

ADVENT DEVOTIONALS

Devotionals written by Advent Conspiracy pastors
and church leaders from around the world.

ADVENTCONSPIRACY.ORG

DAY 1

JOHN 1:1–5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John's Gospel takes us to the beginning of time. The narrative brings us to the formless darkness before all things were made. And yet in that unfathomable nothingness, John speaks of the presence of Jesus. Theologian, John Wesley, suggests that God "spoke from eternity" when He created the universe. This Gospel brings us the mysterious truth that God brought forth life, and that life was the light that is Christ Jesus.

We are reminded that at Advent Christ brings us a new beginning—a life from God, a light in the dark. Advent is a new beginning for us, too—a chance to reflect on the astonishing gift of Jesus. This passage speaks of God's light as something that has the power to overcome darkness, and the source of that power is revealed to us during Advent.

If you have been alone at night, you know the feeling of emptiness can be profound. God speaks to us through the darkness, just as He spoke life and light into the world. Even in the darkest hour, God is present for us. The gloom of the world is overcome by the presence of Christ in Advent.

REFLECT

Do you dread the darkness, or can you feel God's presence even where there is no light? In many parts of the world, Advent takes place at a time of year when there is more darkness than light. In what areas of your life do you long to see the light of Christ break through? How might practicing the four tenets of Advent Conspiracy bring about light into our dark world?

PRAY

Lord of all light, you created us and are all around us. Thank you for being the Light of the World and entering into our story. Help me to seek your light so that I may find and know your presence in both the brightness of day and the deepest dark of the night. Amen.

DAY 2

JEREMIAH 33:14–16

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Righteousness. It's one of those words in church that is difficult for some to define, and for all of us to embody.

If righteousness really is God's own perfection in every word, thought and action, it's a standard that none of us can reach. It's also one that appears painfully absent in the world around us. Yet God is a promise keeper! "I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." He will be called "the LORD is our righteousness."

This is an incredible message of hope for everyone lost in brokenness and sin. God will have the last and final word. He will enact justice and righteousness not only on our behalf, but on the behalf of everyone and everywhere that we see pain, sin and suffering. Just as Isaiah 25 prophesied, "He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken."

As Pastor Tim Keller observes, "While other worldviews lead us to sit in the midst of life's joys, foreseeing the coming sorrows, Christianity empowers its people to sit in the midst of this world's sorrows, tasting the coming joy." Advent reminds us that through Jesus Christ, joy is coming.

REFLECT

Take time to reflect on your own words, thoughts and actions. Do they reflect a Christlike sort of righteousness? How might the four tenets of Advent Conspiracy reorder your priorities this Advent season so that you can show hope to those in your life? Write down some concrete actions you can take to be a blessing to others. Ask someone to hold you accountable and possibly join you this Advent season.

PRAY

Dear Jesus, you are our Righteous Branch. To you and you alone do we cling for our righteousness. Thank you for never letting us go, and for convicting us, comforting us and then commanding us to reflect your hope in our world. Help us to dwell in your loving presence so that we can be ambassadors of your love, justice and righteousness everywhere you send us by your strength. Amen!

DAY 3

LUKE 1:5–10

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

How does the story of Jesus—the story of Advent—begin with an older, childless couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth? It's tempting to want to rush past this part of the narrative. We want to get to the angel's announcement, the connection to Mary and to Joseph and the manger, even to John the Baptist in the wilderness, but that has to wait.

These verses remind us that we are reading the beginning of one story and the end of another. It was time: Israel's wait for the work of God to intervene into their story had come. Could it be that the plight of Israel can be seen like mirror image in the story of these two righteous but childless people?

Israel is tired of waiting and so are Elizabeth and Zechariah. Their prayers seem futile, until God shows up with an announcement that will change the trajectory for them all! While we may read hopelessness and despair into these verses, note what the assembled people are doing. Verse 10 says that when Zechariah went in to serve as the priest at his appointed time, "all the assembled worshipers were praying outside."

John Wesley, once said: "God does nothing but by prayer, and everything with it." Imagine for a moment if prayer is what defined our Advent season this year. What kind of conspiracy would it be if the "all the assembled worshipers devoted themselves to prayer? What could God do in our lives in the coming weeks if we committed to prayer in this way?

REFLECT

Consider your own prayer life, that of your family or congregation. How might you use this Advent season to intentionally focus on prayer? What prayers have you been waiting on or have you given up on praying for? In the coming days, try different kinds, styles or types of prayers to pray in a new way. See how God will meet you. Let that be your Advent gift this season.

PRAY

God of all time and space, we join with Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, as we await the arrival of Jesus during this Advent season of preparation. May my preparations be like those of the assembly gathered with Zechariah, one of prayer and intentionality as I wait, patiently, for you to arrive. Give me courage to come to you honestly and humbly with my authentic prayers, knowing that you are a God who shows up in miraculous ways. Amen.

DAY 4

LUKE 1:11–17

On the right side of the altar of incense an angel of the Lord appeared. This terrified Zechariah and he fell before him out of fear. The angel said, "Zechariah, don't be afraid because your prayers have been heard! Your wife Elizabeth will have a son and you will call his name John. There will be a lot of joy, celebration, and many will be glad. Many of the sons of Israel will return to the Lord, his God. He will go before God in the spirit and power of Elijah and turn the fathers' hearts to their children and the disobedient to an attitude of righteousness. He will prepare people for the Lord.

Have you ever noticed that in the Bible, whenever the Angel of the Lord shows up, people are always afraid? Not just afraid but terrified! The Bible says Zechariah "fell before him out of fear." Zechariah, who had been crying out to God for answers. Zechariah, who prayed for years and years. Zechariah, who wanted a son. That Zechariah.

God sent an angel with a response for Zechariah and he was afraid! Afraid? Yes, yes, he was. Think about that for a minute. How many times have we been surprised or even frightened when we see God working and answering our prayers? Why are we afraid or surprised? Maybe we were not prepared for the answer that was given? Maybe we were expecting a different answer? Maybe God's timing didn't line up with our own?

Zechariah was told that his son, John (who we would come to know as John the Baptist), would help prepare the hearts of the people for the coming of Jesus. What a strong reminder for us: Be prepared, and live with expectation that God will answer our prayers. When we pray, we should prepare for whatever the answer is going to be. This Advent season as we get ready for Christmas, may we continue to be people who are preparing our hearts and the hearts of others to hear from God.

REFLECT

Think back on a time when you were surprised by God. Why do you think you were surprised? Where are you longing to see God show up in your life these days?

PRAY

God, I know you have all the answers and your timing is perfect. Please grant me strength and courage to prepare my heart to hear a message from you. I thank you for all the work you have done in my life and all that you will continue to do. Bless me and those around me this Advent season. Amen.

DAY 5

LUKE 1:18–25

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." And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

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."

The announcement of John's birth was extraordinary. God chose two people, Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, to raise His messenger John. Zechariah asked for a sign and a sign was given that stayed with him for nine months. He became mute, until the birth of his son. Meanwhile, Elizabeth "kept herself hidden" for

five months, most likely until it was clear that she was expecting. Both of them became living signs of God's pressing, yet seemingly unbelievable, reality. The miraculous birth of a son to two people well advanced in age.

Similarly, we might be tempted to doubt the reality of Jesus' second coming, and the unfolding of His Kingdom. We live in this tension of the Kingdom already and not yet. There are markers in our lives that point us to know that yes, the Kingdom is here. And there are those things that tempt us to doubt and ask ourselves, like Zechariah, "How shall I know this?"

The words of Jesus in John 14:3 stand true: "I am preparing a place for you, I am coming again and I surely will receive you to Myself." The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel. His return is certain, and there are still people in need of hearing His story. We have the chance to help tell that story to a watching world. Let Advent be a reminder to each of us of the King who came into the world and who will come again.

REFLECT

How is God calling us to move this Advent season in faith and anticipation of the pressing reality of the Kingdom? How can we live our lives this Advent season in anticipation? Is there someone in our life who we can share the good news of Jesus with?

PRAY

Lord, let me be ready to receive you when you come again. Let me receive your words and life with faith. I pray that today I may be reminded of those markers you have given me—Your Holy Spirit and your Church. May they strengthen me and stir me to walk out all that you have commanded. It's all for your Glory. Amen.

DAY 6

LUKE 1:26–38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

With the angelic proclamation "Greetings, you who are highly favored!" we have our first introduction to Mary in Luke's Gospel. Because of this lofty declaration, we often think of Mary as the model of obedience, the picture of a perfect follower of God.

Now to be sure, being selected to bear the Son of God is indeed a high honor, but the extraordinary thing about Mary was that she was so ordinary. Living in a small village, not in the religious center of Jerusalem, she was a girl in a culture that valued age and men. She later calls herself poor and lowly.

God chooses Mary because she has nothing. When she asks, "How will this be?," it is a practical question. She's old enough to know how this works and knows that there's a step missing in the process. Mary discovers what all Christians must learn. When God calls us, we are not capable of accomplishing the task on our own. Only God can provide what we need. Through miraculous intervention, Mary goes from unwed virgin to the mother of the Christ child.

By embracing her calling, Mary becomes a partner with God in bringing the Kingdom here on earth. Without God's intervention, Mary could not become pregnant. Without Mary as a human mother, Jesus could not be born as one of us. This is God's design, for us to work together to give life to the Kingdom here on earth.

God's call transforms us from people who are incapable on our own to those for whom, with God's help, nothing is impossible. We, like Mary, have been chosen by God, not because of anything we have or have done, but because God wants to have a relationship with us. We are indeed highly favored.

REFLECT

How have you felt incapable or inadequate to do what God has called you to do? Have you ever witnessed God's miraculous provision when you chose to follow His calling? How might the concept of partnering with God help us fulfill the Advent Conspiracy tenents to Give More and Love All?

PRAY

God, who calls and provides, may I recognize the gifts you have given me and remember how truly favored I am. Help me to listen closely for your calling and to be quick to obey, even when I don't fully understand the whys and the hows. During this season of Advent, help me to use the unique gifts you have given me to breathe life into your Kingdom on earth, both now and all year long. Amen.

DAY 7

MATTHEW 1:18–21

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. 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, saying, "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."

The Incarnation is something we are all supposed to "get" as Christians, but its Truth is profound and sometimes eludes us. If we call ourselves Christians, we are—by definition—follower of the Christ, the Anointed One, Jesus of Nazareth. We accept that He is God's gift to humanity, given for our salvation. We know that the giving of that gift came at Christmastime, but the story is filled with surprises, many of which are contained in the few short verses above.

God's Son, the perfect Lamb of God who would one day take away the sins of the world, was born to unwed parents. His earthly father, Joseph, is a just man. More accurately, he is so just that he cannot see God's plan unfolding before his very eyes. In trying to do the right thing, he misses the thing God has called him to do..

It takes divine intervention to keep him on the path of righteousness—to fulfill His calling as the earthly father to Jesus. Joseph almost "missed the mark" as he was kind enough and merciful enough to divorce Mary quietly for what he perceived as her indiscretion, but he was not attuned to what God was truly doing. Thankfully, despite his misstep, and God's patience, he changed course.

This Advent, may we each be open to hearing rightly and truly the course that we should be following. May we not assume to know the way. May we not be just in our ways, but may we be just in God's ways, and His way alone.

REFLECT

Have there been times when you've moved ahead on your own plans instead of obeying God's will? Do you need to ask for forgiveness for any of those choices? Following His call, how can you join together with God in helping to share the good news of the Gospel?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, speak to my heart and soul. Give me ears to hear and a soft heart to receive your message. Give me feet to swiftly follow your way—and change course if necessary. Help me to see the saving grace of your Son alive and active in these days. Help me to enact the Gospel in word and deed in this Advent season and every day until Jesus' return or you call me home. Amen.

DAY 8

MATTHEW 1:22–25

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

This passage begins, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said..." All of what took place? Matthew 1 covers the genealogy of Jesus—how he was a descendant of Abraham and David, fulfilling the requirements to be the Messiah, both the blessing and the King of the world. The miraculous story of Mary becoming pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Ultimately what that meant for her upcoming marriage to Joseph, as we read yesterday.

But everything changed after the angel talked to Joseph in a dream.

Joseph was told the baby was from God, that Joseph should take Mary home as his wife, and here we learn they are to name the baby Jesus. Obedience would mean losing his righteous reputation by acting righteously. The whole story must have seemed crazy. We might ask the angel why he didn't show up nine months sooner with this information. And yet...

Joseph obeyed with radical, countercultural obedience. Against cultural norms, he moved in with a young pregnant Mary (can you imagine the conversation with his family?) and later gave their son the name Jesus. And Jesus became known as Immanuel, God with us. These must have been difficult, crazy times. And yet…

All of this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet in Isaiah. It was an Advent Conspiracy that required an obedient Mary and Joseph. God asked Joseph to Worship Fully in radical, countercultural obedience.

Can God count on us to do the same?

REFLECT

God knew what He was doing when He chose Joseph. If you know Jesus as your Savior, He chose you, too. And He knew what He was doing when He chose you as well. How might God want to use you in your world? In what way might He want you to Worship Fully in full obedience to Him? Joseph is a significant role model of a Godly man, husband, father, and friend. How can you apply his example in your own life?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, thank you for choosing me. I don't get it, but I'm thankful for it! I trust that your will is best, even when it seems countercultural. I desire to follow you even in difficult times. Help me to be bold when I want to shy away, to trust you when I'd rather trust my circumstances, and to be more concerned about pleasing you than those around me. In the name of King Jesus, I pray these things. Amen.

DAY 9

ISAIAH 7:14

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

One of the most enjoyable, and challenging, tasks for expectant parents is that of choosing the name of their new baby. Many parents spend countless hours pouring through books of baby names searching for just the right name. They may go through many dozens of choices before choosing one. How much easier if we could enjoy the benefit of a thousands-of-years-old prophecy to relieve us of the decision!

God's wonderful plan of salvation was to be found in the birth of a miraculous child. If we were in any doubt as to this, the very words "the virgin will conceive" reminds us. God intervenes in human history in the most wonderful and unexpected of ways. The birth of any child is a miracle; the birth of Jesus, to a young virgin in the otherwise unremarkable place of Bethlehem, draws our attention to how God works wonders and miracles as He loves the world back to Himself.

The wonder does not stop with the incredible nature of the birth but continues as the prophet reveals the name of the child to be born: Immanuel, God with us. Names matter a great deal in Scripture as they tell us something about the person. Here we find a beautiful truth revealed: The God of creation who spoke all things into existence is a God who wants to be with His people. In the birth of

Jesus, God makes His dwelling place amongst us and, as Eugene Peterson says, "moves into the neighborhood."

What an incredible thing this is: Our God cares about us so much that He comes to live amongst us, becoming fully human as He works His rescue and restoration plan into completion. Immanuel, God with us, reminds us that we have a God who is involved in every aspect of our lives, a God who cares for us, a God who is compassionate towards us and passionate about us.

What a wonderful name it is, and what a wonderful truth that it reveals.

REFLECT

Do you feel like you are close to or distant from God these days? Why is that? How might the four tenets of Advent Conspiracy help you to find a closer connection to God in your life this Advent?

PRAY

Jesus, we thank you for the truth that you are Immanuel, that you care for us and seek to be known by us. As I journey through Advent, help me to open myself up to you and be drawn deeper into your life-giving presence. Through my life and actions, may others be made more aware of you. I pray that this season would be full of worship as we rejoice in the time when you came to make your dwelling place with us. Amen.

DAY 10

LUKE 1:39–45

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. 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! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

We should all have a relative or friend who we can go to in trying times. More than that, as God's chosen, we should want to be that relative or friend for others. Elizabeth was that to Mary. Mary had an encounter with the Holy Spirit that an angel told her about. It changed everything for her future and the future of the world and Mary needed to tell someone.

Elizabeth was an older relative of Mary's. But it wasn't Elizabeth's age that qualified her and it wasn't that she was related to Mary that qualified her. It wasn't even her circumstances or her life's experience that qualified her to hear of Mary's special news. It was the special anointing that God placed in Elizabeth, for His own purpose, to make way for the Savior. Elizabeth had a purpose.

Mary was carrying a baby who had been conceived by the Holy Spirit. Mary was carrying Jesus in her womb. Mary needed to hear, see, and experience life with Elizabeth. Elizabeth was someone who had a visible sign that the Lord was with her, and that she had His favor on her life. Who do you have in your life with a visible sign that the Lord is with them?

Mary trusted the angel and knew that Elizabeth would keep her secret, and cherish it, for as long as needed. Elizabeth could not understand that Mary trusted her with this genuinely unique secret, so she stated: "Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Simply, because God chose her.

REFLECT

Just like Elizabeth, God wants to use each of His followers for His purpose. What is God calling you to in this season? When you get surprisingly good news, do you have a trusted Christian friend to go to, like how Mary and Elizabeth had each other? If you don't, start praying for God to bring these kinds of friendships into your life.

PRAY

Dear Jesus, I want my life to be used by you, for your purpose. Regardless of my circumstances, help me to go beyond myself, so that you can use me to prepare the way for your will to be done. I also pray for relationships in my life to be strengthened, like the one between Elizabeth and Mary was. I want strong Christian friendships that can encourage me and keep me on your righteous path. Amen.

DAY 11

LUKE 1:46–56

And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

This song is known by many as the Magnificat, which is a Latin word meaning "to magnify." Mary's Magnificat is a strong message from an even stronger young woman.

When Mary said yes to God's invitation to become an integral part of the world's redemption, her life became much more difficult. Even as Mary rightly foresees that "all generations will call me blessed," justifying an out-of-wedlock pregnancy to her husband-to-be and to her family would be no small task. In Mary's world, at this time women were regarded more as property to be controlled than as people with God-ordained agency. The life Mary offered in humble service to God was on the line with those she loved the most.

Gabriel's call, however, touched something deep within Mary, igniting a fire in her bones that would not be quenched by the disapproving judgment of people in town. This young woman grasped that God's salvation was more than a private possession. The redemption which will soon emerge from her womb will turn the power structures of this world on its head. The mighty will be brought low. The lowly will be lifted up. The proud will be scattered and those on the margins will find the favor of our God. It's easy to look at the world and those in power and believe that the way things always have been is the way they always will be. But Advent offers the opportunity we need to join Mary in proclaiming that salvation brings a new future. Advent extends beyond our personal lives to impact the world around us. Jesus brings an upside-down Kingdom to reign. How and where might we begin to join this work?

Let the four tenets of Advent Conspiracy be our guide: Let the way we worship be overflowing. Help us to spend wisely and support causes that truly matter. May we give intentionally and relationally. And may the way we love and serve others be a true reflection of Christ.

REFLECT

Like Mary, how can you magnify the Lord today? In what ways can you intentionally get to know the stories of your neighbors and outsiders in your city? How can knowing these stories help you to better love and serve other people during Advent?

PRAY

My soul magnifies you, O Lord. You are the only one who can bring lasting freedom and peace into our broken world. Help me understand how your salvation is needed in the recesses of my soul and in the recesses of my city. I am your servant; use me in accordance with your will. Help me to express your love boldly to all the people I encounter today. Amen.

DAY 12

LUKE 1:68–69

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.

In this passage, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, is filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesies the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. His words are a song of praise, recognizing the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. The phrase "horn of salvation" is symbolic of strength and victory. In ancient times, a horn represented power and authority, and here it signifies the strong Savior who would redeem His people.

Zechariah's proclamation is both a declaration of joy and a reminder of the faithfulness of God. For generations, Israel had awaited the coming of a Savior, and now that hope was being fulfilled in Jesus Christ. God had not forgotten His people, and in His perfect timing, He intervened in human history to bring salvation and restoration.

As we reflect on this during Advent, we remember that the same God who fulfilled His promises to Israel is still faithful today. In the midst of our struggles and waiting, we can trust that God is at work. Just as He sent Jesus to redeem His people, He continues to reach out to us, offering salvation, peace, and hope.

REFLECT

What are you waiting for in this season of your life? How does the promise of God's faithfulness encourage you as you wait? Consider where you need the "horn of salvation"—Jesus' strength and redemption—today. How can you make room in your life for God to work, even in the midst of uncertainty?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending Jesus, the strong and faithful Savior. In this season of Advent, help me to trust in your promises and to rest in your faithfulness. Teach me to wait with hope, knowing that you are always at work, even when I can't see it. May your salvation be my strength today. Amen.

DAY 13

LUKE 2:1–5

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

These five verses set the stage for the birth of Jesus. Mary and Joseph were leaving Nazareth and going to Bethlehem. Why? Caesar had ordered a census that required citizens to go to their hometown to register. Since Joseph was from King David's family, Bethlehem was his ancestral hometown.

What do these five verses not tell us? As a woman at this time in history, Mary would not be counted in the census, so why was she traveling with Joseph this late in pregnancy? Was Joseph trying to get Mary away from the town gossips in Nazareth? Were Mary and Joseph moving to Bethlehem permanently? (We know from Matthew's Gospel that the family was still in Bethlehem when the Magi visited, perhaps as much as two years after the birth.) Were Mary and Joseph scared?

Throughout her pregnancy and especially as she grew closer to giving birth, Mary likely thought that her mother and other women in her family would be with her at the birth of her child. This trip to Bethlehem removed that option. Have you ever had your plans upset by the decisions of someone else, decisions that you could not ignore? How did you experience God during that time? Did you blame Him or turn to Him for guidance? It's an amazing thing to think about the circumstances surrounding King Jesus' birth and the humble, lowly way He entered into our world. He didn't do it surrounded by a crowd of people or in a palace; He came quietly into an unassuming town called Bethlehem.

REFLECT

Our ancestors help shape and define us. Joseph came from the line of King David—when you think about your family heritage, what comes to mind? Do you have a strong legacy of faith or are you starting new traditions? What does it mean for you to be a part of the family of God?

PRAY

King Jesus, regardless of our family lineage, help us to remember that we are children of God. Even when circumstances are dictated by others or when my plans are changed, help me to remember that you, Immanuel, are with me and at work in all circumstances to bring glory and honor to God. Draw near to me this Advent. Amen.

DAY 14

LUKE 2:6–7

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

This is the moment we've been waiting for, the big announcement of Jesus being born into the world. How does the Gospel of Luke describe it? A couple of sentences, very few details. From the very beginning, God has made it clear Jesus would be a different kind of King. No parades and trumpets sounding, no big celebration happening in the palace for all to hear. The birth of the King that changed the world was nothing like we expected.

Jesus chose to enter into our broken world in the most humble and vulnerable way—by being born into a family that was on the outside, often overlooked and judged. The good news is that the King of Kings is not sitting in a throne in a palace far away... He is in a manger, surrounded by the dirt, grime, and messiness of the world. God came to redeem the whole world, including those of us who sometimes feel like there's not room for us in the Kingdom of God.

"Because there was no guest room available for them."

On this most important night, no one made room for Mary, an expectant mother; all they saw were her circumstances. But that didn't stop God's plan from moving forward. As the people of God, we must open doors and create space for the downtrodden and overlooked. To see people as image bearers and make sure they know they too are invited into the Kingdom of God.

REFLECT

As you Give More and Love All this Advent, how can you make an intentional effort to really notice and see the people you're in community with? Is there someone in your life that you need to share the good news of the Gospel with?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, open my eyes to see the realities of the world around me, the brokenness and the beauty. I pray that this Advent season my heart would overflow with worship and gratitude as I find ways to serve others in my neighborhood, church, and city. Amen.

DAY 15

LUKE 2:8–12

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

One ordinary night, as the shepherds settled into the routine of watching their flock, God interrupted with something extraordinary! The announcement of the arrival of the Savior of the world given to the shepherds included a sign to confirm it. The angel said they would find the sign, the proof of this good news, in Bethlehem … a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

These shepherds are believed to be the Levitical shepherds who were raising and caring for the animals used for the sacrificial offerings in the temple in Jerusalem. They would have known to watch not only for signs the Messiah was coming, but also for signs of health among their flock. When lambs were about to be born, the shepherds would take the ewes to nearby caves for safety. Once the lambs were born, the shepherds would examine the lambs for spots and blemishes. They would keep the lambs safely wrapped in swaddling cloths so they would not injure themselves. Passover lambs had to be perfect in every way.

There was no mistaking that this sign was the one that the Jewish people had been waiting for … The Lamb of God, the Messiah, who takes away the sin of the world, was here.

Just as the shepherds went to Bethlehem to worship the Lamb, we are invited to come to Jesus with a heart of gratitude and Worship Fully this Advent season. He is Immanuel, God with us. We may not receive an angelic sign like the shepherds did, but God hears our prayers and asks us to draw near to Him in the waiting.

REFLECT

Is there an answer or a prayer you've been waiting to receive from God? How does your prayer life influence your worship? Do you find yourself worshiping a lot these days? Why or why not?

PRAY

Father, we celebrate with gratitude that you provided Jesus, your Son, as the Lamb who takes away our sin. Thank you for the gift through your Holy Spirit of being present with me even today. Turn my need for signs and answers into songs of praise. Help me to notice your love at work all around me. Amen.

DAY 16

LUKE 2:13–14

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!"

Words are powerful. No doubt we can think upon words that we have offered and received that have brought us delight and affirmation, words that we might still cherish to this day. We hold too, with gentleness and the peace of Christ, words that we know have brought destruction and anguish for us and others.

The words shared in this passage, announced by these heavenly host, are words of wonder and witness. They give fitting glory to God and witness of the peace on earth that would be upon those on whom God's favor would rest.

These words of wonder and witness play their part in what was taking place and are nestled amongst what was unfolding for these unlikely characters: the shepherds living out in the fields. Their initial terror at the encounter with the Angel of the Lord was suddenly transformed as good news was proclaimed and this awe-filled set of events would evoke action: they would set out to go to Bethlehem.

These powerful words play an incredible part in what took place in that field.

Words spoken, and the positive impact they have, are likely to be cherished long after the memories of whatever "must-have" gift have faded. How true this is when we join with these heavenly hosts in speaking words of wonder and witness. During this Advent season, we have the opportunity to be a part of echoing a story that complements that of the shepherds, in which good news is shared with those who we meet.

REFLECT

Think about the words you have used in the last few days. Are they ones that brought joy, peace, and encouragement to the people you encountered? Did you have any opportunities to share or be a witness of the Gospel?

PRAY

Lord, we thank you for the power and wonder of these words shared by the heavenly host and all who these words witness to. Might we ever be captivated by this unfolding story of good news. Put upon my lips words that are powerful, precious and peace bringing. Minister to me, by your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 17

LUKE 2:15–18

When the angels left them and went back to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, that the Lord has made known to us." So they hurried off and located Mary and Joseph, and found the baby lying in a manger. When they saw him, they related what they had been told about this child, and all who heard it were astonished at what the shepherds said.

The shepherds had just experienced a wonderful moment while they were out among the flocks. Their routine nighttime became a brightly lit, enthusiastic, worshipful moment. The good news they had waited for, the coming of the Messiah, was announced to them!

And then ... the music was over. The lights went back out. And the shepherds faced a decision. They could choose to sit and bask in the moment. After all, it was a thrilling moment. The army of the Lord of Hosts had appeared to them, bringing Scripture like Psalm 46 to life. Each shepherd had heard and seen things beyond imagining; they now had a great story to tell to their children and grandchildren.

Or they could reject the moment entirely. After all, who would believe them that the sky filled with angelic beings? Are they sure that's what happened, anyway?

Instead, they took the third route: They went looking. They did not sit in the shiny moment of shouts and songs. They did not circle up and decide to just let it all drop. They went looking for themselves. The text says they "hurried off" and found Mary, Joseph, and Jesus exactly as they had heard.

These days, we tend to find ourselves as followers of Jesus hurrying off about many things. Working, juggling busy schedules, checking off the Christmas to-do lists, running around after kids, serving extra hours at church. Occasionally, something causes us to pause, look up at the heavens, and remember that there is something bigger than us. What, then, do we do?

Let us consider that our best hurrying off would be in looking for Jesus. We will benefit from realizing that He is not found in the holiday lights and the piles of stuff. He is exactly where He came to be: in the midst of people. Christmas is, remember, the celebration that God Himself put on flesh and dwelt among us, as John 1:14 reminds us. And in our midst is where we still find Him today. We find Jesus near to the brokenhearted and seeking the sheep that have gone astray.

REFLECT

Does Advent feel stressed and hurried or slow and peaceful? What things are getting in the way of you slowing down and worshiping Jesus this Advent? What's one thing you can do this week to Give More of yourself relationally to the people in your life, to soak up the memories and to be present with one another?

PRAY

Jesus, in the midst of the ever-accelerating world I live in, help me set aside the chaotic hurrying. Help me to remember with every light, every song, that the only hurrying I should do matches that of the shepherds: that I would hurry to be in your presence. Amen.

DAY 18

LUKE 2:19–20

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

In the Christmas song, "Mary, Did You Know?," the singer asks what Mary knew about her baby boy. Did you know He will … walk on water? save our sons and daughters? make you new? deliver you?

The angel Gabriel had already told Mary some incredible things about her Son—that she should name him Jesus (which means, "Yahweh is salvation"), that He will be great, will be called the Son of the Most High, and will reign on David's throne forever.

But there are a lot of things that Mary was not told. She does not seem to have been told that by accepting God's task for her, she would be labeled an adulteress. Or that shortly after her Son's birth, Herod would try to kill Him, her family would flee to Egypt, and every baby under age two in Bethlehem would be slaughtered instead. And she does not seem to have been told that the process by which her Son would save us all required His rejection, torment and death—all while she stood watching.

If we put ourselves in Mary's shoes, we can see that she would endure the dark night of the soul time and time again during Jesus' life and death. These are times when it feels like hope seems to be lost, when God's plan is not clear, and when God Himself may seem distant or unresponsive. The narrative in Luke 2 shows us how Mary remained faithful through these dark nights—how she could stand at the foot of the cross while her baby boy died as heaven's perfect Lamb, and yet still choose to be in the room, praying with Jesus' other disciples at the start of the book of Acts.

She pondered on what she had seen God do. To "ponder" means to weigh or reflect on repeatedly. As we are in the season of Advent, reflect on your own experiences with God. Where have you unmistakably seen God's goodness? Even if He feels far away now, take some time to remember those moments when you have known, deep in your soul, that He is good. If none come to mind, listen to "Mary, Did You Know?," and reflect on His faithfulness to Mary.

REFLECT

Read John 16:33 and remember that no matter how dark the night feels, Jesus, the Light of the World, is still in control. Write down a memory of a time when God carried you through a hard season or answered a prayer that seemed impossible.

PRAY

Father, please bring to mind times when I have known your goodness personally. Even though the night is dark, I will trust that you are faithful and will never leave me. Help me to trust you, even when I feel like my circumstances are out of control. Thank you, King Jesus, for becoming that baby who did save the world. Amen.

DAY 19

MATTHEW 2:1–2

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

These two verses herald the outcome of learning, wisdom, and assumption. These Wise Ones (or Magi) probably had spent many years studying the signs of nature and the heavens to understand the world around them. Weather forecasting, particularly for the months and year ahead, probably depended on people like these Wise Ones reading the signs long before science began to model the physics of our atmosphere, sun and moon.

To them the sign was clear—"We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." It was a sign of hope in a challenging world. Why else bring special gifts to honor this foreign ruler? Some suggest the Magi came from Chaldea or Arabia—places of great learning and exotic woods and spices—and may have even been of Abraham's line. But that's based on likely connections. Maybe even on assumptions—just like the Magi assumed such an important king would be in Jerusalem, the region's seat of power and authority. Even today, many know the story of three wise men who visited baby Jesus in the stable in Bethlehem. Yet only the location and that they were Magi is part of the recorded story of this visit to Jesus. The scriptures don't tell us other details about this encounter.

Jesus doesn't fit our stereotypes or our expectations formed based on worldly practice or standards. He is happy to be born in a little town. The God of the Universe is here—vulnerable, dependent on the protection and care of new (and probably bemused) parents.

Yet these Wise Ones are not disappointed when they do locate the young child. They recognize the one who would save God's people, defeat the darkest forces of evil and death, and usher in the Kingdom of God on earth. How do they respond? They bow—and they worship with all they have and are.

REFLECT

When we turn our mind to Jesus, what do we expect to find? When was the last time you were filled with awe and wonder, like the Magi, when you were in the presence of Jesus? Is there anything holding you back from worshiping Jesus fully this Advent?

PRAY

Loving God, as we go through these days of anticipation and beyond, may I be always ready to discover your presence in unexpected places, encounters or experiences. Please give me a heart that readily opens to your embracing love and inspiration—in worship. Amen.

DAY 20

MATTHEW 2:3–6

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

"'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

Yesterday we read about the Magi from the east, who, upon noticing the first Christmas star ornamenting the night sky, set out on a journey to seek the Messiah and worship Him. In stark contrast, today we read that when King Herod and "all Jerusalem" heard about Jesus' birth, they were disturbed.

Disturbed! In the original Greek that word can mean "agitated," "stirred-up," "troubled," or "afraid." Isn't it interesting that you don't have to look far to see the same wide spectrum of responses to Jesus' birth today? You may not even have to look past your own family or group of friends to see such different reactions to Jesus.

And yet, nobody could argue with Micah's prophecy, written some 700 years earlier. Herod demanded answers, and a voice from the past echoed truth down long corridors of time. Maybe if Herod had not been so worried about losing his status, his position, his perceived control, he might have noticed something sweetly significant in that last prophetic sentence.

"A ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

This ruler is different. He's come to lead, but in the humblest way. On the list of dirty jobs, it doesn't get much worse than shepherding. This was not a glamorous position for a king to take. What kind of ruler loves like this? What are we so worried about losing that we'd let it keep us from seeking our Messiah and worshiping Him?

REFLECT

What are you holding onto so hard that the idea of Jesus ruling your life is, frankly, unsettling? Disturbing? Just like a shepherd tending to his flock, Jesus wants to lead you, love you and tenderly care for you. Will you let Him?

PRAY

Lord Jesus, help me to let go of anything that is coming between me and you. You deserve my wholehearted worship! Break down any walls that are keeping me from you. Amen.

DAY 21

MATTHEW 2:7–8

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

Deception at its finest. Herod was a master of his craft, but he could not hide the truth of the matter: What was most important to him was being threatened. The word about this newborn King of the Jews had spread fast. Matthew 2:3 goes as far as to say that Herod "was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him."

As we read yesterday, for Herod, the arrival of Jesus was not good news. The prophecy foretold another kind of ruler who would lead like a shepherd. Jesus' Kingdom would be a topsy-turvy reversal of the power structure. The high and mighty would be brought low, and those of low status would be elevated—a direct threat to someone whose power lies in accumulation, influence, status, and wealth.

God's arrival, Advent, is meant to stir us up. It's meant to shake us from our need to accumulate worldly things and awaken us to a different reality—one where true power and authority are not derived from influence, status, or wealth.

The truth is clear—Herod had no intention to honor the Christ-child because he was not willing to yield his life, his status, his influence, or his power.

REFLECT

The four tenets of Advent Conspiracy are there to help us avoid "the temptation of more" so that we can be fully present with Christ and those we love. Are there things in your life that keep you from yielding to Christ? Are there practices or habits that keep you from fully honoring the Christ-child?

PRAY

Immanuel, stir up within me the desire to give myself and my life fully to you and your Kingdom, where true power lies in humility and simplicity. Remove from within me the temptation to accumulate, and grant me the willingness to worship, serve, share, and love so that I might fully honor you. Amen.

DAY 22

MATTHEW 2:9–12

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

On a morning with a cloudless sky and a gentle offshore breeze, I was surfing with some friends when a pod of dolphins started swimming and jumping all around us. Some of the dolphins were so close I could reach out and touch them. Feelings of awe, joy, and some fear rose up in all of us.

Sometimes I go out surfing when I'm feeling stuck or I'm praying for God to speak. I go into creation and try to listen better and notice God.

As I came in and was walking to my car, a woman was smiling at me and asked with excitement, "Did you get to surf with the dolphins?" I told her I did. She let out a sigh mixed with glee and envy. Then she said something that surprised me: "Did they have a message?"

Now I will admit, when that woman on the beach asked me if the dolphins had

a message for me, my reaction was to laugh and brush it off. Until I got back to thinking about this text. Matthew's Gospel highlights the ways in which the created world pointed to the glory of God's arrival.

Consider the magnitude of Christ's Incarnation. This news was so big it took prophets to foretell it, angels to declare it, and stars in the heavens to proclaim it. This was a message of universal impact and the universe itself was responding. As the psalmist declares in Psalm 19:1, the "heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."

Of course, as part of creation, the Magi heard the message and responded. In fact, there is a poetic reciprocity with the gifts they bring to Jesus. Gold, frankincense, myrrh. These are gifts based in creation, developed with human creative expression, and then given back to the One who was there as God created in the beginning.

In this season of Advent, perhaps a way we can engage in a more full expression of worship is to take time to notice the ways creation continues to proclaim God's glory. The question becomes, "Do I have the eyes and ears to notice?"

REFLECT

Is there a way you can engage with God's creation today? As you do so, in what ways might the created world also be anticipating the arrival of Christ?

PRAY

I praise you, Father, for you are our Almighty Creator. I thank you, Jesus, for your presence and promised return. Guide me, Holy Spirit, as I long for my life to join in with all of creation in proclaiming your glory. Amen.

DAY 23

GALATIANS 4:4–7

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

When I was growing up, we had school meals where we sat down at tables together and we ate the food that was presented to us. We had no choice in what food was served that day. We might like it, we might not like it; it might be well cooked, it might be badly cooked. We had no choice in the matter. My least liked day was sauerkraut day. If you've never had sauerkraut—it's a bitter form of cabbage. Some people love it. I find it hard to even put it in my mouth. But, if it was sauerkraut day at school, it was sauerkraut day.

Turning to today's passage: The book of Galatians challenges its readers, including you and me, to live a life that is rooted solely in faith in Jesus Christ. A life in which other forms of "living right" are given up in favor of one great approach: trusting in Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the reality of a life apart from grace and faith is compared to living like a child with a guardian—limited. The inheritance may, in theory, be yours, but you can't get to it. It's a gray, constrained world.

But now, bursting forth in glorious color is one of the most amazing consequenc-

es of faith in Jesus Christ. We aren't simply forgiven—after all, Jesus' death on the cross could have changed us from unforgiven slaves to forgiven slaves. No! Jesus was sent so that, by faith in Him, we might become the chosen children of God the Father.

The passage is really very bold here. We were constrained and unable to actually live right but now we are God's children. And not just His children, but His adopted children. Compare my school dining experience—you get what you're served—with going to a restaurant. You've chosen the restaurant. You're given the menu. You select food, maybe even multiple courses, from the menu. And, being wise, you choose exactly what you want. The tastes, the flavors—everything that you love and want to eat. You know how good that perfectly cooked dream meal is, and you choose it.

The word "adoption" is one of the most profound points in this passage: Knowing exactly who we were, and exactly who we are today, God chooses to adopt us. In other terms, you weren't just a no-option meal plonked in front of God. No! God had an option, and he willingly chose to adopt you. Yes—you. He looked at the whole of humanity and chose you to welcome home as a child. Not a forgiven slave, but a wanted, chosen, delighted in, loved child. Wow! Let that truth sink into you for a moment.

REFLECT

Consider the significance that, as a Christian, you haven't "just" been forgiven by Jesus' death on the cross, amazing as that is. You are a chosen child of the living God. How does this impact your gratitude to God? How might this transform how you worship, and how you love others this Christmas?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, thank you that when I chose to trust Jesus for forgiveness, you chose to adopt me as your child. Help me to know more how deeply loved I am and help me to live in that reality and the security that it brings. Give me the courage and awareness to love everyone I meet as someone who you value as a child, even if they haven't turned to you yet, just as Jesus did in coming to earth. Amen.

DAY 24

ISAIAH 9:6–7

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Fifteen years ago, inspired by an Advent Conspiracy video, the congregation I was serving in embarked on a clean water project for a small community in Ecuador. When I went to Ecuador for the ribbon cutting and blessing of the project, some of the people took me over to a neighboring community that was built on a garbage field. It is as heartbreaking as you can imagine. One of the many things that goes along with a lack of clean water is a myriad of skin diseases, which were visible on the bodies of the people. After seeing more need, the hope was that our church could do something to help.

While we were there, some people in the community took me to their church—a spot of pounded ground with four poles holding up a corrugated metal roof and twisted-wire cross. They told me other pastors and priests rarely visited them here, so they asked if I would celebrate communion, the Eucharist, with

them, saying to me, "Please. Jesus is all we have." They were right. Jesus is all we have.

The words of the prophet in Isaiah today are often interpreted as a promise, but in their original setting they must have been words of hope. There would be a day when God will send a ruler, just and faithful, restoring joy and justice and reestablishing the nation as it was under David. Isaiah's vision was not spiritual but tangible and physical in a broken world.

When the early Christians thought about the work of Jesus, His healing and feeding, driving out demons, and eating with all sorts of excluded people, they believed they saw a fulfillment of the prophet's vision. God's renewal of Israel was, has always been, a renewal of this world. They also knew that Jesus was the embodiment of this hope of the restoration of God's world. And they knew that Jesus called and empowered them, the disciples, to embody this hope, in His name, in this world.

Jesus is all they had, all we have, and it is enough. At times it seems we struggle to believe that God truly wants the transformation of the world. We look at the world and it's hard to believe it could ever change. But the words and hope of Isaiah still ring true for us today. Jesus is enough for that change. Jesus is all we have. Jesus is all we are given. And it is enough. Enough to change our lives. Enough for God to change the world. That's the story of Christmas, of the Incarnation, isn't it? Jesus is all we are given.

REFLECT

Which name and character trait of Jesus are you clinging to from the promises of Isaiah? Why?

PRAY

Jesus, on this Christmas Eve, I remember the gift of your Incarnation. Be present in me so that I can make you present in the world through my life. Empower me with your Holy Spirit and help me to trust that the promises and hope found in Isaiah are still true for our world today. You are enough, Jesus. Amen.

DAY 25

JOHN 1:14

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.

Nativity sets are usually colorful, artistic, even ornate. The stable is surrounded by shepherds kneeling with lambs, Magi bearing jeweled gifts, archangels pouring forth praise. Mary looks ready to host a party despite just enduring hours of labor pains. Joseph seems more tired, leaning on his staff. It's appropriate for a manger to be magnificent since, as John's Gospel says, this is where we see "his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."

Yet visitors to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem are often surprised by two features. Jesus' birthplace is marked by a cave beneath the altar and a trough carved in the rock. Though adorned with candles and icons today, the birthplace was anything but glorious on that holy night. Try to sense this unsanitary scene: the aroma of animals, a delivery room so dark and cold you can see your breath. It's here the Word became flesh.

All this is a sign of an even greater sacrifice when the Creator of the universe put on human skin. Jesus willingly accepted our limitations and weaknesses, our temptations, trials, and troubles. For thirty years he lived a poor, simple, anonymous life enduring all that is foul, frail and fragile about our existence. Then, coming full circle, He was wrapped and laid in another cave just up the road in Jerusalem after bearing the crushing weight of all our sin on the cross. Some-

times, when we don't dress up Christmas, when we peer into the darker, painful side of His nativity and life, we see the greater glory of His grace and truth. He came to be among us, to be one of us, to be with us even in the darkest caverns of our world. He came to be the light which the darkness has not overcome. He came to lead us into the light. He came so we would be His light in the world.

His mission is our mission. Celebrate His birth this year by taking a step into someone else's darkness. Offer a listening ear, a helping hand, a comforting presence, an invitation to believe, a generous gift that provides a need. Enter in as He did, quietly, anonymously, humbly.

For that is the other feature that surprises visitors to Bethlehem. The only way to enter the massive Church of the Nativity is through a tiny door so low that all who approach His manger must humbly bow down.

REFLECT

Where in the midst of this Christmas Day do you long to find Jesus most? Look for opportunities today to slow down and worship, to get low and remember the weight and the sacrifice of what it meant for the Word to become flesh.

PRAY

Word of God, please become flesh in each one of us so that, through our words and deeds, those walking in darkness will see Your glory, grace and truth. Help me not to move through today so quickly that I miss the beauty and the mystery of the Incarnation. Let today be full of worship and adoration to you, our King. In the strong name of Jesus, amen.