

*Advent
Devotional*

2022

by Pastor Joe Meyer

GLORIA DEI LUTHERAN CHURCH

“Experiencing the Christ- Story Together”

Advent Devotional from
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church
2022

Written by
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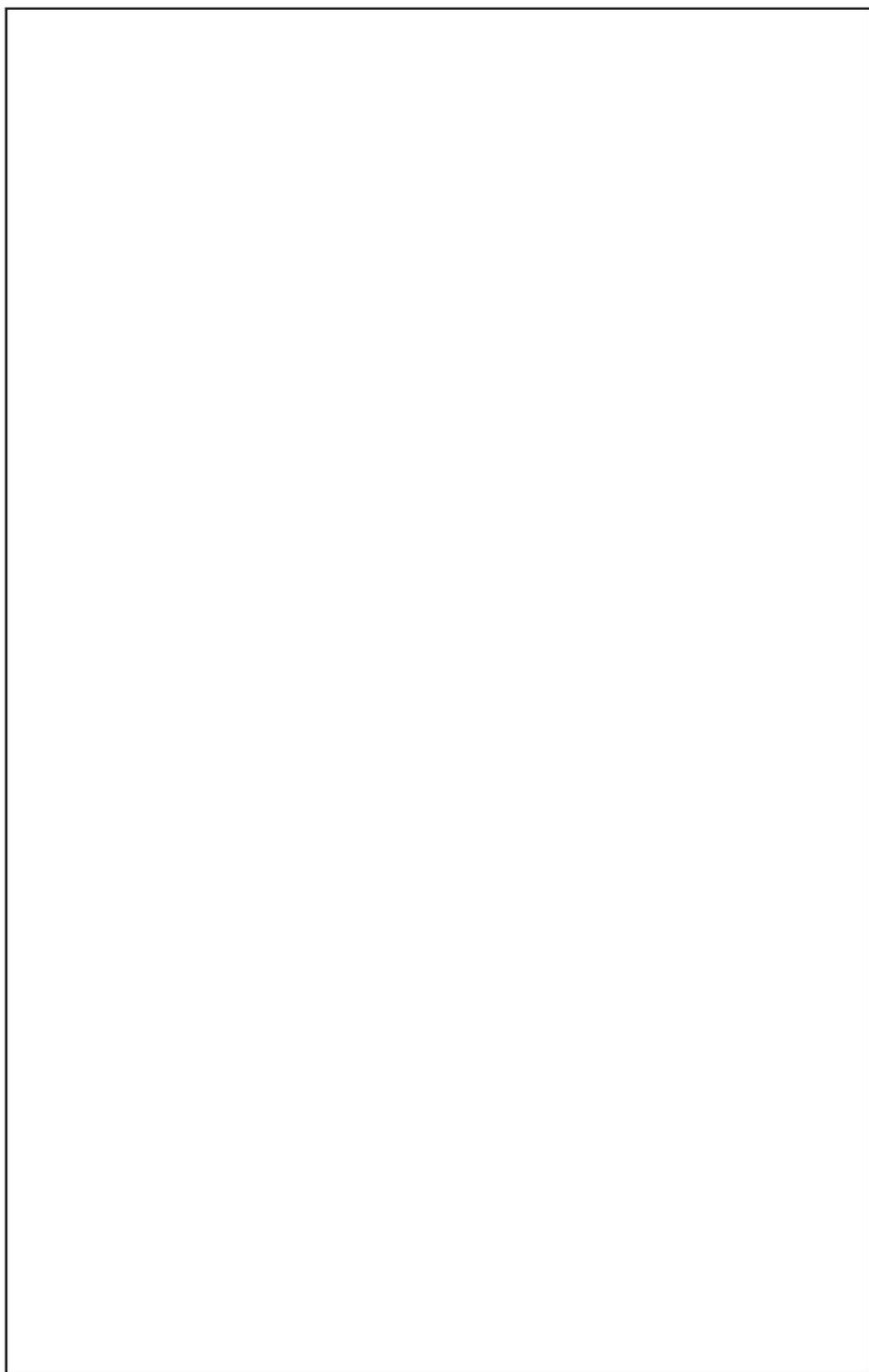
As you read these devotions each day, consider the following questions.

How would you explain this passage to someone else?

What amazes you by these words?

What questions does the passage raise?

Write out a prayer based on the truth of this passage of Scripture:



Day One—November 27
“Seeing God in Creation”
Read Psalm 19:1 & Luke 2:8-14.

I think you can imagine what a breath-taking night it must have been for the shepherds that first Christmas so long ago! Try to put yourself out on the hills of Bethlehem that night...the same night that Jesus came into our world...and think about what it would have been like sitting outside under the stars. I think you can form a mental-picture of just how crazy-beautiful it would have been out there! In your minds-eye you can see the sheep, some standing and softly bleating; some bending the knee in an effort to lay down to sleep; some quietly grazing with their young by their side. You can also see the shepherds trying to relax from the daily duties, in the moment attempting to both keep-an-eye on the flock and to shut-an-eye for some much needed sleep. But as they lay there on their backs, looking skyward out in the open, you can also imagine that their thoughts would have turned to God. I have a feeling you've seen the night sky with the stars looking like a trillion pin-dots as they shine brightly, seeming to twinkle intermittently in the vast blackness of space. You can easily imagine it because you've likely seen how amazingly beautiful the very handiwork of God is as the night-sky acts as the unmistakable fingerprint of the Almighty Creator. How incredible would it have been for the shepherds to look to the sky that dark night...with no light pollution whatsoever...just the brilliant stars twinkling alongside the moon shimmering, both-of-which giving evidence of the Creator God in the creation itself! Maybe in the moment they even recited from memory Psalm 19:1: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” That night on Bethlehem's hills...they “saw God in creation” to be sure!

Having said that, as we know from Luke 2, “seeing God in creation” was about to take a whole new and far-more mind-blowing twist and turn! The amazing truth about that first Christmas night was that God, the one who put the stars in motion, and according to Isaiah who

knows all those stars by name...that same God...was arriving in person in the lowly-little-city of Bethlehem! Of course, I should remind you, the shepherds on the hills that night would not only be privy to an amazing light show via the stars, but they'd also see another light, the blazing light of heaven itself in the the light-bearing angels of God!

As amazing as all that would be for them however, it would, all-together, pale in comparison to what came next when they came face to face with the Lord Jesus! That night the shepherds wouldn't just see the shine of moon and stars and the brilliance of the angels, they would also see the light of Him who is "the Light of the World" (John 8:12). They would come face to face with the Light of the world indeed...but better said, they would come face to face with the GOD who created the stars and angels and everything else! In a manger, in a stable, in Bethlehem-town, God Almighty was literally seen in His creation two-millennia ago! What an amazing truth for the shepherds and...what an amazing truth for us! The God who is light came into our dark world that we might someday come into the brilliance of His!

Day Two—November 28

“Chosen”

Read 1Peter 2:9 and Luke 2:8-14 (again).

I must confess that I'm one of those guys who was privileged to fall into the category of those classified as “chosen”. What I mean by that, at least initially, is that when sides were picked for sports-stuff when I was a boy, I was picked pretty fast, if not picked first. When it came to making the sports teams in junior high and high school...I was first-string in all of the three sports I played. I got the jobs I applied for; I got into the schools and programs I wanted to...etc. etc...you get the idea, I was “chosen”. I say that not as a point of pride, but because I fully realize that not everyone has experienced life the way I did. Sometimes people can be judgmental and down-right cruel, intentionally overlooking those they don't think “worthy” of their attention or “worthy” of their choosing. There are those that move to the head of the class and those that lag behind...but some that lag behind are de facto pushed further behind because they're not only not chosen, but they are shoved to that unenviable place by people's shallowness.

Having said that, we are reminded by the Lord's choosing of the shepherds on the hills of old Bethlehem, that this is not so with God! In fact, God often chooses those we'd never choose...I could give you dozens of Biblical examples! God often chooses the opposite of who we would choose...and the shepherds are clear evidence of that fact. I know, I know, they are those cute little hooded figures in our nativity sets, but let's face it, on the hierarchy of nativity characters, the shepherds are pretty far down the food-chain: Angels? Dearly loved. Mary? Honored and admired. Joseph? The best of the best! “We Three Kings”? They weren't royalty, but we ascribe them royalty nonetheless. All of these nativity

characters seem to overshadow the very lowly shepherds who were keeping watch that night. But clearly, that's not how the Lord saw them whatsoever! Our Lord intentionally chose a group of men that others looked down on. He came to a group of men whom others ignored. He came

to group of men who would then be overtaken by the amazing grace of our amazing God who chose-to-choose them above all others. To that point, in this instance, He chose them to be the first to hear the good news or Gospel, namely, Jesus being born in Bethlehem's stable! He chose them to be the first to witness the birth of Jesus with their own eyes and He chose them to be the first to witness to others about what they saw!

And what an amazing truth that is...one you've heard before...but one you need to be overtaken by as well! God chose the lowly, the forgotten, the disenfranchised, the outcasts to be the first to know of His way of salvation in Jesus and speak about Him! God chose the lowly, the forgotten, the disenfranchised, and the outcasts to be the first to know of His amazing love for the world! And our Lord continues to do the same in our world, in our lives, yet today! He chose me and He also chose you! Worthy of the choosing? Nope, we're not. You know none of us are. But that's what makes His choosing us even more incredible and wonderful to consider. Even if others have rejected you...God chose you! Even if no one else would ever choose you...God chose you! In His sight, you are not lowly or forgotten and in and through Christ you will never be disenfranchised or cast-out...whether you were first-string or bench-warmer, it doesn't matter to Him, in Christ, you are chosen by God Almighty! Peter would write it this way in 1Peter 2:9 "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Thank you Jesus for choosing the shepherds and thank you Jesus...for choosing us too!

Day Three—November 29

“Great Fear”

Read Isaiah 9:6 and Luke 2:8-14 (again).

Have you ever been truly afraid? Have you ever been shaken to your very core? I am sure there have been times when you’ve encountered something that “scared” you, but what about something that caused you to be “filled with great fear” over what you’re seeing and/or experiencing in the moment? I know I’ve had several such moments, moments when what I was experiencing brought about both anxiety and fear...and so, as mentioned, I think I can say I have been “filled with great fear” as our text from Luke two says it.

When I was living in California and working with youth, I had a fear-filled moment at the end of a week’s-long ski-trip to Mammoth Mountain, California. I should say, we not only had a great time hitting the slopes but also had a great “mountain top experience” around the Word of God and with our fellow-believers. When we left however, we had a long drive ahead of us and therefore had to leave for home very early in the morning, while it was still dark. That particular, dark-morning, a cloud had descended on the top of the mountain and in doing so created a very dangerous driving situation. In fact, because I couldn’t see more than about three feet in front of our fifteen passenger van, I didn’t realize that I was heading directly towards the edge of the cliff and nearly careening off the mountain...and in doing so, taking fifteen sleeping passengers with me. Those sleepy-eyed youth were about to get a raging wake-up call as we careened down the mountainside to our deaths! Thankfully (and obviously) we did not...I realized my mistake and jerked the van back to the roadway at the last moment. But I gotta tell you, coming that close to killing fifteen people along with myself, I was seriously rattled to the core and for a long time afterward was shaking and quaking, deeply afraid of what could have happened to us had the Lord not protected us in the moment!

Knowing what I felt that dark, dense-cloud morning, I have a feeling then, that the heavenly experience on the hills of Bethlehem that night caused the shepherds to go through very similar emotions, leaving them “shaking and quaking” as well. Likely they were still a little rattled even as

they excitedly ran to see the Lord Jesus in Bethlehem's stable. Luke tells us about their close-encounter this way: "And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them...and they were filled with great fear" Luke 2:9. Of course they were "filled with great fear"! Let's not forget that by all-Biblical-accounts the angels are frightening and awe-inspiring creatures, and their awe-inspiring nature also elicits "great fear" from those with whom they have appointments. "Fear" is understandable of course, they are mighty and amazing beings! But it does feel a little odd. Why would a heavenly being, said another way, a being from the place of absolute peace found in the presence of God...why would that being, bring fear? We should remember that the angels are extreme...awesome, mighty, and yes, fearful beings. If you think you'd not be afraid to encounter them...you're mistaken. Let me say it this way: If today you stood in the presence of God and came face to face with The Almighty and His band of winged critters, how do you think you'd react? I think you know you'd be as anxiety-filled and as fearful as I was on the mountain years ago or as the shepherds were on the hills that night.

And yet, this is where the beauty of the Gospel intervenes. Awesome beings? Yes. Fear-bringers? You betcha. But also bringers of an unfathomable peace? Yes, yes indeed. That's why they were there that night. The angels came to the shepherds to remind them that the "Prince of Peace" as Jesus is called in Isaiah 9:6, had come to put all fears to rest, not just the one they had on the hills that night. The truth of Christmas is that in the Christ-Child we no longer need to be afraid. We don't need to fear the angels. More importantly, we don't need to fear God! Revere Him? Honor Him? Recognize His amazing nature? Yes, absolutely yes. But you no longer have to be afraid. The angels would say it this way: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14) In Jesus and through faith in His finished work, you are someone with whom He is "well pleased" and you are therefore at peace with the God of the Universe in Him. Paul wrote it this way in Romans 5:1 "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Peace in a fear-filled world. Peace in your heart...peace in your soul!

Day Four—November 30

“Why Shepherds?”

Read Luke 2:8 and Psalm 23.

I’m asking a question today: “Why shepherds?” Why did the angel of the Lord along with the great angel-host come specifically to shepherds? Why not come to a carpenter, since Jesus would be one? Why not come to rabbis, since Jesus was one? Why not come to any number of other people? Of course, we’ve already explored the fact that the shepherds were chosen by God when no one else would have chosen them. They’re chosen-ness is great gospel news for us to remember, namely that the Lord chooses those whom others would not...including you and me! (See Day Two “Chosen”). But I’ll ask it again...and I’m looking for a different response of course...why shepherds specifically?

Well, one reason might be that the shepherds were likely looking out for the sacrificial lambs for the Temple. There is some evidence...and no end of articles on the internet...about the fact that the shepherds were actually watching over the animals that would have been used to bring forgiveness to the people through the sacrifices in Temple. In fact, some will even argue that the thing that is called “swaddling cloths” was actually a cloth that the priests would wrap around the sacrificial lambs. So when the shepherd’s heard from the angels that Jesus would be “wrapped in swaddling cloths”, these “keepers of the sacrifices” would have known what that meant about Him. Possibly then, that’s why the Lord came to lowly shepherds that night? Possibly.

But let me propose another possible reason. Do you remember what Jesus called Himself in John Chapter 10? That may not ring a bell right away unless I quote those now famous words “I am the Good Shepherd” (check the whole reading in John 10:11-18). To be sure, Jesus was “the Lamb of

God that takes away the sin of the world” as John 1:29 says it. (Also see the above discussion). But Jesus, the Lamb of God, was also “The Lord” of “The Lord...is my Shepherd” of Psalm 23, hence why He calls Himself “the Good Shepherd” as found in John 10! Perhaps the reason shepherds were chosen to not only be the first to know-about but also be the first to tell-about the story, was that they were telling the story of “The Lord” being our “Good Shepherd” in the person of Jesus...and shepherds could do so from a unique point of understanding that others would not have had! These shepherds knew what Psalm 23 really meant when it speaks about our relationship with God being a Shepherd-and-sheep existence. They would understand it because they themselves lived the shepherd-and-sheep lifestyle! They understood the depth of the connection between the shepherd and the sheep and could easily then apply “The Lord is my Shepherd” to themselves and to those around them.

So that’s back then...but what does the choice of the shepherds say to us today...right now? Well, we too remember what David wrote in Psalm 23, namely “The LORD...is my Shepherd.” We remember first of all then that, as we sing it at Christmas-time, it was “The little LORD Jesus asleep on the hay.” We begin by marveling at the fact that Jesus is the LORD or as Isaiah 9:6 would describe Him, “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” But in doing so we also then remember the depth of what is written in Psalm 23, namely that “the Lord is...MY Shepherd.” Each and every year as we come to the crèche, as we come to our nativities and see the shepherds there, we should be reminded that the Good Shepherd, the Lord Himself, came down from heaven above to earth below and He did so for you and me, the sheep in His flock. We are also reminded however, that the Lord is not a far-away, uncaring, unloving LORD, but He is indeed MY Good Shepherd...the wonderful, caring, loving, nurturing Good Shepherd of sheep of His flock...sheep just like you and me!

Day Five—December 1st
“Just As They Were Told”
Read Luke 2:20

We live in a very skeptical world. I know I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know, but our world is filled with people who want proof...and they want proof of just about everything! Don’t you dare make any claim you cannot back up or you’ll be fact-checked and roasted faster than you’d care to imagine. And the skepticism of people today is then especially true of those on the outside-looking-in when it comes to the Christian faith. People want verifiable facts about God and not just truth-claims made by God’s children. People want to see the empirical evidence for this faith-in-Jesus-thing we hold so dear. The days of people simply accepting Christianity at face-value are over and done...at least in the United States but probably everywhere to be sure. If you claim Christianity is true, you better be able to back it up.

Of course we have to be careful here...you cannot prove that there is a God. You can point to the wonders of nature and our planet and our universe, all markers in our world that scream out “Creator God”, but you still cannot prove His existence. You can talk about Jesus and His coming in Bethlehem’s stable...coming into our world that we might be able to enter His...but even though all of that is based in historical fact, you still cannot prove to people His role as our Savior and Lord.

What you can do however, is point people to God’s Word and the truth of His Word. You can point people to God’s promises in His Word and then, point then to the fulfillment of those promises in our world. Now, we do need to remember that God’s Word all by itself, because it’s alive with the Holy Spirit, can convert someone to Christianity with or without “proof”.

But God's Word also provides "proof" of its own veracity in that what was prophesied within it, actually came true. What God said...God also did!

I mention all of that because our shepherd friends in Bethlehem experienced first-hand the verification of God's Word and promise to them. God said it. They believed it. But then they saw the proof of it. Notice what Luke tells us in chapter two and verse twenty: "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen...as it had been told them". Notice that Luke makes a point to say that the things they were told lined up with the things that were seen and the history witnessed through the Christ-child they encountered.

And so it is with us! We read about Jesus in Isaiah 7:14 "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." And indeed, so long ago, in Bethlehem's stable, a virgin girl named Mary gave birth to a Son who was amazingly, "Immanuel", or "God with us"! And that of course, was just the beginning. Prophecy after prophecy found in the Old Testament was in fact fulfilled in the New Testament through the life and ministry, as well as, the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus! Our skeptical world needs to know that what God said He would do...He did in the person and work of Jesus! What God promised...He fulfilled! And maybe, just maybe, that's also a word for our own skeptical hearts? Maybe you struggle with doubts? Maybe at times you're wondering about your own faith? Let me remind you my friend, what God promises, He fulfills! Look closely at God's Word and promises and like the shepherds of old, you'll find the truth of this marvelous "story" to be "just as they were told" and then...you can tell that same truth to the world around you that they may, along with you, "glorify and praise God" too!

Day Six—December 2nd
“Who were these guys?”
Read Matthew 2:1-12

I'm sure you've heard a pastor or two say that “The Wise Men” or “Magi” or “Three Kings” as we've come to call them, weren't likely at the stable in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. Though most nativities have the three wise-guys as part of the cast of characters...I know most of ours do...the Magi likely didn't come along to meet Jesus until He was about two years old, when Mary and Joseph were living in a permanent structure, not a borrowed hovel-of-a-stable. So, okay...they came to Jesus' side when He was about two and Mary and Joseph were living in different digs...I got it...but the real question isn't “When did they come?”, but “Who were these guys that came to Jesus side?” Who are these guys and why do they matter?

Their lineage, background and homeland are actually far more important than most people realize. We arrange them in our nativities and dust them off for another Christmas display in our homes, but we generally think little of how important they really are to the Christ-story! These men, likely astrologers from Persia, were actually evidence of God's love for the world and proof positive that what the Lord said/wrote in John 3:16 is actually true. In all likelihood these astrologers were descendants of those in Babylon...those impacted by the Babylonian captivity. Of course the Babylonian Captivity of seventy years (see Jeremiah 25) was a discipline that God brought because of the wickedness of God's People at that time. God doesn't ignore sin but in fact disciplines us when we sin...and so He did...sending the Israelites away from Jerusalem in 609BC in the first wave of the captivity and ultimately rescuing them in 539BC when Cyrus and the Medo-Persian empire conquered Babylon and freed God's People

to return home. But notice what I wrote...the “Medo-Persians” rescued God’s people from Babylon and took up residence in Babylon as well. When God disciplined His children, He brought the Medo-Persian empire into direct contact with His people and His life-giving Word.

In other words, “The Wise Men” or “Magi” are important because they are evidence that God was working long ago to bring even non-Jews to saving faith. These men are a reminder of God’s will for the salvation of the entire world and God’s will for your salvation too! Yes, He chose to bring salvation through the Jewish Nation and for that reason they were “the chosen people”. But the salvation He was bringing was always intended for all nations. Jesus would say it in Matthew 28 “Go, make disciples of all nations... baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” These wise-guys are evidence of our gracious God reaching out to the Jews but also reaching out through the Jews to all nations with the Gospel message! In other words, as you put your “Magi” or “Wise Men” or “We Three Kings” into your nativity this year, be reminded that their place in the Christ-story is in fact your place in the Christ-story too. God seeking all people and all nations, means that God was also seeking you! In a very real sense, when you ask “who are these guys?”, the answer is “They represent us!” These much loved nativity characters point to you and your faith in Jesus! It’s as if, whenever you put them in the nativity, you’re looking in a mirror-of-faith at your own face, a mirror reminding you of the the salvation that God has brought to the world and indeed, has also freely-given to you!

Day Seven—December 3rd
“Their Son—Their Lord”
Read Matthew 2:1-12 (again)

When you think about the early days of Jesus’ life, put yourself in the shoes of Mary and Joseph for a moment. Now, Mary and Joseph both had an amazing visitation from a heavenly being about this Child they’d be given. Joseph had a vision or a dream that included an angel and Mary had a direct audience with the angel Gabriel himself! They had both been told about this Child and so they knew that He’d be great and holy. In fact, Mary was told that very thing as recorded in Luke 1:35, “The angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” They had been told and so they knew who Jesus was and who Jesus was to be.

But you can imagine that by the time the Magi showed up at their house they’d gotten into a groove and routine with this new Son of theirs. By the time the Magi show up, it’d been almost three years since Mary and Joseph had been visited by the angels and given the message about their Son. As mentioned previously, it’d had been at the very least, more than two years since the shepherds came running into the stable from the fields with news of the heavenly chorus. Mary and Joseph were likely very entrenched in the “parent-thing”, just as you and I would be, and therefore were also likely overtaken and thoroughly surprised by the arrival of a caravan of Persians asking for the “King of the Jews” and furthermore bringing their baby boy gifts fit for the “King of the Jews”. More than that however, can you even imagine Mary and Joseph’s faces when these Persian astrologers bowed low, perhaps even prostrating themselves, to worship...yes, worship...their baby boy? Think about it if you have a two

year old...think about it even if you've just seen a two year old...they are very real, earthy, little creatures. Chubby legs. Full diapers. Snotty noses. Toys in hand. Gibberish for speech. Walking like they're drunk. And with that image in mind, further imagine then several grown men, very stately and serious, laying on the floor, prostrate in front of that chubby, snotty, diaper-wrapped, stumbling, bumbling child of yours! How bizarre would that have been for Mary and Joseph! Their little baby boy "Yeshua" or "Jesus", being worshipped and adored as a King!

And yet, the honor given by the Magi was appropriate because that's exactly who Jesus was! He was their Son...but He was also their King...their Lord and their King! Of course He was their fleshy-little-baby-boy...but He was also their mighty King of kings and Lord of lords! I'm getting chills and tearing up just writing that sentence! You see, it's truly a blow-mind! The amazing thing about our amazing God is that He chose to be both just like us and yet nothing like us all at the same time...just like us and yet "wholly-other" all in the same Person. The truth of the Gospel at Christmas time is a reminder that this Jesus in Bethlehem stable and for thirty-three years on this planet, shared our frame and our lives and our hurts and our pains. Ultimately, because He was one of us, He also stood in our place and bore our sins on the cross. Not unlike Mary and Joseph then who had a Son and a Lord in their house, Jesus comes to us as our Friend, our Companion, our Counselor, our Savior...and yet, He also comes as our King and our Lord! What an amazing truth. The King of the Universe deigns to be with us and chooses us to be with Him both now, in time, and forevermore at His throne in Heaven. He is our Friend, our Companion, our Counselor, our Savior...and yet, He also came as our King and our Lord! Thank you Jesus...thank you Jesus indeed!

Day Eight—December 4th
“God Works in Mysterious Ways”

Read Matthew 2:1-12 (again) and Numbers 24:17

You and I live in a very different world than the Magi or Wise Men did. They lived in a world that was sun-up-to-sun-down absolutely driven by faith expressions of varying kinds...faiths that were often led by and supported by superstitions of the ancient world. There was a distinct blending of truths and myths and just about everyone had their own religious bent and expression that found its way into every aspect of their lives. I recently read an article which espouses that the Magi who came to Jesus weren't completely “superstition driven”, but the article does admit that there would have been some amount of superstition motivating these astrologers from Persia. With that admitted, it would be easy to dismiss the Magi as ancient and foolish and therefore out of touch with what the Lord really wanted for their lives. After all, they're actions alone make them suspect...reading the signs in the heavens, following a “star” and bringing expensive gifts to a “child king” and then worshipping Him? Were they motivated by superstition and therefore deluded?

Well, actually, as you know from God's Word, regardless of their ancient superstitions, when they read the signs, followed the star and worshipped Jesus, they weren't deluded at all, but were doing exactly what the Lord wanted them to do. Some believe that it was Daniel's time and influence in Babylon that would have eventually brought these Magi to their understanding of the one, true, Messiah, or King of the Jews. Remember the amazing truth about that though, Daniel's time was five-hundred-fifty years before these specific Magi made their way to the house where Jesus was! God was working five and a half centuries before Jesus was born to bring the good news of the Gospel to a people far from Him in a superstitious and myth-driven land. The prophecy that God used is found in Numbers 24:17 and simply reads “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel...”. So, following a star to worship at the side of the Jewish-Child-King was exactly what God wanted these astrologers to do!

Following God's leading and worshipping Jesus was God's will for them! Of course, we do need to admit that they were a bit of a strange choice, after all, they were still astrologers and therefore had some whacky and ungodly ideas about the stars and their celestial-guidance for human beings. But interestingly, that's what makes this story even more incredible! God works in mysterious ways as He takes something wicked and wrong, namely astrology, and turns it upside down and uses it to His eternal benefit through a star that brought them to Jesus! What? Really? To be sure, as mentioned in the last devotion, God ordained that these three would be the first of the gentiles, or non-Jews, to believe in Jesus. But God also brought them to this spot in time and to the Lord Jesus' side, to give a narrative-reference-point which would proclaim down through the ages, exactly who this baby boy was as the King of kings and Lord of lords...and be proof positive that God works in mysterious...and amazing...ways!

All of this is also an important reminder for us! This is a story that gets at the lengths to which God will go to bring the good news of His Son to us His children! Does He always work the way we think He should? Nope... He will work however and through whatever He wants to...He is God, I am not. But does He always work to bring the Gospel message and His grace and love to us? Yes, yes He does. And sometimes, if not often, it's in very mysterious ways! Thank the Lord He cares that much for us! Thank the Lord that He is that concerned about us! But also thank the Lord, that He does indeed work in mysterious ways!

Day Nine—December 5th
“Gifts Given to the Lord”
Read Matthew 2:10,11

One of the more creative and wonderful children’s ministry events, which many churches have decided to host around Christmas, is what is called “A Birthday Party for Jesus”. In fact, Gloria Dei’s children’s ministry has adopted the “A Birthday Party for Jesus” event and it happened just yesterday at our church! Of course, the purpose of the “Birthday Party for Jesus” event is to teach children not to focus on the “stuff” of Christmas but instead, to dial-in what’s most important...that being, the birth of the Christ-Child in Bethlehem’s stable for them! To get at that though, the “Birthday Party for Jesus” has a huge birthday cake with the singing of “Happy Birthday to Jesus”. There are helium balloons and bounce houses and party hats and ribbon and all the other things the kiddos normally experience at the birthday parties they attend for their friends...including...the giving of gifts! Yes, the children that come to the “Birthday Party for Jesus” bring gifts for Jesus’ birthday, but gifts to benefit others in the community who are in need! Sometimes it’s canned food for our food pantries. Sometimes it’s baby items for a local pregnancy shelter. Sometimes it’s blankets for the homeless. Whatever the gift “theme”, the gifts are brought to Jesus, but actually brought for the benefit of someone who is in need.

Now, I bring all of that up, but especially the gift giving part of it, because in our reading from Matthew 2 regarding the Magi, we’re reminded that the the three-wise-guys brought gifts to the Christ-child...albeit not birthday gifts...but gifts for Jesus nonetheless! The ancient church even attached meaning to the gifts they brought: Gold—Supposedly a royal gift because Jesus was the King of kings. Frankincense—Reminder of the incense burned as a temple-offering to God (Leviticus 2:2), therefore recognizing Jesus as “God with us”. Myrrh—the spice reserved for burial showing that though He was the King of kings and God Almighty, He was also fully human so that He could give His life for the sins of the world.

But regardless of what the gifts meant to the Magi, what we know about Jesus moves us to say that gifts of any kind were actually unnecessary...even if the Magi's Persian culture demanded such things be done! You see, Jesus didn't come to get gifts...Jesus came to give gifts! Don't get me wrong, gold, frankincense and myrrh are certainly appropriate to bring to the Lord of Glory, particularly with the explanations of those things given above. Jesus certainly deserved to be given homage and therefore He could have even demanded gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, since He was in fact the King of kings and Lord of lords...but He didn't do that, did He? In truth, as God Almighty in the flesh, He could have demanded everything from every single one of us...but He wouldn't do that either! Paul would write it this way in Romans 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death...but the free gift...of God...is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Jesus came to us to give to us, not to get from us! Jesus came to give to us and what He gave was the most precious gift of all, everlasting, never-ending life with Him...far more precious than gold, frankincense and myrrh altogether!

So...at this point I'm asking myself "If that's what Jesus did for me... what is my response to this amazing truth and the amazing gift given me by God?" Well, this is where the beauty of our "Birthday Party for Jesus" comes back into play. Remember, the children who come to the "Birthday Party for Jesus" bring gifts for His birthday...but they bring gifts for His birthday which are actually given away to others...those who are truly in need. Our response to God's incredible gift of salvation? We bring gifts to the Lord Jesus in thankfulness to Him, but we bring those gifts to give to others in His name!

Day Ten—December 6th

“The Glory of the Lord”

Read Luke 2:8 and Exodus 34:29-35

Imagine for a moment being the shepherds on the hills that night and further consider what those men experienced when they came face to face with an angel of the Lord! Imagine for a moment what it must have been like to have the angel’s brilliance showing up into the pitch-black darkness of that first Christmas night! On Day Three of our devotional we explored the fear they would have experienced in the moment... a fear that we’d understand considering a mighty-angelic-being showed up quite unannounced! But perhaps that fear was exacerbated by the fact that when the angels came to the hills that night they brought something truly amazing along with them! We’re told in Luke 2:8 “...the glory of the Lord shone around them.” An angel all by itself would blow us away, right? But an angel coming into our space and time and bringing with them “the glory of the Lord” would have been an amazing sight to behold and blown us away even further! You see, in a very real sense, the angel and the company of angels that came to our world that night brought with them a glimpse what the heavenly realm and the presence of God is like. Do you remember what happened to Moses’ face when he met with God on Mount Sinai? Do you remember that Moses had to veil his face as a result of his time spent with God Almighty? But why did he veil his face? He did so because he was “glowing” with the glory of the Lord imparted through his time spent in the presence of the God who, as the Bible says it, “is light” (1John 1:5). Now, fast forward from Moses to the hills of Bethlehem and the shepherds and the angels who are continually in the presence of the God who “is light”! If Moses “glowed” after about a month with the Lord, how brilliantly would the angels “glow” after being in the presence of God all-the-time? You know the answer...

Luke 2:8 gives it to us! “The glory of the Lord shone around them”! Why? Clearly, the angels of God brought God’s glory with them into our time and space in the moment!

But there’s something else we need to consider when we think about “the glory of the Lord.” The glory of the Lord indeed shone around the shepherds on the hills that night via the angels, but far more importantly, the Glory of the Lord was shining brightly in the stable itself! In fact, in the stable, the glory of the Lord shone most brightly that first Christmas in the person of the Baby Jesus! Of course I don’t mean that the Baby Jesus was Himself glowing, or even that He had one of those “dish-plate-halos” that are so prevalent in medieval art! No, the glory of the Lord was that our God is a God who indeed comes to His children...“Immanuel, God with us”... but when He comes, He comes to save! The glory of the Lord and the grace and mercy and everlasting peace of the Lord, was cuddled-up in a manger that first Christmas night! In the person of the Lord Jesus the true glory of the Lord shone ‘round about all who would come into contact with Him and in particular, for all those who would receive His grace and mercy and peace for themselves! And you know what I mean, don’t you? You too have seen the glory of the Lord as you’ve been brought to faith in Jesus and have been taken over by Him who is “the Light of the World” (John 8:12). He has illuminated your heart and mind; He has brought you to saving faith. Most importantly, He has given you the opportunity to experience what Moses and the shepherds were privileged to see...the fullness and majesty of the glory of the Lord in heaven itself!

Day Eleven—December 7th

“Heavenly Choir”

Read Luke 2:13,14 and Matthew 5:14-16

Here at Gloria Dei we are genuinely blessed with a plethora of extremely talented musicians and vocalists for our six worship service time-slots. In both the Family Life Center, with the contemporary services, and in the Worship Center (Sanctuary) and the more traditional services, we have dozens and dozens of very musically talented people who love to lead us in worship. For our members, one of the favorite set of vocalists is the main choir which sings exclusively in the Worship Center/Sanctuary. There are a lot of them, and even better, they are amazingly talented and incredibly strong vocalists. Let's put it this way, when they sing, you know it! In fact, last Easter when they performed the “Hallelujah Chorus” for us, the ceiling seemed to lift off the building and the congregation was absolutely stunned over what they heard. As the congregation gathered themselves, applause shortly erupted and it was applause that was well deserved!

But I make mention of our musicians because they actually have a singular purpose in mind with their “performances”. I think you understand why I wrote “performances”, don't you? You see, while we may define what they do with the word “performance”...we know that it's not a “performance” at all. Our musicians don't gather to “perform”, they gather to lead...and when they gather to lead, they do so with an eye to leading people into worshipping Jesus through their work on our behalf. They are not doing what they do for applause...even if we choose to give it to them. They are not doing what they do for a show...even if their quality makes it seem as such. No, they are doing what they do to move you and me from simply being stirred by the music and lyrics, to being drawn into worshipping the one true Lord of the Universe through their worship and lyrics.

Not surprisingly then, our choirs simply follow in the footsteps of the heavenly choir so many years ago! The angel choir on Bethlehem's hills had exactly that same goal in mind that first Christmas night so long ago. They came to glorify God...note that's what they sang. They came to point to Jesus...note that's then why they sang. The angel of the Lord proclaims "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:10-12). And the very next thing we read...? "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest...'" (Luke 2:13). Notice, they were moved to praise, but moved to praise at the proclamation of the Christ! And what were they moved to say when they broke out in praise for the Christ-child? None other than, "Glory to God in the highest...". Indeed, glory to God! The heavenly choir were in no way pointing to themselves or performing for accolades, but simply praising God for His love found in Jesus and glorifying God for His saving work in our world!

And of course, I mention all of that, because what the heavenly choir did so long ago and what our choir does on a regular basis, reminds us of our lives in Christ every day, whether we sing in the choir or not! Every Christian "sings praises" to God for sending His Son, and we do so everyday by the way that we live for Him! As we live for Him we seek to honor and glorify our Lord with everything we have and everything we do as we submit our lives to His rule and reign! We indeed, each one of us, become participants in the "heavenly chorus" as every Christian does their part to step out of the way, glorifying God and pointing others to to the Christ-Child Jesus!

Day Twelve—December 8th

“All People?”

Read Luke 2:8-14 (again) and 1Timothy 2:1-7

I think you know it's an understatement to say “There are a lot of people on our planet”. When you stop to think about just how many people are walking around this “terra firma” it's genuinely a blow-mind. There are, by most counts, somewhere near eight-billion people inhabiting our God-given home at this point in time. When I say that, remember that “one-billion” is actually a-thousand-million, so that means there's more than eight-thousand-million people living on this planet! That's a lot of people!

Sadly though, in that mix of humanity, only about two-billion of those are followers of Jesus or Christians. You can do the math...that's only about 25% of the present world-wide population that will be in heaven forever with Jesus...the rest will not. Admittedly then, one of the more difficult things about being a Christian living on this bulging planet, is that so many people we know and love will remain unmoved by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel...so many people world-wide will never experience faith in Jesus as we do and therefore spend eternity apart from Him. Do we want all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth? Absolutely! Does God want all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth? Yes, He does, 1Timothy 2:1-7 says so. But our Lord also knows, better than we, that not everyone will be.

Having said that, our angel in the Luke 2 reading says something interesting about Jesus' birth. Luke 2:10 reads this way: “And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for...all the people.’” Wait...did you read that closely? “Good news” and “great joy” for “ALL the people”? We know Christ's birth

is good news, but would it really be “good news” for “ALL the people”? Would it be a “great joy” for “ALL the people”? Well, the way to look at it is this: The good news is good news even if some people won’t receive that good news and make it their own. A person’s opinion or rejection of the good news of the Gospel of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus doesn’t thereby make it bad news. But we also need to remember that when Jesus came into our world, He indeed came for ALL people. The most amazing part of God’s amazing grace is that the Lord Jesus came to give us His mercy by giving His life...for ALL. 1John 2:2 reminds us of that fact when the Apostle John writes “He is the propitiation (payment) for our sins, and not for ours only but also...for the sins of the whole world.” Notice that when Jesus came into our world He did so with a singular purpose and that was to be the payment for sins. But when He came as the payment for sins, He did so for every human being that would ever live on this planet! In other words, this is good news because the Lord Jesus was willing to die for people who would never believe in Him or trust Him as their Savior! Jesus wasn’t selective when He came into our world. Jesus wasn’t here for some and not for others. Indeed, Jesus came for ALL and therefore His birth was most certainly, “Good news of great joy for ALL the people!” Christ’s birth was indeed good news...good news of the Lord and Savior who wants ALL to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth! And so as you and I live as one-person among eight-billion...we are to remember what He wants and take His salvation to all...take His “good news” to all...that they may find Jesus as their Savior and have “great joy” both now and forevermore!

Day Thirteen—December 9th

“The Lord is with You”

Luke 1:26-38 and Romans 3:23,24

As we walk through our world and experience the often frightening things that come our way, we want to know, without a doubt, that God is on our side, that God is with us. When we witness horrifying crimes in our neighborhoods and cities; when we experience frightening politics and ideologies; when we hear of out-of-control and often deadly addictions; when we see where our world seems to be heading, now more than ever... we want to know that God is not only good, but that our good-God is for us! Even more than that however, we also want our Lord to be with us... genuinely, tangibly with us! We want our Lord with us in every way and every day, all the way up until that day that we cross from this broken-life and into everlasting-life where He is with us forever in heaven itself!

In order to get at that truth in fullness however, we need to consider what was said to Mary in our text from Luke chapter one. The angel Gabriel himself comes to Mary and announces “Greetings, O favored one...the Lord is with you!” Luke 1:28. Now, some will interpret those words to mean that there was something so amazing about Mary that the Lord simply couldn’t live without her service to humanity in bearing the Christ-child. And...I understand why people think that. After all, Gabriel does say to Mary in verse thirty “...you have found favor with God”...so I can see why people would consider Mary someone special. And indeed, she was.

But I would simply ask, if Mary was “special” or “favored”, what was it about her that merited those titles? We shouldn’t be ambivalent to the fact that the Lord indeed chose Mary above all other women. We shouldn’t dismiss the fact that the Lord chose this specific virgin-girl from Nazareth to be the bearer of His one and only Son. But was it something about Mary that caused the Lord to be with her, or was it something about God Himself instead? I think you know the answer to that question, right? Mary, while she was the mother of our Lord Jesus, was just like all other people on the earth. In other words, Mary was a sinner in the sight of God just like everyone else is. Romans three is very clear: “...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” Romans 3:23. Mary was most certainly a part of the “all” included in the “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”! Mary was a sinner...just like you and me...just like all human beings.

So...what was it that drove Gabriel to say she was “highly favored” and proclaim that the Lord was with her? Well, though the Lord certainly saw Mary as a sinner...the Lord also saw who Mary would be in the future! Though she doesn’t seem to have been pregnant when Gabriel came to her, our Lord and God, who lives outside of time and space, nonetheless saw Mary as the bearer of the Christ even before she was “overshadowed by the Holy Spirit”. Let that soak in a for a second. What Gabriel was proclaiming to Mary was most likely based on the fact that the Lord already knew that Mary would become pregnant with Jesus by the Holy Spirit. His proclamation of her “highly favored” status could have been based on what God knew ahead of time, that which He would bring about in her life and complete through her life, as she not only bore His only begotten Son, but mothered Him from infancy and into manhood.

In fact, to help you with that, let me give you not just Romans 3:23 but also 3:24 along with it: “...all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God... and...are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” In terms of our Lord’s mother, she was given an amazing gift through the indwelling presence of the Lord Jesus, the Christ-child. Even though she was a sinner, God came to her and dwelt inside her body as she carried Jesus for forty weeks in her womb and then raised him into His ministry years. All of that was indeed a beautiful gift for Mary and caused her to not only be “favored”, but “highly favored” since the Lord was with her.

But her experience as both sinner and bearer of the Christ then also points directly to us! We are sinners and bearers of the Christ too! We all fall into the same category as Mary and Romans three applies to each one of us: “... all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”. Because that’s true about us, because we are sinners saved by the gift of grace, the Lord has blessed us with His very-real-presence in our bodies. We too are then seen by Him as “highly favored” and He is most certainly “with us always, even to the very end of the age” as Jesus would say it in Matthew 28. As you walk through this crazy existence in this broken world and experience things that cause you to wonder...know without a doubt that through faith in the Christ-child, “the Lord is with you” and will be in you both now, and forevermore!

Day Fourteen—December 10th

“That’s Impossible!”

Read Luke 1:34-38 (again)

When it comes to church-work, I’ve always taught my staff and the members of the congregations I’ve served, that we never say “We can’t do that!”, but instead ask “What can we do?” If there’s a certain innovative ministry we want to launch, we don’t say “We can’t do that!”, but we ask “What can we do?” If there’s a need for a building to be built we don’t say “We can’t do that!”, we ask “What can we do?” If there’s a ministry position we need to hire for...well you get the idea...we ask “What can we do?” The reason I insist on asking the question “What can we do?” is that the question removes the defeatist attitude present in many congregations, and gets at some solution for the need or the problem. Further, in the midst of searching for an answer to the need or the problem, asking the question “What can we do?” is an admission that there are limitations to what we are able to do. Can we launch an innovative ministry? Yes, we can...but with limitations. Can we build a building or hire for a new position? Yes, we can...but with limitations. We don’t have to be defeatists saying “We can’t do that!” but we also can avoid being wild-hares spending money we do not have and launching programs and staffing we cannot justify nor support.

Having said that, in the midst of that realism regarding our limitations as we serve God, we do have to admit, that nothing is impossible for the God we serve...He has no limitations! Yes, there are limitations on what we can do...but there are no limitations on what God can do! In His Word the Lord proved Himself over and over again to be a God who surmounts impossibilities...and our text for today is a great example of that very thing! In verse thirty-six Gabriel is helping Mary to understand the unlimited nature of God’s plan and power. To get at that, this messenger of God points out Mary’s kin-folks saying “Behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.” Notice that Gabriel first reminds Mary of the miracle of a man and a woman, Zechariah and Elizabeth, having a baby in their “old age”. You understand the miracle of it. Think about hearing that your seventy-five year old grandmother was pregnant...okay, stop

giggling if you are yourself a seventy-five year old...because you'd fully understand the miraculous nature of that happening, right? More than that however, stop and take notice that Elizabeth wasn't just an old woman but according to verse thirty-six above, she was also "barren"...unable to have children! So, in a very real sense, a resurrection of sorts happened in the life of Zechariah and Elizabeth as they were given life where there was no hope for life...and I think you understand this but let me remind you...only God can do that because as Gabriel says it, "nothing is impossible for God"!

But wait...there's more! A barren, elderly woman having a baby was evidence of God's all-powerful nature...but the Lord would one-up that amazing gift! You see, even if God gave the elderly pair a baby, He still used biology as the conduit for that miraculous event. I'll say it plainly: John the Baptist was a miraculous moment for the "Zech and Liz", but they nonetheless conceived John in the normal husband and wife way! But not so with Mary! In a sense, they look like "samsies miracles" to us at first...but they are not! To begin with, there was no biology involved in Mary's conception of Jesus. No Joseph...as everyone would have thought. No Roman Soldier...as some would espouse. No biology at all! Only theology at work here ladies and gentlemen! And that theology included not only a miraculous conception in the womb of a woman who had "never known a man", but the miraculously conceived Child was in fact, God Himself in the womb of a young virgin-girl named Mary! Immanuel, God with us, was indeed "with us", in the body of His mother Mary! Amazing? Yep. Impossible? Sounds like it. But no, nothing is impossible for God!

And while I have you...let me remind you that nothing is impossible for God...including saving sinners like you and me! We may think at times that we're beyond God's reach...but we're not. We may think at times that we're too sinful for Him...but we're not. We may even think at times that it's impossible for a person like you to be in heaven forever with God...but it's not! And it's not, because...thank you Jesus...nothing is impossible for God, including saving us from sin, death and the power of the devil through His Son's birth into our world! He miraculously gave children long ago and He continues to miraculously make us His children yet today!

Day Fifteen—December 11th

“God in the Flesh?”

Read Luke 1:26-27

As mentioned in yesterday’s devotion, the fact that Mary was a virgin when she became pregnant with Jesus was part and parcel of the mighty-miracle of Jesus our Lord coming into our world. Only God could perform such an amazing miracle! Only God could grant pregnancy to a young woman who not only wasn’t married, but who had also, as I said it yesterday, “never known a man”. But today I’d like to remind you that there’s another very important reason behind Mary’s virgin-status when she became pregnant with the Lord Jesus.

To get at the import of this truth, let me first remind you of the best way to think of our Lord’s conception in the womb of Mary. When we consider the Lord Jesus being Mary’s baby, it’s best to simply say that God placed Himself in the womb of a virgin. Let me say that again, God placed Himself in the womb of a virgin. Odd thought...so let me help you with that: Many years ago I enjoyed watching the television show called “Star Trek Next Generation”. Of course as a child of the 60’s, I grew up faithfully watching William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy, as Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock (respectively) on the first generation of Star Trek. The “Next Generation” then simply carried on my love for Star Trek with a whole new cast of characters. One of those characters was a woman on Captain Picard’s staff who was known as “Counselor Troi”. In a very memorable episode, Counselor Troi was shown asleep in her pod but as she quietly slept, an alien-life-form enters her chamber through the hull of the ship as a tiny-ball-of-light. The brilliant little light-sphere (and space-alien) then passes through her covers (and through her body) and causes her to become pregnant with the space-alien itself...who ends up being rather harmless by the way.

With that illustration and image in mind, remember what Gabriel said to Mary in Luke 1:35, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” I know...I know...I am indeed transitioning from the goofy show known as Star Trek, to the eternal gospel and

the sinless Son of God...but yes...what happened to Counselor Troi in that episode of Next Generation is indeed great imagery to bring understanding regarding what happened to Mary. Jesus, the light of the world, literally placed Himself in the womb of a young woman named Mary. Read that again because it's important...Jesus, the light of the world, placed Himself in the womb of a young woman named Mary. So, that's the fact of it...but what's the even-deeper import of it?

Well, while it's important to note that Jesus was fully human...His time in Mary's womb proves that...it's equally important to remember that He was nonetheless also fully God. He was indeed fully God, the God who has the power to place Himself in womb of a virgin girl! And please understand, this truth is vitally important for all that the Bible teaches about Jesus and all that we then believe about Him as well. Jesus being God-incarnate, or God-in-the-flesh, was a must! Jesus had to be fully human to die, but Jesus also had to be fully God to be able atone for the sins of the world. You see, Jesus wasn't just "a sacrifice" or "a substitute" for our sins, Jesus was "the perfect sacrifice" and "the perfect substitute", for our sins and He was so because He was God...in the flesh! John the Baptist would say "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" in John 1:29, but there's only one way that statement could be true, only one way He could be the "Lamb of God" who can "take away" sins. If Jesus was a mere man then in the Bible we would be reading a tragedy regarding His life and death and...well...there would be no resurrection. But since He was indeed God and God in the flesh, He could be the perfect sacrifice to atone for the sins of the whole world...and yes, rise from the dead on the third day as well. Since He was God in the flesh, thanks be to God, He could be what John the Baptist claimed Him to be...namely, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

And that my friends, is the mightiest miracle of all. God came to us. God came in the flesh. But God came to us in the flesh so that He could live, die and rise again...for sinners like you and me! In fact, we can celebrate at Christmas because it could be said, "God came in the flesh so that in my flesh I might come to God!"

Day Sixteen—December 12th
“I Am The Lord’s Servant”
Read Luke 1:38

One of the more crucial aspects of our faith in Jesus is often one of the more overlooked and sometimes even ignored, aspects of our faith. We love and embrace what Jesus has done for us, and we should! We hold dear to the fact that Jesus not only died for our sins but rose again for our justification, or to make us right in the sight of God. We effectively run to the altar to receive the gift of His forgiveness through His body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. We read His living and active Word as it reminds us of His grace and guides us through our days. But as I asked on Day Nine of this devotion booklet...what is our response to all that love and grace and mercy given by the Lord Jesus? I guess I should ask you that directly...what is your response to God’s love and grace and mercy given in Jesus Christ?

As you think about your answer, let me hold up as an example, our lovely-lady-hero found here in the Christ-story. Mary is such an amazing person...and I think I can confidently say that based on this one verse from Luke’s first chapter. Think about it: Gabriel does an information dump, admittedly at Mary’s request. The mighty Angel gives her the low-down on what will happen to her and what will then happen through her as she is used by God to bring His sinless-Son into the world. Had to have been an overwhelming moment for her. Had to have been a blow-mind to say the least. There were likely feelings of deep trepidation in her heart. There were likely butterflies in her stomach over what was to come. What would she tell her betrothed, Joseph about this pregnancy? What would she tell her protective parents about the same? How would she handle the ridiculing neighbors and skeptical friends? If you stop and think about being a fourteen or fifteen year-old girl in a strict cultural setting, you’ll

quickly realize that this had to have been a terribly up-ending moment for the Lord's mother.

So, what was her response to all this? Did Mary tell Gabriel "There's got to be a mistake here!"? Did she say, "I'm not your gal...you should probably look for someone else!"? Did she tell him she was very busy and didn't have time to be the bearer of the Christ? No, no she didn't. We'll give her all the aforementioned upsetting feelings, and even more, right? We'll agree that she may have even felt like she should hide from the Holy Spirit before He was able to give her Jesus! But she didn't, did she? Mary proved herself to be the woman of God we hold her up to be. Mary didn't run from God, instead, when God called her into an amazing and frightening service in His name, she simply said "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Amazing. Beautiful. Incredible. And indeed... inspiring as well.

And I say "inspiring" because her response is to be our response too! She inspires us and she shows us the way we are to live in our relationship with the Lord. Are there things the Lord will ask of you that are difficult? Yes. Are there things the Lord will lead you to and through that make you want to run from Him? Yes. But knowing the lengths to which He went to bring you to salvation and the lengths to which He goes every day to keep you in that salvation...His love and mercy changes everything! The lengths to which He went to save us from sin, death and the power of the devil moves and motivates how we respond in service to Him all our lives. Every day and in every way then, our response to His call to saving-faith and call-to-duty is simply to use the words of Mary herself... "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

Day Seventeen—December 13th

“God Breaks In”

Read Matthew 1:18-25

As an adult, one of the things that you just have to get used to is an interruption of your plans. You might have all sorts of ideas about how things are going to go down during the day, but inevitably something will interject itself into your situation. Might be the kids. Might be the boss. Might be traffic. Might be...just about anything! You have a direction you believe you are headed and here comes something breaking in.

Our text for today about Joseph reminds us that sometimes it's God who is breaking in! Clearly from our text, Joseph found out about Mary's pregnancy. Clearly Mary, who had her own visitation from Gabriel, shared the information given her with her betrothed Joseph. And after being given that information, all of us then understand Joseph's response to Mary's "Holy Spirit pregnancy". We might not like the idea of divorce, and yes, betrothal would have required that level of response, but we'd understand why Joseph would have considered it. To be sure we'd want Joseph to stay with Mary but we'd also get it, especially in the culture of the day. You can almost read Joseph's mind here: "Yeah...right...the HOLY SPIRIT made you pregnant...that's a convenient excuse Mary!" We'd get it...divorce sounds reasonable. But though Joseph had plans for that very thing...God broke in and intervened in those plans.

When I was a young man I wanted to be a "businessman just like my father." I put that in quotation marks because I actually said that very thing one Sunday morning to my seventh-grade Sunday School teacher Mr. Swartling. Mr. Swartling was such a godly man and such a wonderful Christian influence in my life, but he was also a beacon of patience for me as he'd listen to me tell him of my future plans. Fast forward then

to when I was seventeen. I'd had a major car accident but I'd also had a wake-up call about my mortality. I therefore declared to my mother "I'm going back to church"...and so I did. The first Sunday I stepped back on the property after being gone for four long years, I immediately ran into none other than Mr. Swartling...in fact, he was the very first person I ran into! And yes, I ran into him because God had a plan! He greeted me warmly, hugged my neck and made me feel at home...made me feel as if I'd come home or even never left! He then said something that seemed so random and so out-of-place. Mr. Swartling asked me "Joe, would you like to teach Sunday School?" Wait...what? I was a wild-child. I was out-of-control. I was gone shortly after confirmation and didn't come back to worship or anything else for four-full-years...I wasn't exactly the model Sunday School teacher! But God was breaking into my life and did so through the person known as Mr. Swartling. God was breaking in and furthermore moved my response to Mr. Swartling's request and so I simply said "Yes, yes I would." Most of you have heard me tell that story, but I want you to be amazed by that story nonetheless. You see, I started teaching seventh-grade Sunday School of all things and that led to me being asked to be the 4th-6th grade youth-worker...I not only took that position, but since then, Fall of 1979 that is, I've been working for churches in one capacity or another ever since. Let me remind you again...God breaks into our lives!

God broke into Joseph's life two millennia ago. God broke into this Joseph's life 43 years ago. God will break-into your life too. He's created you and saved you and has a purpose and a plan for your life. What's He saying to you today? What's He trying to do for you today? What's He trying to do through you today? Listen for His voice. Watch for His direction. Follow His lead. Your plans will likely be interrupted...but when God breaks-in, it's always better than what you had planned!

Day Eighteen—December 14th

“That’s My Boy!”

Read Matthew 1:18-25

One of the great gifts given to us who are fathers is our sons. Don’t get me wrong, there are definite and deep connections between dads and daughters, but there’s something different and special between a father and a son. When our kids were little I remember saying to our third son Jon Mark, “You’re my boy Jon!” and Jon Mark would always respond “You’re my boy too Papa!” Very special stuff. He was “my boy”! He was, along with his brothers, a delightful gift from our Lord to this “papa’s” heart. Fathers want their boys to follow in their footsteps and that was my hope for our sons. Fathers want their boys to look up to them and emulate them too...and again, that was my hope for our sons. Likely, even if you’re not a parent, you can understand quite well what I’m saying.

But I say all of that to take you back to Nazareth and the life that Jesus and Joseph would have had together. Joseph likely felt about Jesus the same way we feel about our sons. Even at the hearing of the angel’s explanation of who Jesus was, Joseph likely had a father’s heart for his as-yet unborn Son. Joseph likely then looked at Jesus and endearingly said something akin to “That’s my boy!” as he proudly put his arm around the Lord. Likely then, Joseph wanted Jesus to follow in his footsteps. Likely, Joseph wanted Jesus to look up to him and therefore to emulate him as well. And of course, Jesus would do that very thing. Jesus would, to an extent, follow in Joseph’s footsteps at least initially.

But we know that Jesus had another Father, His Heavenly Father. We know Jesus had one, true Father that is. Jesus would indeed follow in His Heavenly Father’s footsteps and Jesus would in fact emulate His merci

ful Heavenly Father as well. You know that's true because of what is said about this baby boy that would be born to Mary and Joseph. Notice in verse twenty-one that the angelic-vision-visitor to Joseph says "...you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save His people from their sins." Jesus' name, Yeshua, means "God saves" and so God would save in the person of Jesus His Son. Would Jesus be a builder like Joseph? I think we can say unequivocally that He was since Mark six seems to attribute that trade not only to Joseph (Matthew 13:55) but to Jesus too. Did He look up to Joseph and emulate him? Yes, I think we can presume that the Lord who gave us those feelings also lived those feelings with His own earthly dad. But Jesus did not come to build. Jesus did not come as the Son of the carpenter or a carpenter Himself. Jesus came to save! Jesus came as God's beloved Son and did so for a singular purpose, namely, to "save His people from their sins." In fact, "That's my boy" would essentially be said by the Heavenly Father about Jesus..."this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17), indicating that Jesus came to do His Heavenly Father's work.

But because of that truth...because Jesus came to "save His people from their sins"...our Heavenly Father says the same about you and me. John wrote this in the first chapter of his Gospel: "...to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" John 1:12,13. You are His son! You are His daughter! Following in His footsteps to be sure. Following Him and doing His will every day. But by faith in Jesus and baptism into His name, He proudly calls you His child! Because of Jesus and His finished work in your life, the Heavenly Father can say "That's my boy!" or better for our purposes, from Scripture, He says about Jesus and He says about you..."This is my beloved (child) with whom I am well pleased". Thank you Jesus for following in your Father's footsteps...thank you Jesus for causing us to do the same!

Day Nineteen—December 15th

“What Did He Build?”

Read Matthew 1:18-25

As mentioned in yesterday’s devotion, Mark six seems to say that Jesus Himself was a carpenter. We know that Joseph was because Matthew thirteen tells us that and the presumption would be that Jesus would indeed follow in His earthly father’s footsteps...see yesterday’s devotion for that. But the question would be...what did Jesus build?

Well, the word in Greek doesn’t mean “carpenter” specifically, but actually means “a person in the building trade.” Remember that there weren’t a whole lot of trees in Nazareth or the surrounding towns and cities. In fact, you’d be hard pressed to find a lot of trees, other than olive trees, in the whole region. Likely, Jesus and Joseph were stone masons, for lack of a better term. They worked with the materials that they did have at hand and that would be the abundance of rocks, which they then turned into building blocks through the skilled hands of our Lord and his dad. So, they built houses and other structures but did so out of rock.

But I bring this idea up for a second day, because I want to remind you what Jesus actually did come into our world to build. Why did God send His Son to Mary and Joseph? You could answer “To build”. Why did God send His Son to the virgin girl and her betrothed stone mason? To build. Why did God send His Son into the world at all? To be sure, “...to save His people from their sins” we read, but He also came to build. Yes, as mentioned yesterday, “Yeshua” or Jesus means “God saves” and so that’s what He came to do when He placed Himself in Mary’s womb. But in bringing God’s salvation to us, He also came to build...but the “structure” He came to build was His Church! The Apostle Peter wrote this: “...

you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” 1Peter 2:5. Jesus came to build His church with “living stones” and those “living stones” are you and me and every other Christian that has ever lived!

Interestingly though, He continues to build with “living stones” long after His ascension into heaven. As children of our Heavenly Father, we follow His footsteps and as we do we are used by Him to continue to build the Church yet today! Of course God gets all the credit because He does all the work (see 1Corinthians 3:5-11)! But you and I, just like all the disciples of Jesus for two millennia, are used by God to bring Jesus to people and people to Jesus, thereby building the church, stone-by-precious-stone! What Jesus built through the disciples who went before us, He continues to build each day through the disciples of Jesus in 2022!

Day Twenty—December 16th

“In the Beginning?”

Read John 1:1-5

One of the more difficult concepts to understand about our Lord and Savior lies in the name by which we call Him, namely, “Jesus—Christ”. The reason it can be an enigma for people is that in truth, those are two distinctly and separate “things” brought together in one name and unified forever in One Person. You see, “Christ” is actually His title, and not His last name...and yes, I know that you knew that...and that you’re rolling your eyes because you understood it already. But let me then remind of the import of the title “Christ” and what it tells us about Jesus. The “Christ” in “Jesus Christ”, reminds us that He is in fact God from all time and eternity, with no beginning and no ending. “Christ” has always existed and always will exist. “Christ” is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit and has been forever. “Christ” is then indivisible in His Trinitarian union with the Father and the Spirit. Because of His Trinitarian union then, “Christ” was in fact our God who was “in the beginning” of creation as John tells us in our text from John one.

But when it comes to the name “Jesus” in “Jesus Christ”, we have something completely different. “Jesus” indeed had a beginning. “Jesus” was the flesh-guy conceived in the womb of Mary. “Jesus” was the baby-boy given to that pair so long ago. “Jesus” was indeed, “the carpenter’s son” as we read just yesterday. Let me say it again then, “Jesus” had a beginning. And John’s readers and his contemporaries would have known that part of the story all too well. They would have known that He grew up in Nazareth. They would have known that He was Mary and Joseph’s “kid”. They would have known the “flesh-guy” and as in the case of the disciples, perhaps known that “flesh-guy” quite well.

What they needed to know however, was that this “guy” named Jesus that had a beginning, was also the Christ who was “In the beginning.”

What John is telling his readers is that this Jesus that you know so well, is also the beyond-all-knowing-God of creation. This Jesus was “in the beginning” when He Himself spoke the world into being! This Jesus was at creation as God’s Spirit “hovered over the waters” as recorded in Genesis one! This Jesus was also the One who brought out all the stars and created all that inhabits the heavens! This Jesus is the God who put creation in its place and this Jesus is the God who holds it tight in His Almighty hands! Paul would write these words about this truth: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together” Colossians 1:15-17.

And that is indeed, a wonderful word for you and me too! We need to remember that our Lord is both Jesus and The Christ! The Lord Jesus whom we love so much, is not just “the little lord Jesus asleep in the hay”, but is in fact, “the little LORD Jesus asleep in the hay.” He came in humility and servanthood, but He came to live, die and rise again for us and to this day, sits in His rightful place at the right hand of God as the Bible says it. Let me personalize it for you: Jesus isn’t just the “flesh-guy”, but as you go through this life and struggle, you can remember and hold fast to the truth that He is also the God of creation who can manage your life every day. Jesus isn’t just the “flesh-guy”, but is in fact the God of the universe who loves you more than life itself and proved it at the cross for you and can therefore manage your eternity as well! He was “in the beginning”...to be sure. He was in Bethlehem’s stable...we know it’s true. But He was so, so that you and I could one day leave this creation He designed for us, and be in an even “better place” than He made in the beginning...be with Him in heaven forever!

Day Twenty-One—December 17th

“Walking in the Light”

Read John 1:1-5 and 1John 1:5-7

Most of you know I like to watch television shows that are significantly deeper than the average sitcom can possibly provide. I'm afraid my love for learning drives and dictates what I will allow into my cranium through the medium known as “the idiot-box” or television. If I'm going to sit and watch something on TV, I want to learn something new or grow in my understanding of something I'm already familiar with. What that means is that I most often watch documentary type shows, but I'll also watch shows that, in a manner of speaking, take me to places I've never been.

Once such show is called “The Last Alaskans”. Explaining this show in total would require too much space, so suffice to say, there are seven families who will be the “Last Alaskans” allowed to live in what is called the “Arctic National Wildlife Refuge”. In 1980, the Federal Government cut off all new human habitation in the refuge where they live, so the seven families that already had permits could stay, but no one else could ever come and live there after that.

But I gotta tell you...I don't know why they would want to...or even why the seven families that live there are staying there! I'm all about the outdoors and making my own way, and even the amazing freedom afforded by the lifestyle they live, but their lives lived-out-there are ridiculous! By all accounts of the families living there, it's an extremely difficult way of life and that's putting it mildly. They have no stores...no roads...no outside contact apart from occasional bush-planes and pilots bringing some needed supplies. There's no easy, laid-back “cabin life” here, but instead, one of constant hunting, incessant gathering and often, absolute sheer survival. The worst thing in my opinion however? On top of all their daily struggles and aforementioned “chores”, these folks also live in almost six months of complete darkness! From some time in October until some time in March, these “Last Alaskans” live without the sun and therefore hunt, gather and survive in the dark! They live in that darkness day after day just hoping for the light of the sun to come back into their lives! Imagine how depressing that must be! Imagine how difficult that must become! Walking in darkness...just hoping for light!

Here enters our text and the “Light” and “darkness” of John chapter one. John’s words from John 1:4,5 describe light and darkness, but his words here remind that this “Light” and this “darkness” are far greater than that found in the arctic or anywhere else! John’s words in this first chapter of his Gospel remind us that there is in fact a spiritual/eternal “Light” and an spiritual/eternal “darkness”...a darkness that I think you’d agree is far more frightening an encounter than living without the sun for half the year! The darkness John is describing can frighten and depress us far more than any sunless day ever could...and perhaps, since it is eternal darkness, it should!

So, in this world that is not just sunless at times and therefore physically dark, but where there is also a deep spiritual darkness, John’s words remind us that the Babe of Bethlehem comes to dispel all darkness in our lives! As we see the wickedness in our world, we therefore hold onto and remember what John wrote, namely, “...in Him was life and His life was the light of men”! But we also remember the amazing truth of the next verse as John 1:5 reads “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Jesus came to conquer our darkness! Jesus came to claim victory over all our darkness! As we live in this broken, sin-torn world and experience the darkness on display in the lives of so many including our own, we nonetheless live in the victorious light that our Lord and Savior Jesus brought to us when He was born into our world! We remember that Jesus, the Light of the world, has defeated and continues to defeat this world’s darkness for us and we remember that the darkness cannot, can never, will never...overcome Him or His light in our lives! The Christ-child whose birth was marked by the brilliance of a star and the glorious light heaven itself through the angels, was in fact the Bearer of God’s light for our sin-darkened world!

So, one last thought: I’ve seen a couple episodes of “The Last Alaskans” where they experience the sun returning to their lives in the spring. I am amazed how these folks go from seemingly down and dreary and depressed, to excited and energized and ready to live fully every day with the advent of the light in their lives. And so it should be for us Christian! We have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of Light. We have been given the “Light of life” through our Lord and Savior of Bethlehem’s stable. And so every day we too should be excited and energized and ready to live for the Lord Jesus who is our life and our light both now, and forevermore!

Day Twenty-Two—December 18th

“What are you doing here?”

Read John 1:9-14

One of the more comical things about being a Pastor is when I run into people in places where they simply don't expect to see me. I'll be out at Walmart buying groceries and run into members of Gloria Dei and they not only miss seeing me completely, but when I reach out and say “Hi”, they are typically surprised...because angels deliver our groceries of course...right?. This kind of thing happens at Christmas with a Cause every year. Each year when Robin and I are “vendors” at CWAC, people come to our booth and are taken back when they realize it's me. This year it must have happened twenty times at least! People came to our mission-kiosk and found me at a high-top table making para-cord-bracelets and initially did not recognize me. Several people commented that it was strange for them because I was wearing “civilian clothes” and some even said to me “What are you doing here?” while pointing towards the Sanctuary as to where I really belonged on a Sunday morning!

Imagine then something a-hundred-million times more difficult to believe and understand...namely, when, so to speak, God showed up at Walmart...God came into our world! Talk about out of place! As we've explored before in this devotional booklet, Jesus was indeed “Immanuel” and therefore was in fact, God and not just God, but God with us! John writes about Jesus not only being Creator God but that when He came He was so out of place that He was missed and missed completely by His children! John writes in chapter 1:9-11 “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” The Creator God showed up to earth and when He did His creation and creatures missed Him completely!

The Creator God and Redeemer of Israel came to the Israelites who had in their hands the Old Testament as a guide to His messianic arrival, and yet they missed Him completely too! Even if the world, and more specifically the Jews, had recognized the Lord they would have quickly asked “What are you doing here?”

But this is where the beautiful Gospel message comes into play! Our Lord and God had come to us before! Our Lord and God was in fact quite at home here on earth with us. In the Garden of Eden He walked with Adam and Eve and did so so regularly that they recognized His steps when He came to the Garden after the fall into sin (see Genesis 3:8). They heard God walking in the Garden in the cool of the day and they not only heard Him but recognized His presence because it had happened before and was in truth, what God always wanted! He wanted to be with us and be with us forever!

And so, as John writes it, “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world...He was in the world...”. Though our sin and sinfulness blinded our eyes to seeing our Lord when He came into the world as John writes, He came to open our eyes and bring us from abject darkness into His marvelous light (see 1Peter 2:9). Though the Jews, who had all the prophecies of the Christ, completely missed the coming of the Christ, He nonetheless came to open their eyes to “the true light” and give them the Messiah they’d longed for what seemed like “forever”. Our Lord who came to us in the Garden had come back to this place, had come back to us, to restore the relationship we once had with Him in the Garden...a relationship that was and then would, through Christ, be perfect and pure and personal. Our perfect Lord came into our imperfect world so that we could once again be restored to His! Our perfect Lord and God came to our imperfect world to retrieve and redeem and restore His children to the relationship He wanted us to have with Him all along! In fact, if you asked the Lord “What are you doing here?” His answer would simply be “I am here because of you...I am here for you!”

Day Twenty-Three—December 19th

“Born of God”

Read John 1:9-14 (again)

One of the reasons we Christians are pro-life is because we understand that a person doesn't decide to be born into this world...their parents don't even decide that they'll be born into this world...only God decides that life will happen. God is in fact the “Author of Life” and so He decides when and where a child will be born and furthermore has a plan and a purpose for their lives as a result.

What is true about our physical birth though, is also true of our spiritual birth as we are “born again” of water and the Spirit through faith in Jesus and the waters of our baptism. This is such a hard concept for people to grasp because many church-people believe the statement “I accepted Jesus”. This concept is an important reminder then that you did not “accept Jesus” but much better yet, Jesus accepted you! This truth about God and salvation is not only truly biblical but also gets at exactly how God works. The Bible is clear, He is the bringer of life...we are only the receivers of the life He brings. He is the bringer of life, both physical and spiritual, and we receive that life from Him and all we really do is give thanks for His intervention in our lives. But again, that's hard for us to wrap our minds around in an “I chose to do this” or “I chose to do that” society and culture. So where do we start in order to get at that truth?

There are likely many places in Scripture I could take you to help you understand this concept, but since this is an Advent devotional...there are perhaps none better than the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem's stable. Consider who was in the driver's seat of this marvelous story...consider who was running the show that first Christmas night! I know you know but...who was it? Well, did Mary and Joseph apply to be the parents of Jesus? Did the star self-generate and of its own power light up the night sky and furthermore, move to where Jesus was for the Magi to follow? Did the shepherds plan on being accosted by the angelic host as they slept under the heavens that night? Did the angels come into our time and space to announce and sing of the birth of Jesus of their own accord? Were the people of Bethlehem conspiring against Mary and Joseph so they had to

give birth in a humble-stable-fashion? You know that's all ridiculous! You know our Lord and Savior not only decided that all of this would happen, but He completely orchestrated the whole thing and did so exactly as He wanted it to come about!

Let me say it again then, God is the bringer of life...we are only the receivers of life...both physical and spiritual life are given by Him. It could be said, He is the orchestrator of life...period. Notice these beautiful words then, words spoken about Christian people: "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" John 1:12,13. Take note Christian person! Certainly take note that you are a child of God but take note why! You "received" Him. You were "born" or became His child "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man...but of God". Being born-again means being born not of blood or flesh, not of the will of man, but completely and wholly born-again of the Holy Spirit of God! Therefore, as again this year you consider Jesus being born into our world in Bethlehem's stable...consider your own born-again status brought to you by Him. He was born in this world according to the Father's timing and according to His Almighty plan! You were born-again according to the Father's timing and according to His Almighty plan as well! Thank you Jesus, we have been "Born of God!"

Day Twenty-Four—December 20th
“God’s Timing is Always Perfect”
Read Galatians 4:4-7

One of the more appropriate Christian sayings is found in the title of this devotion, namely, “God’s timing is always perfect!” Christian people tend to make things up about God and they do so to make them feel better about their lives...and to make them feel better about how their God works, as well. People say things like “God helps those who help themselves” to make them feel better...but that ain’t in the Bible. People will sometimes even abuse Scripture as they take verses out of context and make them pithy sayings rather than what God actually intended. Things like describing a beautiful morning with the words of Psalm 118 “This is the day the Lord has made let us rejoice and be glad in it”...but that verse is about the crucifixion of Jesus and not about a beautiful day. And you likely know many more pithy sayings and verses ripped out of context as they’ve shown up on Christian t-shirts, coffee cups and journal covers... and sold at a high price in Christian book stores mind you! But the seemingly pithy saying “God’s timing is always perfect!” is actually very, very Biblical and can be said loud and long any day of the week...or even put on t-shirts, cups and journals!

And I mention all of that because of what the Apostle Paul wrote here in this famous passage. Paul wrote by the power and at the direction of the Holy Spirit, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son...”. Now, it sounds as if history had been ambling and bumbling and stumbling along into the “fullness of time”, and when God saw that the “fullness of time had FINALLY come”, He quickly gathered His Son and sent Him into the world...but you know that’s ridiculous! You know that our Lord knew exactly how things would shake out in our world and He knew how they would shake out from all time and eternity. Beyond that, the history of the world was His to control as the Sovereign God...His to control and bring about the perfect timing for His Son to come!

Don't get me wrong, the sin and sinfulness, the death and degradation, none of that was His plan whatsoever but was our doing instead! But through all of that that mess which we brought to the world, the Lord worked history to be His-Story, bringing about the exact and perfect timing for the sending of the Christ-child into Bethlehem's stable!

And that truth about God and His Sovereignty is wonderful news about our wonderful God! You see, His perfect timing was designed to bring about the most perfect moment in history for the news of His Son, or His-Story, to be transmitted and brought to this imperfect world! Remember, at the heart all of this "perfect timing" discussion is the truth that "God so loved the world..." (John 3:16) and "God wants all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3). His perfect timing was driven by His deep, deep love of His children and the equally deep, deep desire He had to bring them back to Himself. His perfect timing was designed to bring His Gospel message to as many as He possible could! And so, He orchestrated history to indeed be His-Story and did so to bring His salvation to the world...or as Paul says it in Galatians 4:5, "...to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." God's perfect timing is very good news for a world dying in sin. God's perfect timing is very good news for every human being who would ever live! And for you and me, God's children who have been brought to saving faith in Jesus and given child-of-God-status through Jesus, we can most certainly proclaim loud and long "God's timing is always perfect!" Amen?

Day Twenty-Five—December 21st

“I am a Child of God!”

Read Galatians 4:4-7 (again)

I have been privileged to walk with many families through the process of adopting a child. Being brought in to advise parents as they seek this option and as well, to speak on their behalf as the agency checks them out, is such a huge honor for us as pastors! It's an incredibly exciting time in the lives of parents, parents that may simply want to add a child to an already existing kid-corps in their house, or more often, when a couple has struggled to get pregnant and simply want to start their family. Either way, it's a wonderful time for them as they look forward to what God has planned in their new baby boy or girl.

Of course, I've never adopted children myself, but I can unequivocally say that it's not just an exciting-time in the life of a young couple, but also a very, very difficult-time in the life of the couple too. To begin with, the paperwork the parents must go through to procure an adoption feels like it's enough to max-out a terabyte hard drive. The interviews are thorough and painstaking and the background check is extensive and invasive. And then...there's the cost. We knew a couple that laid out tens of thousands of dollars to adopt their daughter from China and I think you realize it's not any cheaper in the United States. Adoption is exciting to be sure, no question about it, but for the parents, adoption is also an extremely taxing and very difficult process and yes, sometimes even a horribly painful experience too. Parents willingly submit themselves to all of this however, to adopt and to love and to nurture a son or daughter of their own.

But for the child? Oh, for the child...adoption is amazingly wonderful! There's no cost to them...only an incredibly rich benefit from a couple who desperately loves them sight unseen! There's no pain for them... only untold excitement and wondrous joy over the new life they're being given! There's no difficulty for adoptee...only the reception of the deep

love and the new life found in their adoptive parents and family.

Here enters our text from Galatians four. Paul writes “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” Galatians 4:4,5. As we discovered in yesterday’s devotion, God’s perfect timing was in play when “in the fullness of time” He sent His Son into the world that we might be adopted as His sons and daughters. God’s intervention in our lives was accomplished in His timing but also... in His way. And what was His way? Well, you understand that Jesus came into Bethlehem’s stable as a cute, little, baby-boy...we love this story! But you also understand that the stable and Christmas and the beauty of the moment and the excitement of Mary and Joseph, would ultimately be replaced by the immeasurable pain and terrible difficulty and a heavy price which Jesus would pay! And let me remind you, the immeasurable pain, terrible difficulty, and heavy price Jesus would pay...was all willingly experienced by Him in order to affect our adoption as His sons and daughters! He wanted us that badly! He loved us that much!

And I think you realize what that really means. You realize Jesus wanted to adopt you so badly, He’d go through anything, including hell itself, to make you His son or daughter. But you also realize, all that Jesus went through was done so that you would experience the amazing wonder, the incredible benefit, and the untold excitement of being God’s child! No cost to you. No pain for you. No difficulty for you. All of that taking on by Jesus so that you could confidently say “I am a child of God!”

Day Twenty-Six—December 22nd

“Heirs of Heaven”

Read Galatians 4:4-7 (again) and Revelation 7:9-11

I don't know about you but when I think about that first Christmas night... it makes me want to have been able to be there when it all went down two-thousand years ago! Oh, I can imagine all of the events and characters found in the narrative of the hills of Bethlehem as well as the family huddled in the stable in that little town. I can get a good picture in my mind's eye of what it was like and how amazing it must have been for all those involved. But that's still just my imagination and leaves me wanting more...so much more...as it leaves me wanting to have seen it all myself, live and in person!

To be sure, my “wanting to see it firsthand” feeling has been exacerbated by my trips to the Holy Land. I've been to Israel four times now and repeatedly seen the hills of Bethlehem and of course, the (modern) “little town” as well. My second trip to Israel we were blessed to be able to stay in a Kibbutz that overlooked the hills of Bethlehem. What a beautiful view I had from my room, especially when the sun went down and the stars came out and...turning off the lights in the hotel-room...gazing out my window at the soft-rolling-hills where it all happened! In my imagination, I could almost see the angels filling the sky and the faithful shepherds then running to see Jesus after their private choir-concert with the messengers of God. Now, at this point, I should admit to you that the two characters in this incredible Christ-child story I'd want to be able to see are the angels in their full-glory-moment and of course, Jesus Himself, our Lord and God come into our world. It's not that everyone else in the narrative is unimportant, they're not unimportant, but personally I'd just really like to see the angels and Jesus...and again, see them with my own-two-eyes!

Well, the wondrous truth of the Gospel message is that I do get to see them and so do you! The Gospel reminds us that our Lord came into the world as a child to make us His children as we explored just yesterday. But what does that adopted-son or adopted-daughter status do for us? Paul wrote this in Galatians 4 “...to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” Galatians 4:5. So, if you ask what the son/daughter of God status does for us, the first thing is to remember is that we are “redeemed” as Paul writes it and redeemed from

sin, death and the power of the devil...thanks be to God!

But it's important to also take note of one little word in this text. Paul writes "So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir...through God" Galatians 4:7. We're no longer slaves to sin, death and the power of the devil. We're claimed as His son or His daughter. But did you see the, albeit small, and yet powerful word "heir" above? You are no longer a slave but a son or daughter and that status gives you an inheritance and that inheritance is heaven itself! You are an heir of heaven! I know you hold tight to that truth. But I want you to consider what that means for you! This is no Eeyore-esque moment "Ho-hum...oh bother...I'm going to heaven" (said slowly and in a baritone voice). Through Christ and in Christ we are going to heaven! And because we're going to heaven, we together get to see both the angel choir and Jesus Himself! We do get a firsthand and in person view of the heavenly singers and the Lord Jesus whom we love so much! In fact, you are an heir and an heir of everlasting, never-ending life with all of the players in the narrative! Mary, Joseph, the shepherds...all will be there...and yes, of course, the angels of God and the Lord Jesus too! I don't know about you, but I nonetheless think you are with me on this...I cannot wait to see all of this live and in-person and...through Jesus..we will!

With that truth espoused, let me then leave you with this imagery from the Revelation: "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels were standing around the throne..." Revelation 7:9-11. Thank you Jesus, we get to see this ourselves!

Day Twenty-Seven—December 23rd

“Nothing Lasts Forever...right?”

Read Luke 1:31-33 and Romans 9:5

Perhaps you've heard the saying "All good things must come to an end"? You likely understand what the saying means even if you've never heard it...ultimately it means...nothing lasts forever. We say things like: "We had a great two-week vacation this year, but all good things must come to an end."...or..."My career was amazing and long, but I'm retiring, after all, all good things must come to an end." We get it. Nothing lasts "forever"...right?

Well, while you know the truth of the saying about our humanity and our lives, you also know that it's not true when it comes to our faith in Jesus. Our faith in Jesus reminds us that forever is...well...forever! What's important to realize about that reality is that the "forever-ness" of our faith is linked directly to the "forever-ness" of our Lord and Savior. In our reading from Luke one, notice what we're told about the Lord Jesus: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David..." Admittedly, as you cogitate on that sentence, what might just stick out about the verse is what sounds like a "temporal promise" regarding God's Son, Jesus. "The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David..." sounds as if the Son of God will be an earthly king and rule a very temporal kingdom. After all, "all good things come to an end" could be said about King David, right? Great king? Yep. Man after God's own heart? Yes, the Bible says so. But David's reign as king came to an end when God called him home to Himself...because, indeed...all good things come to an end!

But the first part of that verse is really what is the most important part. Let me ask you, was David God's son? The answer is "Yes...he was". But he wasn't God's son in the same way Jesus was, or better said, in the same way Jesus is. When we say that Jesus was "the Son of God" it is indeed getting at a very important truth about His humanity. To be sure, when we say that Jesus was "the Son of God", we do mean that He was a human-being, born into this world, born into the flesh. But Jesus wasn't just a Son of God, Jesus was THE Son of God, or as the Bible gives testimony of it, Jesus was flesh, but Jesus was more than just flesh, He was God in the flesh. We read in Romans 9:5 about Jesus. Paul is describing both His human nature and His Christ nature when he writes

“To the (Israelites) belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ...who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.” Notice Paul reminds us that Jesus was flesh...indeed, the physical Son of God or as Paul puts it “according to the flesh”. But this physical and fleshy Son of God was also, as Paul also writes it there, “...God over all, blessed forever...”. Take note of that last word there...“forever”. Jesus is human but Jesus is also God. And...Jesus is God forever. Therefore Jesus’ Kingdom is also forever!

All that to remind you that His forever Kingdom is your forever Kingdom too! The King of kings came into this world but He did so so that you could come into His. The King of kings made Himself lowly like a servant so that He could exalt us to the status of son or daughter. And yes, in and through the King of kings we then inherit the Kingdom of God and we inherit the Kingdom of God...forever!

