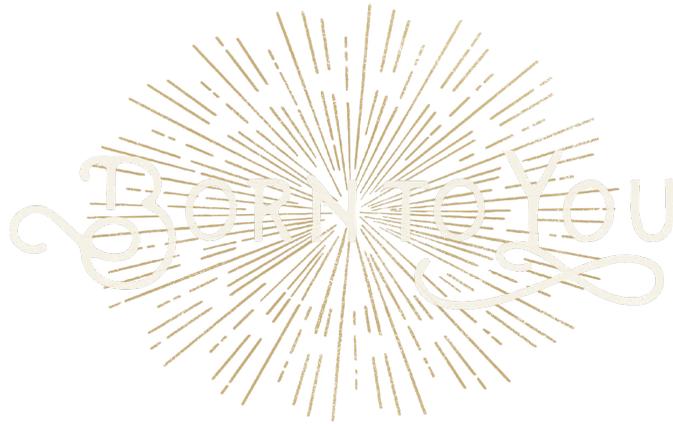




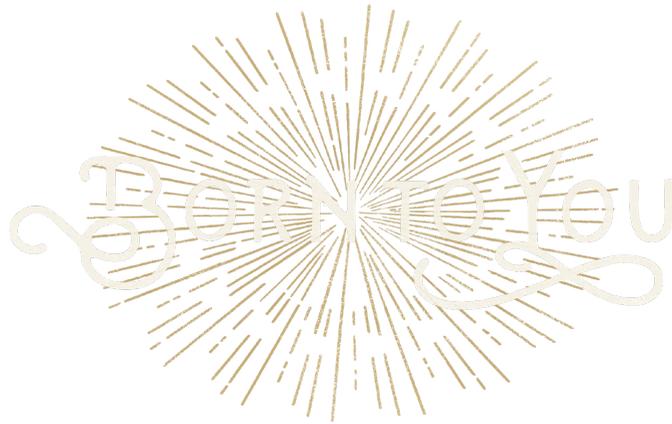
BORN TO YOU
ADVENT 2022

2022 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



"Oh, I wish we had swift messengers to run the world over to tell the story that God has come down among us. I wish we had fluent tongues to tell in every language the story that, coming down among us, God was arrayed in the flesh like our own and that He took our sins and carried our sorrows..."

-Charles Spurgeon



Welcome

The late James Montgomery Boice, the former Pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, once lamented that “as a Pastor in one Church for many years, Advent season was among the hardest because of the pressure to come up with new material year after year, among the same congregation.” I resemble this pressure. It’s the pressure to tell the old story in a new and fresh way again and again.

That’s why I’ve decided to forgo fresh and modern and tell the age-old story of the promise of Christ’s coming, prophesied back in Eden and fulfilled in His arrival through Mary, Joseph, in that quiet little town of Bethlehem. It’s this story that radically changed my life. It was this story that transported me from death to life. And it’s this story that, by God’s grace, I get to tell week after week to the beautiful people of Legacy Church!

It’s my prayer that this year, you will discover the coming of Jesus in a new and profound way. It’s my prayer that you would marvel at the Savior, wrapped in swaddling clothes, God, found in the form of a human as a baby! For unto you is born Christ the Savior.

Pastor Patrick Walton

Making The Most Out of Your Christmas Season

If your life is anything like mine, it's packed as it is, but then you add the Christmas season on top of it, and it's nearly outta control. There are work parties, family parties, gifts to purchase and wrap, kids' concerts to attend, shopping, and not to mention the regular work week.

This is why I've tried to make it a goal each year to plan, ensuring that the wonder of Christmas isn't lost in the many extra things happening. So, here's a short list of things you could do to make sure you get the most out of your Christmas season.

(1) Build A Christmas Music Playlist

a. Take some time to find those classic Christmas songs and some new ones that allow you to take in the wonder of Christmas, both with its nostalgic past and the wonder of finding Christ in the manger.

b. *it seems that more and more of our favorite artists are producing a Christmas album, so go ahead, look them up, and build a great playlist to keep the tunes filling the house.

(2) Hang Christmas Lights

a. I know some of you are sweating already just thinking about it. And although it's a hassle to drag out the lights and work to untangle the massive knots because you threw them all into a box really quick at the end of last year's season. But, especially for those with kids, there's nothing like coming home to a house with lights on it. Maybe it's simply putting lights up in your window and decorating the house; we have found it helps to create the feeling of Christ with us during what's already an amazing season.

b. Every year, Jennifer and I have purchased a few decorations adding to our collection over time, mainly at the end of Christmas as everything goes on sale! And with plugin timers, you can set your outdoor and indoor lights to come on and go off at specific times. It's a set it, and forget it type thing! I personally love waking up in the morning with the Christmas all lit up, somewhere in August...just kidding!

(3) Get Some Holiday Foods

a. Over the years, Jennifer and I have found some items that our kids love and enjoy during the Christmas season. Things like Egg Nog, Apple Cider, Cheese rolls (or, as I call them, fruit-filled yule-tide logs), Danish Cookies, crackers, cheese, meat trays, and peppermint ice cream, among many other things.

b. We try to make a point to have these items around, stocked in the fridge, and accessible for the kids and us. Taking time for nights with special food and thought-out displays helps to create special nights that they will remember in the years to come.

(4) Build A Collection of Christmas Movies

a. Growing up as a kid, one of my favorite things to do during the holidays was to watch old classic Christmas movies like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Frosty the snowman, and Charlie Brown Christmas. Back in the day, before we had digital movies, you had to look ahead in the TV guide to see when they would be on, and then we'd plan the evening around it.

b. Now, with so many streaming services, shows on TV, and digital recordings, you can create these moments anytime you'd like. I'd encourage you to build a personal collection of Christmas DVDs or purchases on a streaming service so you can reuse them year after year. Often during the holidays, they charge more for various Christmas movies, so if you can buy them in the off-season, you will have them to play whenever you want.

(5) Read An Advent Booklet Daily

a. Over the years, Jennifer and I have made it a family practice to go through an Advent Book together as a family. If there was one created through the Church that year, like this one, we've used it, but we've also deeply enjoyed Anne Voskamp's "Unwrapping the Greatest Gift." We usually read this over dinner every night as we make our way towards Christmas Day.

b. Whatever you decide to use, find something that's Biblical and not just fun and cute. Make it a priority to go through it every day, talk about the various things involved, ask questions, and create dialog around the incarnation of Jesus. Having a daily, Biblical advent reading is one way to ensure that Christ is not lost in the commercial culture of Christmas. It's too precious of a season to let it slip through the cracks.

(6) Attend A Christmas Play/Production

a. For the past six years, it's become a Christmas tradition for my daughter Anna and me to attend the Nutcracker together. It's a night where we get dressed up, have a special dinner somewhere, and then head to the performance in downtown Seattle. We close the evening with a burger, fries, and a shake from Dicks.

b. I've also taken Phinneas to a Christmas play or production at a smaller theater in a nearby city to create memories with him as well. Whatever you do, plan now, look ahead, find out what Christmas plays/productions are happening in the surrounding cities, and chart a path forward to ensure you capture a special night with your family, friends, or loved ones.

(7) Christmas Day

a. However you spend this day, work hard to make parts of it memorable. If you open presents with others, take time to read the Nativity story from Matthew 1 and Luke 2 first. Start some traditions of opening stockings first; then opening presents one person at a time so that everyone can watch and celebrate each other. Eat a big meal afterward and take an epic nap. Rejoice, rest and relish that God became flesh and dwelt among us!

Events Happening in November-December At Legacy Church

- 11/26 First Day of Advent I (Service times) The official worldwide start of Advent is November 27th, but because we do a Saturday service, it will start for us on November 26th. Take time, asking God to capture you afresh this holiday season.
- 12/ 9 Legacy Church Christmas Party - 6-8pm
Every year at Legacy Church, we throw a Christmas party for anyone and everyone. It's a potluck meal, so please bring a dish to share based on your last name below:

Appetizers A-E \\ Entrees F-P \\ Desserts Q-Z
- 12/24 Christmas Eve Service | 5 PM
- 12/26-1/3 Legacy Church offices closed

The Legacy Church offices will be closed from Monday, December 26th, until Monday, January 2nd, 2023. This includes our weekly prayer meeting.
- 12/31 Final Service of 2022
Saturday, December 31st at 5pm

Week #1 | Day #1
November 27th, 2022
Genesis 3:13-15

“Back to The Beginning”

Genesis 3:15 *“And the Lord God said to the women, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” So the Lord God said to the serpent: “Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.”*

By now, the Thanksgiving leftovers are gone, Christmas lights are going up in the neighborhood, peppermint mochas are flying out the door, and Christmas music is piping through every store you enter. Christmas is starting right here, in that Bermuda Triangle of dates between the end of November and the start of December, or in some cases, at the end of September. But in truth, Christmas doesn't start here in this transition of seasons from Fall to Winter. And to take it a step further, we aren't only celebrating Christmas because of what happened 2000+ years ago with Christ's coming. In reality, this story of Christ and His coming started all the way back in the Garden of Eden with our first parents, Adam and Eve.

God placed Adam and Eve in a paradise-like garden, where they walked around naked, naming animals, and eating all sorts of organic foods, like original hippies. But the real glory of Eden was that God Himself dwelt in the midst of them. He was the reason the garden was paradise-like. They walked with God during the day, talking to Him and sharing their lives; they were unashamed and unaware that they were stark naked. But this fairytale-like story (which is real) had a tragic, horrific day.

Adam and Eve were free to do whatever they wanted, except for one thing. God told them clearly, “guys, you are free to do whatever you like in My garden; don't eat any fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...OKAY?” Like most kids, Adam and Eve responded with a, “yep, sure thing Dad.” But after some time, Satan, as a serpent, worked his way into Adam and Eve's life, telling them lies, deceiving them, and moving them to eat fruit from the same tree God said not to eat from. Suddenly, the nearness that Adam and Eve had enjoyed with God was gone. It wasn't that God moved, but that sin, now entering Adam and Eve's life, caused them to see their nakedness and move away from God.

God was greatly disappointed and crushed. His creation had rebelled against Him, believing lies instead of the truth. His relationship with His creation would change. What was beautiful, growing, green, and vibrant would start the process of death, decay, and darkness. Sin would enter everything, humans, but also creation itself. But because God is gracious, merciful, and caring, He doesn't discard what He made. In fact, God does the unthinkable; He immediately puts into place a plan to redeem it and bring it back to Himself.

This is where Christmas begins. Right here amid cataclysmic failure on behalf of our first parents, Adam and Eve. It's here in glaring disappointment that God crushes Satan but then turns to Eve and tells her, “...I will put enmity between you (Satan) and the women, and between your seed and her Seed (Jesus); He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.”

Even though Eve was unfaithful to God, God remained faithful to her by giving her the promise of a coming Seed, a Son, God's very own Son. This is what's called the Protoevangelium, or the first mention of the Gospel in the Bible. Yes, that's right, God talked about the Gospel or the good news of His Kingdom back at the beginning.

This is the origin of Christmas. In the garden, among failure, loss, and disappointment, God steps in and makes sure that His creation wouldn't be separated from Him forever. He had a plan. This coming Seed would be the hope of Israel, the hope of the World. Though there'd still be a very long road ahead until this long-awaited Christmas day arrived, it was secure in promise form, and this would be enough for God's people to rest their hope in the unfailing God who made the promise.

Reflection and Response

Are you in a place of disappointment or personal failure? Are you suffering from someone else's failure? Can you see Christ amid the pain, offering promises of restoration?

Consider that God's faithfulness can be shown, experienced, and enjoyed even amid failure.

What promises are you holding onto in this season, in the same way, that Eve, Adam, and all of Israel would have to hold onto them?

“Moving Forward, But Slowly”

Genesis 6:1-3, 5-8 *“Now it came to pass when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful, and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose. And the Lord, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, for he is indeed flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years....” Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry He made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the Lord said, “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.”*

Yesterday, our Christmas story began in our daily readings, not on December 25th, but in the Garden of Eden. It was there, in Eden, that God promised Eve a coming Seed who would one day crush the serpent’s head. Though they had sinned against God, this One who was coming would live without sin so that He could redeem a people back to God. But as the human story progresses and we get to Genesis 6 (just three chapters to the right of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3), things have taken a further downhill slide.

God is recorded here expressing deep anger, hurt, and disappointment with how His creation is acting. The ones He has loved, made provision for, and given promises to have all gone their own way. So much so that God says, “...He was sorry He made man on the earth....” Without knowing the end of this story, which is hard for most of us because we’ve heard it before, we also, along with God, would feel sad, depressed, and perplexed. What will become of this promise that was given to Eve? If God destroys everyone, like He’s talking about doing, the Seed, the promised Son who’s to come, will also be destroyed.

But, in a sudden like fashion, just as God stepped into Adam and Eve’s story in the midst of their failure, God once again makes clear that He has a plan to preserve His promise. This time it’s a guy named Noah. Now Noah hasn’t been selected because he played his best for God like the Little Drummer Boy. Noah’s been chosen by grace. God has sovereignly chosen to set His favor upon his life, and at the same time, Noah also responds to God’s invitation with obedience. Because Noah is the chosen person by whom Eve’s promised Seed would come, God calls him and his sons to build a boat for a future season that the earth has never seen before. God was going to cause it to rain and flood everything. Noah is told to build a boat that will hold roughly 550 modern-day, full-size boxcars.

Like I said at the start, if things were looking bad with Adam and Eve, it’s even worse here with Noah. And though it would be easy to major in the negatives, I want to look at the positives. This story tells us much about God and His commitment to Christmas. He’s more committed to this day than any other person in human history. God will make sure, through voluntary love, that His promised Seed, the Savior Son who is to come, actually comes. That’s why He’s preserving Noah and his family. Yes, it’s about God’s love for Noah and His commitment to this promise to this coming Christmas day. It’s not here yet, but it’s coming!

REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

In what ways do you see God fulfilling His purpose and promise for your life?

Do you see God's fulfillment of His promises for your life fit into the larger story of redemptive history that He's telling? You say, what's that mean? It means, are you able to see that the story God is working out with you is a part of a much larger story that God is working out for others? Your life is connected to the lives of others.

Week #1 | Day #3
November 29th, 2022

“The God Who Acts On His Own Behalf”

Genesis 12:1-3 *“Now the Lord said to Abram; Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you, and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*

From Adam and Eve to Noah, the Seed of God is still alive in the life of Abram, later known as Abraham, when God changes both his name and his wife’s name. And although the Seed of God is still alive and progressing towards that epic Christmas day in the making, there’s a long bumpy road to get there. This will be a through the woods, and over the hills, to Mary’s house, we go kind of a trip. Abram/Abraham and his wife Sarai/Sarah have a serious dilemma. Apart from a miracle, these folks are old and getting older. And the reason this is bad is because if Abraham is going to fulfill God’s purpose for his life in becoming a father to many nations, he needs a son, and currently, they don’t have one.

Now, like many people in the Bible and in real life (not you who are reading this, but “other” people), Abraham and his wife step in to give God a little help fulfilling His promise to them. As you can imagine, it doesn’t go well. Because Sarah is old and has what the Bible calls a “dead womb,” they decide to allow Abraham to sleep with their maidservant to bring this promised son to life. Things go terribly wrong. As soon as the son comes out, Ishmael, God speaks to Abraham and tells him that Ishmael isn’t the promised seed from which this future Deliverer would come. Abraham isn’t just crushed; he’s devastated. He sees no human way possible that this promise of being a father to many nations could ever happen through him and his wife. But this is just the point; there is no human way it will work out. It will only be a miracle that God Himself will bring to pass.

But, just when it seems that the promise to Abraham is down for the count, God, looking after His purposes, brings about an 11th-hour victory and causes Sarah to conceive a child in her old age miraculously. And it’s this child Isaac that God tells Abraham would be the chosen seed. Abraham is rejoicing, celebrating the goodness of God towards him and his wife. And just like that, God’s promise lives on. But this would continue to be the case for the rest of Abraham’s life. He would continually make foolish decisions, and God would time and time again bail out His promise that He’d given him. Though Abraham would occasionally lose sight of Christmas day, God would never lose sight of it, not even for one second.

REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

What moments in your life have you dropped God’s promises that He’s given you, only to watch Him pick them back up and again place them back in your life?

Do you have confidence in God’s ability to see His purposes accomplished in your life as God did with Eve, Noah, and Abraham?

Does it feel that too much time has passed for God to fulfill His promises to you?

“The God Who Doesn’t Forget”

Isaiah 7:14; 9:6 Micah 5:2 *“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel...For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And his name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace, there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this...But you, Bethlehem, Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from old, from everlasting.”*

Although much time has passed between the opening promises given to Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God is still at work accomplishing His purposes. Israel would go on to have some high moments of faith in God, trust in Him, and obedience to His ways. But high moments would only be a ¼ of their story. They seem to have even darker moments of idolatry, rebellion, a lack of trust in God, and the pursuit of their ways. God promised them through Moses that if they obeyed Him, it would go well for them, but if they disobeyed Him, it would not go well. And as most children do, they tested God to see if He would keep His word. They were shocked when they found out; He wasn’t kidding.

Hardship, pain, trouble, a lack of peace, and distress would become the predominant story of Israel. This promised land sworn to their forefathers would seem like a mirage, like a cloud that was so real one moment and gone in the next. Wandering, looking for this place of rest, they would find themselves mostly under the threat of hostile nations, in captivity, in bondage to their sins, and worse than all these, at odds with God Himself.

But about 700 years before the Incarnation, Isaiah and Micah began to prophesy some wildly specific prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, God’s chosen Son. In the midst of Israel’s apostasy and deep darkness, God’s voice’s shining, bright light through His prophets would be heard in their land. God would assure them, “Though you have forgotten Me, I have not forgotten you. And even when your plans are continually evil and self-serving, My plans for a redemptive story have never changed.” Your Christmas day hasn’t yet come, but it is undoubtedly on the way. God even declared to them who and how this Chosen Seed would come to Israel; through a virgin. And He would be the One promised to David that would eternally be seated upon David’s throne.

One of these prophecies even declared, around 700 years prior, the specific city in which this Chosen Seed would be born. Not every page in the Old Testament speaks of the Seed, but here and there, we get brilliant glimpses into God’s intention to ensure Christmas Day would come for His people.

Israel’s history is a story not only of Israel but also of humanity. And our human story is one of being loved by God, but instead of receiving that love, we choose a path that seems right in our eyes. And instead of peace and rest, which Jesus has promised us in Him, we have stress, turmoil, and fractured relationships. But God’s desire for humanity is a better way.

REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

Are there broken, stressful, unrested areas in your life? Have you brought them to Jesus, surrendering your will and a way to Him?

If you haven't done this yet, let today be the day. Open the door of those dark areas and ask Him to come in; He's patiently waiting for you. Not only is he willing to sit with you, but He's also willing and able to bring all the healing that's needed.

Remember, Israel's story isn't only about Israel; it's also about us, about you.

“The God Who Personally Carries The Future”

Zechariah 9:9 *“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, humble and mounted on a donkey, even a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*

Years ago, growing up, my father struggled to trust me with sensitive information. And rightly so. I couldn't keep a secret from my mom or my sister. Christmas presents, birthday surprises, and other special things my dad was planning would make their way into the public space before the surprise happened. I know, it's tragic. But I have reaped what I've sown. Believe me; I have been repaid. My 11-year-old Phinneas also has a hard time keeping things under wraps. Drinking soda, doing somewhat “potentially dangerous things,” and Christmas surprises that mom either shouldn't know until the surprise or really shouldn't know at all seem to make their way to her, his sister, and his brothers. Lord have mercy....ON ME!

But when it comes to God, the work of the Holy Spirit and prophecy, it seems like it's not all that different from my son and I spilling the beans on the surprise. As you read Israel's beautiful and tragic story, there are all these places where God is seemingly unable to hold in the surprise, and He speaks out, declaring His plans for Israel for the world. The pain of the Father watching His children wander, trying to keep the law but unable, tears at His heart, causing Him to, again and again, reiterate His plans for them. This coming Christmas Day would come as a surprise, but not a total surprise. At the very least, though they don't know the moment, they are assured it's coming. God made sure of this.

Here, in the midst of Israel's spiritual bankruptcy, the prophet, Zechariah, gives a prophecy that only God could share. Around 520 years before the coming of Christ, Zechariah declares that this coming Seed is humble, endowed with salvation, and willing to suffer humiliation on behalf of the ones He loves. This isn't the first prophecy regarding this Promised Seed, as we have seen. But even if Israel heard a thousand other prophecies, they still would be unable to understand just how humble this promised Seed would be. According to Paul, this coming King, this greater than Moses Deliverer, is an indescribable gift. There are not enough prophecies, words, songs, or colors to describe Him.

God was inching ever closer to Christmas, making sure that Israel knew she was loved and cared for and that the One overseeing her was jealous for all of her. He wouldn't share her with anyone or anything.

REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

In what ways do you need Christ to serve you?

Is it hard to consider Christ serving you?

Have you considered the difficulty in Christ serving you as pride?

You're not saved or sanctified on your own but through the work of the Holy Spirit. He's not put off or bothered by your brokenness. This is what Christmas is all about. God was coming to help people who couldn't help themselves. He's humble and happy to help. Ask Him to serve you, like Peter. Not only your feet but your hands and your head (everywhere).

"It's Coming, But Not Yet"

Hebrews 11:13,32-40; Malachi 3:1 *"...These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them...for the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak...who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouth of lions. Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance. Still, others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment...Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold He is coming, says the Lord of hosts."*

As the Old Testament ends with the book of Malachi, we find ourselves amid an epic cliffhanger. It is not like a Sylvester Stallone Cliffhanger, like a real one. There's been a fair amount of talk about this Promised Child, this Seed that was spoken over Eve. But it seems He was lost; they would have to wait longer, or even worse, somehow, it wasn't true. Well, we know it can't be a lie because God spoke it and is incapable of lying. Was the Seed lost through foolishness and sin? Or was it not the divine time, the season when God would bring it forth? Where was Israel's Christmas Day?

As the book of Malachi closes out, there are a few prophecies that He was still coming, but no sign of Him. Once again, there are promises about Him but no actual sign of Him. In fact, Malachi, whose name means messenger, was acting much like a hype man at a street parade. He was the guy at the front getting all the people to stand on their feet, declaring that He was coming. "Israel, your wait is over. Here comes the parade (the promised Seed). Everybody on your feet! Now's the time." But was their wait actually over? The answer is no; the wait wasn't over. The book of Malachi would close out, and there would be no promised Seed. There would be 400 years of silence that would ensue. Yes, you read that right, 400 years. That means no prophecies, inspired teachings, dreams, angel visitations, prophets, word of the Lord, nothing from God, just silence, painful, dark silence.

Enduring a little bit of silence from God is painful, but 400 years? Most would live their entire lifetime hearing nothing from God. In the book of Hebrews, in the New Testament, the writer speaks extensively about Israel and their journey of faith, waiting for the promises of God. But it seems to climax in Hebrews 11, as mentioned above. These people lived through unthinkable hardship, difficulty, persecution, and even death. The writer uses Israel's long journey through the Old Testament writings to appeal to Jewish believers in the New Testament, who have put faith in Messiah but are now being persecuted by their fellow Jewish brothers and sisters who haven't put faith in Messiah are still living in Judaism.

The reason for pointing this out is to state that Israel, though often coming up short in their story, was faithful to carry the promises of God. Even as 400 years of silence set in over Israel, according to Luke 2, in the story of Simeon and Anna, they, along with others mentioned, were still eagerly awaiting and even looking for this promised Seed that was to come. It wasn't the majority, but even amidst extended darkness and silence, God's people hadn't forgotten about Christmas Day, and neither did God.

Silence from God didn't mean He had forgotten or changed His mind. Christmas Day was going to happen, but like it is today with little children, the wait would be long. This helps us make sense of John Wesley's Christmas hymn, "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus.." At this point, Israel would have to wait.

Week #2 | Day #1
December 4th, 2022

"Serving God In Hiddenness"

Luke 1:6, 11-13 *"And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly."*

Well, 400 years in slavery in Egypt, 80 years wandering in the wilderness, 500 years living in the promised land but then another 70 years in exile, and 400 years of silence. This is Israel's up-and-down journey of following God, serving Him for a little while, but then falling into life's seductive pull as they fell away from God. This present 400 years of silence is, in total, "146,000 silent nights, and over 210 million minutes of longing, groaning and waiting...waiting for their advent...waiting for their Christmas Day." -Kate Miller

In my relationship with Jesus, I endured nearly one year of silence from heaven (It might not have been complete silence, but it sure was quiet). It started around December 15th, 2010 and lasted until December 11th, 2011. It started with Him saying to me at Slater's dinner one afternoon, "I'm going to go into hiding." I was so excited that God was speaking to me, but I didn't consider what He was saying until a couple of months later, when the silence became deafening. Over the months, this grew more challenging, as I was fasting, praying, reading God's Word, and working to lead a Church, but not feeling much or any inspiration from the Holy Spirit or life-giving revelation. After nearly one year, on Sunday, December 11th, in a pre-service prayer meeting at New Life Fellowship in Raymond, WA, God broke into my heart, thundering Song of Songs 2:8-13 saying, "The winter is past, the rain is over, and gone, and the time of singing has come." Granted, this was challenging, and I wouldn't want to go through it again, but it was only one year, not 400 years. Only 365 quiet nights, not 146,000 silent nights. It's hard to imagine what this was like for Israel.

In this small, rural city, we learn about a faithful priest and his wife, Zacharias and Elizabeth. They were among a long line of priestly people serving God faithfully, believing, waiting, and looking for the Messiah to come, this Promised Seed, even though it wasn't here yet. These folks had grown up in an environment where there were no prophets, inspired writings, dreams, revelations, or the Word of God, just silence from heaven. They lived amid these 400 years of silence, although it was about to change. But even during God's silence, they were faithful. The Bible calls Zacharias and Elizabeth "...righteous before God, and walking in...(His) commandments...blamelessly." Now, it's not that they were sinless; it just means that they followed God faithfully, not perfectly. But notice that they were "righteous before God," meaning they had years of hidden faithfulness to God, even when nobody else saw them.

Zacharias and Elizabeth were in a hard spot; they had no children, they were aging and getting older by the second. This was humiliating and financially risky for them because they wouldn't have anyone to take care of them in their older age. But, among these societal pressures, challenges, and personal distress, they were still waiting for their Christmas Day (a child) and Israel's Christmas Day (the Child). Every year the 18,000 priests were divided into 24 divisions leaving around 750 people to serve twice a year, for a week at a time. As they arrived at the temple, they would cast lots to see who would be officiating various roles in the temple. Well, this time, the lot fell to Zacharias to burn incense in the holy place, an opportunity you were only afforded once in a lifetime.

Just think, Zacharias has been to the temple to serve many times previously, as was the custom for his tribe, but this time it's all different. Instead of a typical role, the lot fell to him for a once-in-a-lifetime shot to go where he will never go again. Maybe this time, Zacharias is thinking, "Whoa. This is my one chance to go behind the veil, into the holy of holies, where God is said to dwell and make my request known to Him while I'm back there, asking God for a son." We don't know precisely what Zacharias says or if he says anything while he's there; it's not recorded in the Bible. But what is there is that he and his wife have been serving God faithfully when nobody else was watching, and it wasn't exciting.

REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

What parts of your life feel unexciting, boring, and mundane? Have you ever considered how God feels about those areas of your life? Have you ever connected the fact that eternity might tell a very different story than the one you're feeling?

What if you could connect eternity and heavenly rewards with many of the mundane, boring, and unexciting parts of your life? Do you see how serving God faithfully in hiddenness could take on a different experience?

I encourage you to consider how you might see your life and its boring parts in light of eternity.

Week #2 | Day #2
December 5th, 2022

“He’s The God Who Hears”

Luke 1:11-13 *“Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.”*

You know it’s just like God to save the best for last. This happened in the famous wedding story Jesus told when He turned the water into wine. It was said by the host of the party, “Typically, they bring out the best wine at the start, but then at the end, when everybody is drunk, they bring out the cheap wine. But you, you have saved the best for last.” (John 2:10). This is precisely what’s happening with Zacharias and Elizabeth. In Zacharias’ old age, he’s now having what’s most likely the greatest, most powerful experience with God he’s ever had. And isn’t it just like God to do this when you’re down and out, when you’ve counted God out and assumed He’s not heard you or forgotten, He shows up and shows out?

Well, when this angel showed up, Zacharias was anything but casual. It’s not like Zach was working away when suddenly this angel showed up, and he’s like, “Hey, how’s it going? My name is Zacharias, and I’m just here offering incense to God; what are you up to these days?” From the verse above, it’s clear that Zacharias is not just shocked and surprised; he’s freaked out. But look, Zacharias has good reason to be freaked out; they are currently at the end of about 399.9 years of silence from heaven. They’ve been doing the stuff, meaning ministering in the temple and serving God without any divine witness from heaven. Now suddenly, God is breaking four centuries of separation between Him and humanity. This is big stuff. This is a watershed moment, not just for Zacharias, but for humanity, for God’s promised Christmas Day.

When this angel steps into Zacharias’ presence, what does he say? He says to him, “Your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.” Can you imagine what must be going through Zacharias’ mind? “God has heard my prayer for a son? God has listened to us, from this rural city, in the middle of nowhere. The Genesis 1 God, who hasn’t spoken to anyone for the past 399.99 years, has chosen to speak to us? First? What?”

We must ask ourselves, what prayer has been heard? Well, it’s his prayer for a son, but it’s more than that. This answer to their prayer is a two-for-one. Zacharias and Elizabeth will get a son, whom they are to name John, but John will have a very specific task. John is a forerunner to the Messiah. Yes, Zacharias and Elizabeth’s Christmas day is coming in seed form, but it’s not the only thing that’s coming; Israel’s Christmas Day is coming too! The Promised Seed is en route. It’s not here yet, but God is now speaking; it’s coming.

For those older in age, I want to encourage you not to let cynicism, skepticism, hardness of heart, bitterness, and offense settle into your life. I could understand that for many, there are prayers, deep, even God-given desires that you have that aren't currently fulfilled. Taking your foot off the gas pedal of belief and trust in God would be easy. But you can't do that. Like Zacharias, who's living with deep discontentment about the lack of a child, what we see from him is that he's still faithfully serving God. Not perfectly, but faithfully. I think it's clear that there's some layer of pain over his heart, but even with that, he's still serving God. Something to consider would be the cost of giving up on our prayers. It's hard at times to hold onto the promises of God, but I think what's at stake if we give up on them is even greater, even harder. We must hold onto not just the promises God gives but God Himself, the fount of all our promises.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

What prayers in your life have you struggled to keep both in front of God and yourself? Are there things God has promised you that you haven't yet seen fulfilled? Is there a layer of hardness over your heart in the long delay? If you were to consider what that hardness might be, what do you think it is? Bitterness, disappointment, hurt, anger? Friend, whatever it is, talk to God about it. The One who makes promises is incapable of breaking them. In the delay, in the waiting, in the struggle, we learn so much about ourselves and God, and these two things become a gift to us.

Week #2 | Day #3
December 6th, 2022

“Joy, Gladness, and Rejoicing”

Luke 1:14-15 *“And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.”*

There’s nothing like something that we’ve waited for, longed for, and hoped for, finally coming to pass or finally, at long last, receiving it in our arms. It’s one thing to believe in something; it’s another thing to have it. Zacharias and Elizabeth, just like the angel said, would have great reason to rejoice. What they had longed for was finally coming. But their rejoicing isn’t just personal; it’s also corporate. They have personal joy because they will receive a son into their family. Still, they also have eschatological joy because this child will help pave the way for God’s promised Child, the Promised Seed from Genesis 3.

All throughout the Bible God calls His people to personally rejoice, rejoicing that comes from God’s promises to us personally, His promises to keep us, to provide for us, to lead us, and to help us. But God’s family is also called to rejoice in a future hope, a hope that’s not here yet, a hope that’s still yet coming. Luke’s writings in Chapters 1-2 were about Jesus’ first Advent, but for us now, we are living in the tension of the first and second advent. The first advent or coming has already happened, and now we await the second advent, the second coming of Jesus. And like Zacharias and Elizabeth, though there is a great delay, though it takes time, we are still to rejoice in Jesus’ second coming, that as sure as the sun and the moon remain, so also will He come, although that Day is slow in its arrival.

I mean, how great is this rejoicing, after 399.99 years of silence, and some thousands of years since God’s promise in the Garden of Eden, suddenly, just as the Prophet Malachi said, He’s fulfilling His promises (Malachi 3:1)! This is the reason for great joy, gladness, and rejoicing. And just like his father, Zacarias, John would live his life before God, honoring the Lord in both his public and private life. John the Baptist would live a life of great hiddenness, even living in the secret place until God called him out of the wilderness, for a very short 18 months of public ministry before he’d give up his life for truth (Luke 1:80).

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

In a culture that demands you be great in the eyes of others, for the eyes of social media, what does it mean to live in the sight of God? To live before God? When so many seek the public place of notoriety, what does the private place of solitude look like?

Like his father, Zacharias, John would carry on this precious quality of living in hiddenness, trusting God with his public life. What parts of your life do you so desire others to see that God might want to remain hidden? And are there parts of your public life that you have pushed out there, maybe before God desired for them to be public?

Henri Nouwen would often say, "The Christian life is to be like a steam bath. If we are always opening the door, we will lose the steam. There are many things God does in our life that are meant for us and Him alone. We don't always have to open the door to tell others what God is doing in our lives."

It's always best to allow God to open the doors for us. It's best to let God take what He has worked into us privately and publicly display it.

Week #2 | Day #4
December 7th, 2022

“The gracious God who remembers”

Luke 1:16-17 *“And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*

Israel’s story is a complicated one. In one regard, it’s as complicated as the human heart, but in another, it’s simple. Israel’s journey of hardship, evil nations, temptations, and inward and outward struggles is complicated. But it’s also a simple one, where God said through Moses, “If you obey Me, it will go well, but if you disobey Me, it will go poorly.” Now, that last part is a simple phrase, but it’s also one of the most challenging things to walk out and have it been true in our lives. This is what I mean—complicated but straightforward at the same time. It’s for sure what Christians desire but desiring and obtaining something is not usually easy. It’s a struggle, a war, a perpetual challenge.

This is where Israel currently finds itself, in the middle of this simple yet complicated condition. At times Israel had walked with God, but it was a back and forth, on and off again relationship. At times they were all in, but other times they were as far as you could get from God. And although Zacharias and Elizabeth, and some others (Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, to name a few), are waiting on God, trusting Him even amid 399.99 years of silence, the majority of Israel was far from God. They were apostate people. And therefore, God visited Zacharias. As prophesied in the Old Testament, God planned to send a forerunner, a messenger who would prepare the way for the Messiah. And this was what the angel told Zacharias: “This son that God is giving you, he’s going to be great, but he’s also going to be subservient to God and His purposes. He’s a messenger, but he’s not the Messenger.”

So, we ask, “What’s John the Baptist’s purpose,” the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth. As pronounced by the angel, his purpose is to “...turn the hearts of the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Israel’s heart, Israel’s home, Israel’s temple, and Israel’s city were in disrepute. They needed someone to come and shake them from their slumber, to bring them back from their distance to God, and John was going to be that guy. Now John knew that His role wasn’t to save Israel; only the coming Messiah could do that. John’s role was to prepare people for the Messiah when He came; amazingly, John never got his role twisted, even when he could’ve. He remained a number two when he could’ve easily tried to be a number one.

Historically names in the ancient world meant a big deal. They were often prophecies about what God’s plans were for that individual. And believe it or not, Zacharias means “God remembers,” and John means “God is gracious.” In these moments, I often say, “You can’t make this stuff up.” After thousands of years of struggle, exile among the nations and apostasy, and now silence, God was gracious because He remembered Israel. And beloved when God remembers, He acts, always. And this is what He has done. He knows Israel can’t return to God; they will only be reconciled to the Father if God comes to them. And this is what He is doing and will do. His rescue plan is underway, using this older, faithful couple and their soon-to-come son to declare that Christmas Day is en route.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

Like John the Baptist, the Church today has a role that we are to play on the earth, also as forerunners to prepare people for Christ's second coming. God wants us to also share His message of love, truth, and justice with the world around us.

In what ways are you actively participating with God to broadcast His message to the world around you? When we participate with God, we are helping to remind society, our loved ones, neighbors, and co-workers, "God is gracious, He has remembered, and He's acting to draw you to Himself."

Maybe this is new or scary to consider stepping out to follow Him and to be on mission with Jesus, but I want to encourage you; this is what you were made for, just like John the Baptist, to also be a forerunner!

Week #2 | Day #5
December 8th, 2022

“Intimacy, Not Just Ministry”

Luke 1:18-20 *“And Zacharias said to the angel, how shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years. And the angel answered and said to him, I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to and bring you these good tidings. But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.”*

Well, here it is. Until this point, when God visited Zacharias, Israel was in 399.99 years of silence from heaven. God was not speaking. These weren't silent nights; these were silent centuries, basically four. Israel is in the condition that they are in because of their unbelief. They have erred and gone their own way, and God has given them over to the dictates of their heart. But suddenly, amid deafening silence, God breaks Israel's long night with this angelic visitation to Zacharias. And how crazy is this? God breaks 400 years of silence, and the first person He talks to, Zacharias, through this angel, doesn't believe him. I wish this painful story weren't true, but it's so true.

Zacharias says to the angel, “Hey, wow, thanks for coming down here. It means a lot. I appreciate the thought and consideration, but I don't know if you know my age. I'm like ancient, and way past the years of being able to father a child, and Elizabeth, shoooot.” I also love the interchange between Zacharias and the angel. Zacharias says, “how will I know these things.” The angel is like, “Bro, I'm Gabriel, one of only two named angels in the Bible who stands in the presence of God.” I mean, wow, you couldn't get a sharper response from Gabriel. It's almost as if the angel is thinking, “Sheesh, Lord, I know you told me that he's going to be surprised and disoriented, but I had no idea he and so many others in Israel would be in this much disbelief. I'm shocked.”

As a Bible teacher, I try to find some humor in the text; I try to personalize some of the text, how would I think, what would be my experience, but here, although I'm trying to make it lighthearted, it's serious. The angel is shocked to be met with this much unbelief. It's because of Zacharias' unbelief that the angel says to him, “You know what, I was sent to speak these glad tidings to you, but because of your unbelief, you're not going to be able to speak until the day all the things take place.” The angel pronounces nine months of muteness over Zacharias while his wife carries this baby full term.

We learn that God doesn't take unbelief lightly; it's not funny to Him. He doesn't overlook it, and it's not appreciated. To Him, it's sinful; it's an indictment on His character; it's an indictment, a charge against His goodness! The only thing we can do with unbelief, which we all have and struggle with from time to time, is repent of it, to ask forgiveness for it, which God is happy to give. Zacharias represents what I think to be many within God's house who serve, attend to ministerial needs, and go through the religious routines but are separated from intimate friendship and nearness with Jesus. It's not that Zacharias wasn't a devout follower of God; it's just that over the years, the routine became more important than Whom he was doing it for. But Israel's story, is our story. Zacharias is our story. If we aren't careful, we do the same thing. We also can be around God, around God's house, around God's people, but not actually with God! And although there is plenty of stuff to do, Jesus never wants us to do it without nearness to Him, without intimacy.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

Are there areas of your life, in your relationship with Jesus, where it's easier to go through the motions of religion than it is to be in relationship with Him and to do things with Him, near Him, and through Him? Consider what areas those are and repent, and invite Him back into the routine, so that you no longer do it just by discipline but now with delight.

Is there unbelief in your heart about what God has said in His word or over your life? If so, have you taken time to repent of it? Repentance is simply a heartfelt apology directed towards God, coupled with a prayer that He would help you to overcome it.

It might sound like this, "Jesus, please forgive me for unbelief in _____ (fill in the blank). I'm sorry for not taking You at Your word, for not believing what You have said. Would you help me, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to overcome my unbelief and to trust You and Your word?"

Week #2 | Day #6
December 9th, 2022

"God Sized Miracles"

Luke 1:21-25 *"And the people waited for the Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless. So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. Now, after those days, his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying, thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."*

A popular saying goes like this: "Good things come to those who wait." I believe that sometimes, good things might come to those who wait, but plenty of people have waited for good things only to experience bad things. So, it's not a perfect science. But you know what is perfect, God. You could change that saying, and state it from a Biblical perspective and say, "God, things come to those who wait on God." As the Biblical authors wrote, "Nobody who's ever waited on God has been put to shame (Ps. 25:3). This is where Zacharias and Elizabeth are. They have long desired a child; I'm sure they have attempted so many times to try and make it happen, only to see failure. We also know that even though they are still hanging in there, serving God, and being faithful, disappointment has set in over the long delay. Zacharias' response to the angel proves that.

But something amazing about God is that He doesn't judge our lives based on a single moment but over our lifetime. Take a guy like Abraham, who had several colossal public fails, like two times saying to others that his wife was his sister. Another time, instead of waiting on God for a son, he had his wife sleep with someone else to try and make God's promise over their lives come to pass. But after all this, Paul says in Romans 4 that Abraham was justified by faith, and he was perfect before God, never wavering at the promises of God. Say what? Perfect? Never wavering? Are you kidding me? No, what Paul said is correct. It wasn't that Abraham never wavered; it was that the whole of Abraham's life was an unwavering life. Abraham had moments where he wavered, but that didn't characterize the whole of his life by those moments. When God looked at Abraham's life from start to finish, God said, "Overall, you trusted Me, followed Me, and obeyed Me."

So, even though Zacharias and Elizabeth might have had moments of doubt, discouragement, and unbelief, it doesn't mean that they weren't still faithful. They were serving God and waiting for their promise to come to pass, waiting for their Christmas day. The fact that they don't have a child wasn't God judging them or punishing them. God was working out something on their behalf that they couldn't see. This can happen to us also when our eyes are so fixed on the promise or our desire that we lose sight of the Promise Maker, God. In their case, God was holding out for the perfect moment to answer Zacharias and Elizabeth's desire for a son and give them a son who would be a forerunner to the Messiah, Israel's long-awaited Christmas Day. He would do it through them in their old age when everyone around them counted them out.

What God was working on their behalf was a God-sized miracle, the same size as every miracle God demonstrated on Israel's behalf. They wouldn't be able to do this for themselves; it would take God. And God was for them, He was for Israel, He was for the nations, and therefore He was at work, even when it looked like it was over. Even though so many had left God, God had not left them. And even though many in Israel had forgotten about Christmas Day, God never forgot.

Well, nine months go by, and finally, Zacharias and Elizabeth hold their baby boy, the promise of God's faithfulness to them, and all of Israel, in fact, to the whole of the world, including the Gentiles. God's rescue plan was still underway; even during 400 years of silence, God was at work. God was for them; He was not against them. Even in delay, disappointment, and what seemed to be misplaced desires, God was doing something they couldn't see at the moment.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

Friend, it's true, regardless of what's going on in your life, irrespective of what's happening or how you feel, God's eyes are upon you! He's watching you with incredible passion and care. He's working things out on your behalf that you might not be able to see.

What desires or promises are you holding onto, maybe more than you're holding onto Christ? What would it look like for you to place those desires and those promises back into God's hands? Can you put them into His hands and say, "Father, I trust you? I believe, by faith, not by feeling, that You are watching me, You are leading Me, You are helping me, and You are working to bring about Your purposes through my life. Therefore, I'm going to trust You."

Take time today and tell Him that you trust Him and that He alone is your great desire. And if that doesn't feel true, ask Him that He would become your one true treasure.

Week #3 | Day #1
December 11th, 2022

"Chosen In Obscurity"

Luke 1:26-27 *"Now in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary."*

Sometimes, reading the Bible can seem like things happen haphazardly or spontaneously. But I have discovered that the Bible is ordered perfectly and even organized in many ways that are helpful for the reader. The Holy Spirit, a God of order, systems, and processes, inspired the Bible. And here, what might look like a random day in which the angel Gabriel visits Mary, is no random day. It was in the sixth month, not the seventh or fourth month. A divinely chosen month and moment. Although it's not "hard" for God to do, think through all that needed to happen for Mary to be in this house, doing what she was doing, with everyone else away. In the genius of God, He works these things out on behalf of Himself, His plans, and His glory.

It was as if God was saying to Mary in the sixth month, "Mary, I've waited for this day for thousands of years. Rebellion, murder, floods, barrenness, slavery, unbelief, broken agreements, idolatry, sexual immorality, and thousands of other evils couldn't stop Christmas Day from coming...It was never contingent upon you, Mary, or Israel; it depended upon Me." This moment was a surprise for Mary but no surprise for God. In Genesis 3, God had planned in Eden when He promised Mary's first mother, Eve, that in the 6th month, thousands of years later, He would visit Mary and fulfill His promise. And now the day has come!

Not only was Mary visited in the 6th month, but she was also visited by the angel Gabriel. This is the same angel that visited Zacharias. Gabriel is one of only two named angels in the Bible's entirety. And when he comes, it's usually coupled with the fact that he stands in the presence of God or was sent by God. Now, any angelic visit would be amazing, but you got one of the two named angels in the Bible visiting you, whom it's said that they stand in the very presence of God! Pretty amazing. And at the time of this visitation, we learn that Mary was living in Nazareth. In Greek, there is no word for village or town, so they use city. But, Nazareth was said to have about 150-400 people living in it at the time. Not much of a city. It's best to consider that she lived in a rural, conservative, Podunk as many would say, village (Jn. 1:45-46).

From this verse, we also learn several things about Mary, first of which, she's a virgin. In my opinion, this might be the second most controversial miracle in the Bible after the resurrection of Jesus. When Dr. Al Mohler was asked if a Christian can deny the virgin birth of Jesus, he responded with, "The answer to that question must be a decisive no...Christians must face the fact that a denial of the virgin birth is a denial of Jesus Christ. The savior who died for our sins was none other than a Baby who was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. The virgin birth does not stand alone as Biblical doctrine; it is an irreducible part of the biblical revelation about the person and work of Jesus Christ. With it, the Gospel stands or falls."

When it comes to Mary, the Church tends to do one of two things with her. Either we elevate her to a place of prominence and even worship as if she's a deity, or we discard her and have little interest in her. Both of these are wrong. The Bible is clear, we aren't to worship anyone but God. So instead of neglecting Mary, we celebrate her life, as Jesus' mom. Instead of making Mary the object of our faith, we should make her an example of faith. An example all followers of Jesus should emulate. This also means that Mary wasn't sinless, as some false religions state. And even though God chose Mary to bring forth His Son, she would also need a Savior, like every other human.

The last thing we learn about Mary from the verse above is that she was betrothed to Joseph. In ancient times, a betrothal was an engagement, but even stronger than our modern-day wedding engagement. It was typically a year in length, and it was so serious, that if you broke off a betrothal, it was considered a divorce. And in the case of a man dying, during this year long period, the woman was considered a widow. When we learn this, it makes sense why Joseph was in a hurry to get out.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

But when it comes to your life, what promises have you considered too far gone? Are there things in your life that feel overlooked, neglected, and out of the "sight of God?" Mary's life was an obscure one, a quiet one, a simple one, yet she's the one that God chose.

This means that no matter how big the city you live in is, how small, or how minuscule you think your job and life might be, God is watching you, God is for you, and God is working things out on your behalf. May you also find yourself like Mary, an example of faith to those around you by how you live your life?

Week #3 | Day #2
December 12th, 2022

“The Grace of God”

Luke 1:28-30 *“And having come in, the angel said to her, Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women! But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.”*

Throughout Church history, God’s family has done strange things with Mary. As I stated in yesterday’s reading, we must be careful how high of a pedestal we place Mary on. In the verse above, Luke says, “Mary is blessed among women,” but this doesn’t mean Mary is above other women. She holds a special place in history, but this place isn’t based on anything she did but on what God did. Like you, she has great reason to rejoice simply because God is at work in her life. At this time when the angel visits her, Mary is around 13-15 years old, living in a town of 150+ people (small, Podunk, rural), and betrothed to a carpenter. In sarcasm, Mary might’ve said, “Yay, I’m living the Nazarene dream.”

In the natural, just looking at Mary’s life from the outside, it wouldn’t seem like there was much reason for rejoicing. But what does this say about the various mundane parts of your life? The simple, unseen, non-exciting aspects of our lives become epic, like Mary’s, when God is involved. The routine work commute becomes transformational when God appears and steps in. The monotonous Monday-Friday work life becomes exciting when we feel God is at work in us, through us and around us. In Mary’s case, she’s greatly troubled or startled when the angel shows up and declares these words to her. As Mary minds her business, doing what she does every day, the angel suddenly appears and changes everything about Mary’s life and future.

But when we get to this point in the Nativity story, it’s common for God’s family to make much of Mary and celebrate how amazing she was, which is why we say God chose her. But this isn’t the case at all. God has not visited Mary because she’s earned it, or because she’s been good enough, or she’s paid the most attention in class. God’s visitation to Mary is about God, not Mary. This is the Christian doctrine of divine election or God’s choosing. God’s grace has come to Mary, as it does to every other person, because of God’s gracious heart, not something Mary or we did. God has not chosen Mary because of her piety or a special place of privilege that she somehow earned. He’s chosen Mary because He wanted to. He’s made much of Mary because He wanted to.

It’s easy for us to think that God’s gift of salvation has appeared because we are good, special, and deserving. But that is not what grace is. That’s what the Bible calls works, works of the flesh. The reality is, we don’t deserve God’s gift of salvation. There’s nothing Mary could do to earn it. Before we were in Christ, we were enemies of God. When we were far off, God came near us. When we couldn’t get to God, God came to us. Christmas Day and even the Christmas season have this at their center; God gave us an indescribable gift that we could never repay, only receive. In the same way, that the angel visited Mary, God desires to visit you this Christmas season. In your 9-5, or let’s be honest, in your 6A-6P job, God desires to show up, and reveal Himself to you, even when you least expect it.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

Have you mistakenly thought that God chose you because of your coolness? Because you were better than the rest of the other people? Maybe because you were more spiritual than the others or a way better student than the rest of the others? Have you ever considered God called you and chose you simply because He desired to? That is what grace is, God's unmerited choosing. Friend, this was Mary's reason for rejoicing, and it's also yours.

Rejoice because He chose you when you were an enemy of His, when you didn't love Him, when you weren't interested in learning about Him! This is what Christmas is all about. God visiting people who didn't deserve it, but because He loves!

Week #3 | Day #3
December 13th, 2022

"Do You Want God's Blessings?"

Luke 1:28-30 *"And having come in, the angel said to her, Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women! But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."*

For many years I have closed out my emails and correspondence with "Blessings." It's a word I often use, even in everyday conversations. Saying things like, "Bless you" or "Blessings on you guys as you travel." And if I were, to be honest, I would say, "Man, I want the blessings of God upon my life, in my family." But I also want to be "blessed" with a great parking spot at Trader Joe's when I pull up. Here, in Luke 1:28-30 when the angel Gabriel visited Mary, one of the key things he said to her was, "...Blessed are you among women!..." So, I must think, what could this mean for Mary and Joseph? Does it mean for them what I think it means for me? I think the answer is partly yes, and partly no.

There's a Proverb that says, "The blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow to it." So, it's true, when God blesses us, it's a good thing, even a great thing. But, when we think of blessing in terms of Westerners, we will forfeit this word of its great power and, at the same time, set ourselves up for failure. The reason for this is that we are looking through a lens that's more cultural than it is Biblical. For Mary and Joseph, so much would change as they set out to follow God and walk in the promises that He had just been spoken over their lives. The blessing of God for them would be a mixture of challenging circumstances and eternal rewards, happening at the same time.

Under the grace of God, within the will of God, in the blessing of God, Mary and Joseph will live a portion of their early married life with their Child in tow as refugees, running for their lives. This most likely wasn't in Mary's mind when she received this exciting prophetic word about what God would do. For the whole of their married life, they would both have to bear the stigma that their Child came about by sexual immorality because Mary got pregnant before their betrothal was completed. In a rural town in the middle east, where everyone knows each other, and many are trying to keep the law, this is devastating to your character. And then, after all this, Jesus would receive the same ridicule from the religious leaders of His day, that He was born of fornication.

On top of all these significant challenges, the worst yet, Mary would have to watch her beloved Son be brutally murdered, as He's stripped nearly naked and hung up on a tree to die for the sins of humanity. This was all going to happen under the blessing of God, God's blessing to Mary and Joseph. I can assure you Mary wasn't aware of all this when the angel visited her. And Mary most likely would've been able to receive all that during the angel visitation anyway. Which is why God gives most of the information about our future in small portions, or even in seed form. This was something both her and Joseph would have to walk into.

But back to my original point, if we think of God's blessings only as increasing, favorable circumstances, and better, then this word will lose its power and we will lose our ability to stay the course under great difficulty. It will take perseverance and trust in God's promises for Mary and Joseph to stay their course. And the same is true for our lives. We also need confidence in God's words that when He assures us of great blessings in our lives, the road won't only be downhill (easy), it will also be uphill (hard at times). Seeing the blessings of God come to pass in your life will take a proper understanding of what God means, and Mary and Joseph's journey give us just that.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

When trouble comes your way, or when difficult circumstances arise, do you see them as the absence of God or as something God is using to shape Christ in you? Does your view of the blessings of God include tribulation and a bumpy road or mainly smooth sailing with minor hiccups along the way?

Take some time to evaluate your life and the promises God has made, and then take a second look at your pressures. They are related or directly correlated. Often we pray for God's blessings in our lives, but then we are surprised at the road God takes us down to see them come to pass. Just because the road is bumpy doesn't mean it's not the blessing of God in your life. And just because it's smooth sailing, that's no guarantee that you're walking in God's blessings.

Week #3 | Day #4
December 14th, 2022

“Nothing Is Impossible With God”

Luke 1:36a *“Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month of her who was called barren. “For with God nothing will be impossible.”*

Throughout the Bible, God has visited His people with angels. Sometimes they have been considerable, standing strong, some with flaming swords, and others in blinding light. But it doesn't seem to matter how they come; the result is usually the same; people are terrified. And I think rightly so. Even when Jesus appeared to John in Revelation 1:16 on the isle of Patmos, John fell as a corpse. This was because Jesus shone brighter than the sun in all its strength. It just seems to be the case; it's startling when God turns the lights on, either through angels or through Himself.

Well, Mary is in the same place. This angel has greatly startled her, maybe even terrified her. It's most likely the first time that anything from heaven, more so from God's direct presence, has visited her like this. And remember, this is only the second time that God has broken Israel's long, 400 years of silence, so it's unexpected. In the previous verses, the angel tells Mary the great things God is currently working out on their behalf. But if you remember, Mary asks the angel, “How will I know these things will be?” And it's here that God answers her, giving the assurance that's needed that these promises from heaven, which are way above Mary's pay grade, are true.

In response to Mary's question, the angel says to her (in my paraphrase), “Mary, you know your relative Elizabeth, the older lady who's been barren for decades, unable to have children, who desperately wanted a child? Ya, that Elizabeth is currently in her sixth month of pregnancy.” This reply, something many of us have heard before during Christmas time, is more than a remarkable statement. It's more than a cute pleasantry. This is a “mic-drop” moment. I believe this galvanizing phrase settles everything in Mary's heart. Meaning Mary realizes that if God can help Zacharias and Elizabeth conceive a child, then what the angel is saying to Mary is also true.

This is why the angel says to her, “...with God; nothing will be impossible.” “Mary, if God has done this for Elizabeth, then He can surely accomplish all He promised you.” And it's true; this is precisely what God does for Mary. He accomplishes through her everything that He promises her. But doesn't this also seem to be what God always does? He paints people into a corner, He paints nations, He paints Israel into a corner, and then shows up as the only One who can deliver. God has placed Israel in an impossible situation, and then He comes as the only One who can make the impossible possible. God loves to do this because then He alone gets the glory and receives the praise. Israel will not get itself out of this jam; it will require God. Christmas Day isn't going to come simply because of desire; it's going to come because God brings it to pass.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

Are there parts of your life today that seem like God has painted you into a corner? Are there circumstances or situations around you that currently seem there is no way out? An old song that used to be sung in the Church says, "God will make a way where seems to be no way." That song is accurate; that song is the song of the Bible.

God's deliverance of Israel and His visitation to Mary and Elizabeth isn't recorded in scripture only as a lovely story about what God did for others; it's also recorded to tell us about how God still deals with us today. It's given to us as a reminder that what God did for them is also what He committed to doing for us. So, take courage today; if there are seemingly impossible situations around you, God can make a way where there seems to be no way; this is what He does.

Week #3 | Day #5
December 15th, 2022

“Obedience Is Better Than Sacrifice”

Luke 1:36b *“Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month of her who was called barren. “For with God, nothing will be impossible. Then Mary said, Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her.”*

Years ago, Jennifer and I’s pastor in Kansas City rightly said, “If we aren’t careful, we can end up almost deifying historical Christian figures. This is because they are presented as people who do no wrong. And most of the people that write the biographies for these people are so enamored with their subject that the person they are covering is practically walking on water fulltime.” But the real problem arises when we read these biographies and believe everything that’s written. I don’t mean that the authors are lying; it’s just that they often leave out the hardship, the questions, the challenges, and the adverse circumstances. If you’ve lived any amount of time, you understand life is always a mixture of positives and negatives, with highs but also lows. This is how life works, and Mary’s situation is no different. God calls her into an incredible story; there are significant challenges, but how she responds to God’s invitation is amazing.

As I stated previously, Mary is sure of the angel’s truthful words to her when she hears about her relative Elizabeth, the one who’s been barren for her entire life, is now six months pregnant. This is Mary’s, “Wow, this is a real visitation of God.” But Mary doesn’t leave it there. This is because Gabriel isn’t just pronouncing great things over her life; the angel is telling Mary things that God intends to do both in her and through her. Consider what’s going through Mary’s mind at this moment. As a young Jewish girl, she knows the Hebrew scriptures that promise Messiah is coming. She knows about God’s commitment to save Israel and deliver Christmas Day at last. What Mary didn’t know, was that God wanted to bring thousands of years of prophecy to pass through her. I’m sure Mary’s yearbook didn’t read, “Most likely to bring forth all of God’s prophetic promises.”

So, what will Mary do? Is the mission accepted, or is the task rejected? Will she go forward with it, walking into the extraordinary, somewhat unknown, or will she walk away and continue with her plans? It’s easy for us to answer that question because we have two thousand years of Church history behind us, but in Mary’s moment, I don’t think it was so easy. But look at what she says. Mary responds to the angel, saying, “...Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her.” Wow, what a brave answer to God’s request. Although Mary didn’t know how things would go down, she knew enough that accepting this task would totally upend her life. The New King James uses the word “Maidservant” here, but the word in Greek is Doulos, translated as slave. Mary responds to God’s request, “I’m Your DOO-LAY, your female slave. I will obey You without question.” This is Mary’s way of saying, “If this is what You want, if You want to use me, if you want to set Your hand upon me and bring forth your purposes in and through me, then I will agree with You and obey.”

In Luke 1 and Acts 1, Mary is mentioned as responding in obedience to the Lord in these opening chapters. One time in conception and one time after the crucifixion. It's interesting to consider where Mary was found in Acts 1:14-15, in the upper room. There Mary is, waiting for the Promise of the Father, in a prayer meeting, asking her Son, her Lord, and Savior, to baptize her with fire. This is what a life of obedience looks like: a yes without condition, without question. These are the bookends of Mary's life. Her joy in conception as she delivers this Baby, but then also watching that very same Baby crucified. This is Mary's tension, joy in responding to God's invitation, severe challenges along the way, and waiting for His promise to come after her Son's death.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

Has obedience to God's invitation in your life been your typical response? When God calls you, does your reply to Him look like Mary's, saying, "Lord, here is Your slave, your servant?" Sometimes, God's invitation to follow Him has a clear direction, but other times, it appears that the future is unknown.

God desires that we would trust Him and follow Him, like Mary, without question or hesitation. This comes from knowing Who's behind the invitation. When we know God is trustworthy, we can say yes to Him, like Mary.

“Obedience Is Better Than Sacrifice”

Luke 1:31-35 *“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and called the Son of the Highest, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His Father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom, there will be no end. Then Mary said to the angel, how can this be since I do not know a man?” And the angel answered and said to her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.”*

Although there are some similarities between the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus, it's also clear there are some stark differences. Some things they share, but at the same time, so much separates them in significant ways. Let's take time and look at the similarities first. Both Zacharias and Mary were visited by the angel Gabriel. This is noteworthy. There are only two named angels in the Bible, and they don't make very many appearances. So, the fact that God has sent this specific angel, an archangel, to speak to them is a big deal. Both Zacharias and Mary were troubled by the presence of the angel. This angelic visitation freaked them out, or at the very least surprised them, like I think it would any person.

The Bible tells us that the angel told Zacharias and Mary not to fear. I don't think Gabriel meant there was no need to fear their presence, but they wouldn't need to fear the message God was delivering to them. The message that God gave Zacharias and Mary included God's intent to provide them with a son, one human only in John, and one Godman through Mary. They were assured that the Spirit of God would work in their child's life, even in their birth. If you remember, when Elizabeth and Mary met for the first time, both pregnant, the baby leaped into her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. How amazing that from birth, God's Spirit was at work within these homes. Both families were told what to name their babies, which significantly differed from the tradition in Zacharias' case. Typically, they would've called Elizabeth's baby by his father's name, but at the last minute, after nine months of silence from Zacharias, he said, “His name shall be called John.” And lastly, Zacharias and Mary were told specific things about their children's destiny, purpose, and future role in God's Christmas Day rescue mission.

Looking only at these similarities, we might think these babies are cut from the same cloth. But when we peer in a little closer, we soon realize that John is only human, and Mary's Child, Jesus, is both fully human and fully God. The theological term for this is hypostatic union, God and man dwelling in one Person. Let's look at some of the differences between John and Jesus. Although John's birth was like Isaac, Samson, and Samuel, which were miraculous, Jesus' would be unique. Jesus' birth is one of a kind, never to be repeated. It's not just a beautiful conception; it's an miraculous (flawless, free from sin) conception. John is called great by the angel, but with qualifications for why he was great. Jesus, on the other hand, is called Great, without qualifications, simply because none are needed.

Part of John's mission was to baptize with water, which Jesus would also participate in, allowing John to baptize Him. But Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, something very different than John's calling. Gabriel said that John would be called a prophet of the Most High, but Jesus is called the Son of the Most High! John would be the product of intimacy between Zacharias and Elizabeth, but Jesus would come uncreated, sent by God, and not a product of intimacy from Mary and Joseph. And lastly, John would be filled with the Holy Spirit, but Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, two entirely different things.

Again, the list of similarities is amazing and even startling when we look at both John's and Jesus' lives. But when it comes to their differences, we are further struck by the gap between John and Jesus, which is the point. One is finite and created, and One is infinite and uncreated. Although Jesus had all the markers of human life, He also has all the markers for an unhuman life because He's not just Man; he's also fully God.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

The Christmas season give us an amazing opportunity to stare into the glory and wonders of the manger, a manger filled with Man and God in the same person. This is truly heaven and earth dwelling together in perfect harmony, in a way that only God Himself could pull off.

Take some time today and investigate the glory of the incarnation, so much that's familiar, while at the same time, so much that's radically different. This is truly the wonder of the season.

Week #4 | Day #1
December 18th, 2022

“Things Aren’t Always As They Seem”

Luke 2:1-5 *“And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all the world went to be registered, everyone to his city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.”*

In the Gospel of Matthew, we get the amazing backstory that was taking place with Joseph, Mary’s betrothed fiancé. In ancient times, betrothals were a far more serious commitment than our modern-day wedding engagements. It was considered a divorce if you walked away from a 1-year betrothal. So, when Joseph found out, during his betrothal to Mary, that she was pregnant, he was freaked out, knowing that he hadn’t been intimate with her. Joseph planned to break off the relationship and move on secretly. He assumed that Mary had been unfaithful to him. I mean, after all, God impregnated a woman/Mary, which had never happened in human history.

But, instead of running away and breaking it off, God, once again, did what God has done since Eden; He saved Christmas Day by sending an angel to visit Joseph and assure him that the Lord was at work in Mary’s life (Matt. 1:24-25). In Luke 2, we learn that Joseph obeyed the angel and followed God, taking Mary, his betrothed wife, and their Baby boy, the Lord Jesus Christ, who was still in the womb, to himself. Leaving Nazareth, which was around 1,200 ft above sea level, they would’ve most likely descended about 80 miles into Jericho, only to climb another 15 miles and 3,600 ft to make the final trek into Bethlehem. You can only imagine the conversations these two must’ve been having as they journeyed from their hometown to Bethlehem. “Joseph, what does all this mean? Can you believe both Zacharias and I received a visitation from Gabriel? And now God wants us to be the people He’s fulfilling thousands of years of prophecy with? Are we really qualified to do this? I mean, we’re just a couple of poor teenagers from nowhere Nazareth. Can all this really be true?”

Well, it’s clear Luke had a purpose for including all these various details about their travels and the journey they had to take. I mean, Luke is a physician working to keep an accurate account of God’s work in accomplishing Christmas Day, but it’s more than that. Luke wants us to see that even though wicked leaders are forcing people to leave their hometowns and come to Bethlehem to participate in this census, it’s God who is leading them. My good friend Justin Rizzo rightly says, “...seemingly driven by Caesar’s hand, yet this was God’s sovereign plan.” The idea is that even in far-off Rome, God was working out His plan through the voluntary decisions of unrighteous rulers.

And alongside Joseph and Mary’s shock about God’s work in their lives, they also might’ve had frustration during this journey. Maybe tired, worn out, and annoyed that they’re taking this long trip while Mary is pregnant, with little money and depleting resources. But before they become bitter and offended and allow anger to surface in their lives, they must remember that God is ruling in the heavens, overseeing all things, including this trip.

There's a prophecy God gave Israel in Micah 5:2 that states the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. Instead of taking out their anger on Herod and complaining about this 95-mile journey, they had to remember that God's hand was leading them; God's purposes were guiding them. In fact, in this long, tiring, and arduous journey, they were fulfilling thousands of years of prophecy. This was a journey that Israel longed to see, and now, it was happening through them.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

But look, it's not just Joseph and Mary's life that God was leading; he's also doing the same thing with your life. I'm sure there are many things that you could become angry about, that you could become bitter about. But before you jump to conclusions, I suggest taking a deep breath and considering that right now, in this hard place, God is overseeing your life. And what might seem like a detour, like a closed road, or a destroyed bridge, might very well be the provision of God in your life.

Take time today, and celebrate that God is involved, even if it doesn't feel like He is, even if He feels far away. I assure you; that God is closer than you might think. Reach for Him today, with whatever is going on, and have confidence that He's already reaching for you before you reach for Him. Things aren't always as they seem.

Week #4 | Day #2
December 19th, 2022

“The Great God, Who Bows Low”

Luke 2:6-7 *“So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.”*

After a couple of thousand years of Church history, a few Hollywood productions, and lots of speculation, we must return to a middle eastern ideal when we consider Jesus’ birth. Here in Bethlehem, there wasn’t an Israeli motel chain. No Vrbo, Airbnb, or Priceline to find nice digs. This village, Bethlehem, was in the middle of nowhere with limited housing options. The best way to accurately view their lodging would be a guest room that was added alongside some homes in that day, much like where Jesus shared the last supper in Luke 22:7-13.

For thousands of years, middle eastern homes had a feeding trough in the living room because the animals people owned were often brought inside during the night to protect them from theft or potential loss. The animals were also used as a heat source among many of the poorer families. The fact that Jesus was born into a manger/feeding trough is accurate; it’s what’s reflected in many houses from that era. And although we don’t have every specific detail surrounding Jesus’ birth, we can say definitively that Jesus was born to poor parents, in a lowly birthplace, among great obscurity and rejection. The rejection was natural, but it also held a spiritual truth. Because of the census, they were among so many that had returned to Bethlehem to be counted that there wasn’t room for Him, or His family. But, as I said, this held spiritual truth, that many hearts would be closed to the very One that had come for them.

As you can tell, this isn’t the ideal birth situation and place most parents dream about when preparing to welcome their newborn. There was no pre-painted bedroom for Him, no gender reveal party, no Jellycat stuffed animals or sleep machines simulating the sounds of the ocean. This is just hard, obscure, lonely, and what many would call the struggle bus. For Joseph and Mary, the struggle was real. But beyond historical information, Jesus’ birth reveals something glorious about God Himself. When we look at God’s arrival, we learn who God is at His core, His very nature, and Personhood. This is what theologians call “the condescension of God.” They mean that God bowed so low, He embraced so much humility, not just on Calvary, but being born as He traded in the glory of heaven for a life on earth, a life like ours.

This is the Genesis 1 God, the uncreated God who formed the worlds with the words of His mouth breathing His first breath on earth, not in a palace but to two poor teenage parents in an obscure city. The High and lofty One, the separated One, has come near to us, was born like us, and lived a life like ours, not just as a good moral example, but so that He could save us from our sins. This is what Christmas Day is all about, God coming near us, living among us. He wasn’t satisfied to only tell us what He is like; he wanted to demonstrate it. That’s right, this wasn’t a far-off, from heaven type-proclamation; this was living proof, God dwelling among man. If you ever wondered if God was approachable, Christmas Day assures us He is.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

Some years ago, I was spending time with an adopted young man. He struggled most of his life because his biological parents didn't raise him. In his pain and hardship, I said to him, "Neither was Jesus." This is because Joseph wasn't Jesus' father; he was His stepdad. This deeply touched him, as it should. Jesus' birth holds profound and liberating truths for all of us.

The reality is, nobody has been born lower than Jesus. Nobody has had a more disruptive birth than Jesus. And it's not just because of His situation in Bethlehem, it's because He left the glory of heaven to live on earth. Jesus has done all this so He can say, "I've been as low as you. I've experienced what you've experienced. I can relate to you. I understand you, not from a distance, but from being up close and personal."

Take courage today, friend; God is approachable, He understands your situation, and because He's a great High Priest, who's lived life like you, yet without sin, you can come boldly before Him to receive grace and mercy in your time of need. Don't delay; approach His throne; he's waiting for you!

Week #4 | Day #3
December 20th, 2022

“Fully God, and fully man”

Luke 2:6-7 *“So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.”*

Throughout Church history, the birth of Jesus has been the epicenter of endless debates. There’s no denying the polarizing effect of the coming of Jesus Christ. Even history, as we know it, is split between B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini, the year of our Lord). So significant was Jesus’ coming, historians marked the only split in the calendar that exists. But even with this calendar split, it could not silence the raging among the nations. When it comes to the central matters of this debate, it’s over Jesus’ dual nature, the fact that He was both God and Man simultaneously. Because this has never happened before, it’s nearly impossible for us to get our heads around it, which is why it’s a truth that requires faith.

Historically Christianity refers to Jesus’ birth as the Incarnation. The word incarnation means “In the flesh.” Like where we get the word carne, like carne asada, or meat. As Christians, we believe that God became a man. We don’t believe that man became a God or that God lost His ability to be God when He became a man. One of our Church fathers, Augustine, said it this way, “At the incarnation, God added to what He was not (man), but He didn’t lose what He was (God). He added humanity alongside His divinity.” Understandably, this is hard to believe, which is why I stated that it must be received by faith because there’s no other example. It’s unique, and it will never happen again.

Jesus’ humanity and His divinity have come under constant attack. Some of those attacks stated, “Christ didn’t die as an atonement for sinners, but simply as a good moral example.” Others have said, “He wasn’t truly human because all humans are evil. Therefore, Jesus couldn’t have been human.” Some have said, “He was a spiritual being, somewhere in-between God and man, something in the middle, but not both at the same time.” And still, others have argued, “At His birth, He was human, but at His baptism, He became God’s son.”

Because of these arguments, some have been thrown off course as they’ve followed Jesus. But God’s desire for you is that you’re not thrown off track as you learn what the Bible says about Christ and His coming. For instance, when it comes to Jesus’ humanity, we must remember He had a natural genealogy, a family tree, with real names like yours (Matt. 1:1-17). He had a human name and was born through a woman (Matt. 1:18-25). He had brothers and sisters (Matt. 13:55). Jesus grew physically, spiritually, mentally, and socially (Luke 2:42). And lastly, He gave to others, He loved children, He celebrated holidays, He went to parties, He loved His mom, and He prayed and obeyed God the Father. All these things speak about His humanity that He was fully man.

Alongside these human qualities, He also had divine attributes, qualities that make Him exclusively God, like when He affirmed Peter's proclamation that He was indeed the Messiah, sent from heaven (Matt. 16:15). Or when He claimed God was His father, making himself equal with God (John 5:18). He also claimed omniscience, which only God can possess, when He prophesied Peter's denial, just like it happened (Matt. 26:34). And lastly, He said that He was the root, and offspring of David, meaning that He came from David (offspring), but that He was also before David (root) (Rev. 22:16). How can a person exist before someone, and come through that person, unless your fully God? You can't! You can only do this if you're God.

One of the beautiful things about Christianity is that God and man dwell together in perfect harmony in the person of Christ Jesus. Christmas Day is about heaven and nature singing, celebrating the mystery of God, that He would come, live among us, becoming like us, that He might save us from our sins.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

Take time today and create your list of human activities that you think Jesus might have done or participated in. Allow the humility of God to touch and awaken your heart as you consider how low the God of glory bowed to take on flesh and live like you.

Make another list of divine qualities and allow those qualities to renew your allegiance to Jesus and your confidence in Him so that He can do what He said He would do because He's God! Not only did He say powerful and precious promises to us as Man, but because He is God, He can fulfill them. Be encouraged today in the dual nature of Jesus Christ, as both fully God and fully man!

“The Real Reason For The Season”

Luke 2:8-14 *“Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For THERE IS BORN TO YOU THIS DAY in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.”*

It's interesting how Luke, the author of this Gospel account, shifts here from poor parents and a poor Baby born in a poor home to the poorest of the poor, the shepherds. These shepherds always get a starring role in the Christmas play, and that's simply because Jesus gave them a starring role in the Christmas story, not because they would've had one on their own. Shepherds in Jesus' day were social outcasts, doing a dirty, nomadic job. They lived in the fields because they had to stay with the sheep to protect them from loss, wandering, or potential harm. The shepherds didn't own their sheep; they managed them for someone else, so if you lost one and couldn't prove it was because of a predator, you had to pay for it out of your pocket.

The shepherds also had a Rabbinical ban, excluding them from temple life because they couldn't leave the sheep even to come inside. So, even though they were Jewish, they were alienated from the commonwealth of their own nation. Most considered them unclean, leaving them unable to testify in court because they were deemed untrustworthy. They were stuck outside, just like the sheep they led. And although they had spent many nights alone in the wilderness, this night would be different, unlike any of the previous nights they had experienced outside. Because they couldn't come in, God came to them.

The Christmas season is a time for great joy, but not for the many reasons you might think. We don't celebrate Christmas because it's a mostly peaceful place around the world. We don't celebrate Christmas because it's a cute story to tell Children, or even because we receive and give gifts to one another. We celebrate Christmas because when we couldn't get to God, God came to us like these shepherds. This verse is a favorite among the Church during Christmas time. We love to say, “Born to you this day...” but it's often out of context. Remember, whom are the angels talking to? Are they speaking to 21st-century followers of Jesus? Yes, but not first. In context, this verse is first being declared specifically to these shepherds, these so-called dirty, untrustworthy, nomadic wilderness wanderers. The angel rightly proclaims, “To you shepherds who can't come in. To you outcasts, separated from your own commonwealth, to you who cannot enter into the temple, Christ the Lord has been born.”

Luke does this intentionally in his Gospel. He wants us to see that God has sidestepped Caesar, Augustus, and Quirinius and instead used Joseph, Mary, and these shepherds. Luke's Gospel reminds us that it's not God who needs us; we need God. Like those shepherds, our sins have separated us from God, and we cannot go into His temple because we are unclean. In our brokenness, in our separated state, we also need a visitation from heaven to find us, like those shepherds out in the proverbial field. This is the joy of Christmas; this is the reason for the season: God seeks to save what is lost.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

Take time today and remember the goodness of God in your life. Think back to when you were without Christ, when you were lost, and when your sins separated you from nearness to God. Drink in those feelings of being outside of God's family. I have found it essential to remember where we once were to rejoice in where we are now. It's important to remember what it was like without Christ so that we never lose our gratitude for His work on our behalf.

But maybe you are far from God; you're feeling alone and separated from God's Son, Christ Jesus the Lord. If that's the case, then these verses are for you. There's been born a King for you. Wherever you might be right now, Christ has come to rescue you, to reach you exactly where you are, so that He can take you to where He is. All you need to do is surrender your life, raise the white flag, and confess Jesus as the Lord of your life. He's there with you. He's near you, as close as conversation. Talk to Him!

Week #4 | Day #5
December 22nd, 2022

“A Story Only God Can Tell”

Luke 2:15-16 *“So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us. And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe is laying in a manger.”*

God’s nature is very different from ours. If it were up to me to rule the world, there are countless things that I would choose to do that God would never do. And many things I would never do that God regularly does. This is the vast difference between God and man. I have found that many parts of the Bible are so contrary to what I would do if I were leading that to me, it’s proof of divine inspiration. For example, God asked Abraham and Sarah to sacrifice their long-awaited son of promise, Isaac. I would’ve never done this. Or in Revelation 20, God releases Satan back onto the earth after locking him up for 1,000 years. Like really? You’re going to let this created monster loose after you’ve locked him up and recreated the world? This is a move that only God would do.

But here’s the point, the nativity story, the story of Christ’s coming, is a story that only God can write. If I was God, and I was making my big entrance to planet earth, I wouldn’t have done it the way He did. I wouldn’t have chosen Zacharias and Elizabeth, an out-of-the-way priest whose wife is old and barren. I wouldn’t have chosen Joseph and Mary, a couple of teenage kids who may not even be able to drive in the United States legally. And I wouldn’t have chosen the shepherds as some of the first people to declare that God has been born to them! This is unheard of. I mean, think about it. If you’re God and preparing your public debut, would you want to do it through a handful of hardly known people in some obscure cities and an animal feeding trough for a delivery bed? In the words of a New Yorker, “Fuhgeddaboutit.” But this is precisely what God has chosen to do, which I why I said His nature is very different from ours.

All the so-called “big people” in the nativity story don’t budge to see Israel’s King. Folks like Caesar Augustus, Herod, Quirinius, the chief priests, and the scribes. These are the heavy hitters in Jesus’ day. These folks have all the power and influence but are not interested in God’s purposes. All the so-called “little people” of the nativity story take the starring role—people like Zacharias, Elizabeth, Joseph, and Mary, the wise men, and shepherds. Jesus’ coming doesn’t happen in the palace or the hip, popular places; it happens in Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Hebron, all outside of Jerusalem. These seemingly insignificant people radically upend their lives to accommodate Christ, and His coming.

The religious leaders, who were well versed in the Hebrew scriptures according to Matthew 2:4-6, knew the prophecy of Micah 5:2, which spoke about where Christ would be born. This means that they knew the specific city where He’d be born. But this knowledge did nothing for them because they weren’t willing to go see Him, to bow before Him, or worship Him. They weren’t willing to reorder their lives around Christ. They weren’t willing to disrupt their routine to worship Jesus. All they had to do was walk five miles to see 4,000+ years of prophecy fulfilled, but they weren’t willing. These so-called big people were stuck, feeling important, holding positions of power, set in place to serve God by way of serving people, and God bypasses them to accomplish His purposes. As I said, this is a story that only God can write.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

Considering the above verse's, how are you responding to the Lord during this Christmas season? It's easy, even familiar, for us to hear certain things and think, "wow, this is totally for my spouse or my neighbor; they need to hear this." Sometimes we even read these types of things and think, "wow, these people were so disconnected. Five miles, like really, you couldn't go that far. Sheesh." But the more important question is, what are you doing? Are you taking the preverbal five-mile journey in your life? What does it look like to upend things so you can build your world, your job, your family, and your living situation around Christ and His purposes?

Take time today and identify an area or two where you can make changes so that Christ is the priority. And then ask the Holy Spirit for help to keep these new and fresh commitments. Not only is God the Holy Spirit willing to help, but He's also more than able!

Week #4 | Day #6
December 23rd, 2022

“Fit For His Purposes”

Luke 2:17-21 *“Now when they saw Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at the things the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them. And when the eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called JESUS, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.”*

Over the years, many people have been shocked as they've learned the backstories of various individuals God has called to proclaim the Gospel. It's often the case that the person we see on the stage or ministering to others has been so transformed that it's hard to imagine them before Christ. There are many people when we hear about what their lives looked like outside of Christ, we might think to ourselves, “how on earth did this person end up on this stage, telling others about Christ?” But this is precisely what God loves to do. It was Paul's words to the Corinthians, in 1st Corinthians 1, where he said, “Not many mighty, not many noble God has called. In fact, God calls the foolish things of the earth, the base things to confound the wisdom of the wise.” This is God's sweet spot. He's able to overlook the failures in our lives, and our shortcomings, because He knows what He's destined us to be, and that's what He goes after.

This is precisely what God did with the shepherds out in the field. They were shocked when the angel visited them. They were the least likely people to have an in-person encounter with a heavenly being. I'd assume that this was not on their to-do list that day, but it was on God's. And it's enough for the story's sake that God came near them and proclaimed His Son's birth and arrival to them. If that were all that the story said, it would be remarkable. But this isn't where God stopped. He took it a step further. God wasn't satisfied to announce something to them; He wanted to include them in His purposes. He wanted them to have a central role, not just in hearing, but in telling others about what had just taken place.

The above verse says that these once societally rejected people, these unclean and untrustworthy outsiders, the shepherds, went out and “...made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child...” That's right; they were among the first people to proclaim the message of God's arrival. This precious message that God had been curating for 4,000+ years was entrusted to these guys. Again, this truth is remarkable when we consider the people God chooses to use, but even more than that, it says something about Himself. It's another glimpse into how He thinks, feels, and perceives who's in and out. In most people's eyes, these shepherds, though they served an essential role for the owners of the sheep, the majority of people would consider them on the outs of God's family and purposes. But not God.

Many of the disciples are people we would not have chosen and entrusted with the Gospel message. Not because they were bad people but because, on the outside, they didn't “look” capable or weren't a specific type. The first advent of Jesus sends a powerful message to those who feel on the outs and those who seem to be disqualified. The Christmas season proclaims loud and clear that God desires those who feel undesirable and seeks those who are lost so that He can include them in His purposes.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

When God called me into the ministry some years ago, I remember thinking, "I've never been to college, I have a terrible past, and there's got to be some smarter people out there that You're desiring to use." But this is the thing with God, He knows what He's created us for, so if we aren't walking it, though we might feel disqualified, He doesn't feel the same way as us. Praise God for that.

I don't know where you've been or what you've done, but I know that God desires to use you, to include you in His local and global rescue mission, like the shepherds, to announce His coming to those around you. But maybe you don't have a wild past; perhaps you've never felt dirty and undesirable. If that's the case, have you responded to Him? Have you signed up to join Him as a co-laborer alongside Him? He's longing to include you, to give you a starring role in His epic storyline. Have you responded?

BORN TO YOU



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Weekend Service - Saturdays 5pm
Prayer Meeting - Tuesdays 7pm