. The Latin word for priest is *pontifex* which means “bridge-builder.” The role of a priest was to build a bridge between God and humankind. Jesus is the high priest who is “holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.” (Hebrews 7:26) The third gift was myrrh. Myrrh was used to embalm bodies; it was the gift for one who was going to die and foreshadowed what was to come. That is why God sent His Son to earth; His birth was for His death and resurrection, and His death was for our birth. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh – “these were the gifts of the wise men, and, even at the cradle of Christ, they foretold that he was to be the true king, the perfect high priest, and in the end the supreme Saviour of the world.” (William Barclay in *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume One*)

What gifts do you bring to Jesus? While our monetary gifts to the church are important, that is not all that God wants. He wants it all – our worship, prayers, service, and witness – and most of all our hearts.

That might seem like a lot, but is it really that much? After all, Jesus gave His all on the cross for you. Ask God to help you give your all to Him this Christmas and always.

Christmas Day, Monday, December 25

Read: John 1:1-18

Key Verse: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

Merry Christmas! On this holy day we celebrate the manifestation of God’s love in the birth of a tiny baby over 2,000 years ago. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) God incarnate; God took on human flesh and came to earth to live with us as One who was fully human and fully divine. Emmanuel, God with us – that is the gift of Christmas.

In *The Message*, Eugene H. Peterson’s paraphrase of the Bible in modern-day English, John 1:14 reads: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son. Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.” Jesus moved into the neighborhood! What an incredible perspective from which to view the Christmas story! God demonstrated His love for us in simple yet dynamic way – a newborn baby moved into the neighborhood.

The whole Christmas story, in fact, all the Good News of the gospels, is epitomized in one beloved verse: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.” John 3:16 reminds us that the core characteristic of God’s being is love. God does not force His people into submission; He woos them with love. God loves the whole world – people who love Him and people who reject Him, the rich and the poor, kings and shepherds, and people of every race, language, and nation. God loves the whole world collectively and each of us as individuals. As St. Augustine said, “God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love.” God loves you!

The birth of Jesus is God’s gift of salvation to all humankind. Through Jesus, we, who deserved only hell, were given heaven. Jesus meets us where we are and calls us to a new life in Him. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (II Corinthians 5:17 from the New International Version) On that first Christmas Day, God revealed Himself to humankind in a new and powerful way through a tiny baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. And today, over 2,000 years later, God continues to reveal Himself to us. He has moved into the neighborhood, but His greatest desire is to move into your heart. God wants to be born anew in each of our hearts on this Christmas Day and to transform each of us into the people He created us to be in Christ Jesus Our Lord. May the fourth verse of *O Little Town of Bethlehem* be your prayer today and every day.

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!

Tuesday, December 26

Read: I John 3:18-24

Key Verse: “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” (I John 3:18)

Christmas Day is over, but that does not mean we are finished with Christmas. In *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, Ebenezer Scrooge is transformed after his encounters with the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Near the end of his conversation with the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, Scrooge says, “I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.”

Doesn't God ask the same of us? How can we keep Christmas all the year?

The answer lies in the Scripture passage for today. We love. We love in truth and in action.

Peter Marshall was a man who loved in truth and action. A Scottish-born minister who immigrated to the United States, Marshall served churches in Atlanta and Washington D.C. before being appointed Chaplain of the U.S. Senate in 1947. He remained in that position until his death in 1949 at the age of 46. Marshall was known for his quick wit, personal relationship with Jesus, and an intense zeal for God. His Gaelic brogue and eloquent words made his sermons and prayers the favorite of many, and, as evidenced by his prayer *For Christmas the Year Round*, Marshall clearly understood that Christmas was not confined to December 25. Christmas is an encounter with the living God, and through that encounter we are transformed. Pray Peter Marshall's prayer and ask God to show you how to love in truth and in action. By doing so, you will honor Christmas and keep it in your heart all year.

For Christmas the Year Round

Lord Jesus, we thank Thee for the spirit shed abroad in human hearts on Christmas. Even as we invited Thee on Christmas to be born again in our hearts, so wilt Thou now go with us throughout the days ahead, to be our Companion in all that we do. Wilt Thou help each one of us to keep Christmas alive in our hearts and in our homes, that it may continue to glow, to shed its warmth, to speak its message during all the bleak days of winter.

May we hold to that spirit, that we may be as gentle and as kindly today as we were on Christmas Eve, as generous tomorrow as we were on Christmas morning.

Then if – by Thy help – we should live through a whole week in that spirit, it may be we can go into another week, and thus be encouraged and gladdened by the discovery that Christmas can last the year round.

So give us joyful, cheerful hearts to the glory of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Notes:

- 1) Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRVS) of the Bible.
- 2) *O Little Town of Bethlehem* was written by Phillip Brooks and printed in The United Methodist Hymnal (1989)
- 3) The prayer *For Christmas the Year Round* was written by Peter Marshall and printed in *The Prayers of Peter Marshall*, edited by Catherine Marshall (1954)