



THE MESSIAH
IN THE
MANGER

ADVENT 2024

December 1 - Matthew 1:18-25

“God With Us”

Written by Pastor Ben Johnson, Lead Pastor

The birth of Jesus comes to us from Joseph’s point of view in the Gospel of Matthew. We are told the couple was engaged to be married and in Judaism an engagement was a binding union and required a divorce to separate. The violation of an engagement was literally a matter of life and death (Deut 22:23-29).

Joseph is a mysterious figure in the Gospels which tell us virtually nothing about him. We know that he was a builder (Mt13:55). He was a descendent of David (Lk 2:4). Though Joseph is present in Luke 2:41-52, when the twelve-year-old Jesus is lost and found in the temple, he doesn’t utter a word. The vast majority of what we see of and know about Joseph we learn from the Gospel of Matthew.

In Luke, Mary is communicated to by means of a direct angelic messenger but somehow Joseph was the sort of person who could more easily believe a dream encounter with an angel. In this dream the angel communicates the impossible to him that his virgin fiancée is pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. He communicates the baby’s name will be Jesus (Yeshua) because, as His name implies, “He will save His people from their sins”.

When Joseph awakes, he immediately obeys the angelic

message and we do not see even a hint of internal emotional struggle. He takes Mary to his home but denies physical union with her until Jesus is born.

We know very little of Joseph, yet as the Scripture always does, we are told everything we need to know about him. The most important information comes to us from Matthew 1:19 that describes Joseph as a “righteous” man. He doesn’t want to publicly humiliate Mary and so decides to divorce her quietly. So even before the angel came Joseph has already decided not to take advantage of his legal right but to act gently, kind and in a righteous way towards her. In fact, it seems Joseph was willing to take upon himself the guilt that he thought was Mary’s guilt. This is all we know about the heart of Joseph and really it is all we need to know about this man.

Joseph resonates with all of us because we all have had to face difficult decisions in our own lives. Do we act upon our legal rights, hold to the old order of things, maintain status quo, or follow a new and wonderful dream from God at an enormous personal cost. Joseph embraced the dream, obeyed the voice of God, and became the earthly Father to the Son of God. What dreams might God be giving to you?

December 2 - Isaiah 9:6

“Too Good to Be True”

Written by Mike Martens, Director of Men’s Ministry

There are moments in our lives when we think to ourselves, “that’s too good to be true.” An example of this might be when we purchase a car and find out that the selling price for this make and model is much lower than it should be. We become suspicious of it because it seems better than we had expected and so we conclude there must be something wrong with it. We have all had these too good to believe moments throughout our lives.

In today’s scripture reading, we have a clear and complete picture of our Savior. In this prophecy written by Isaiah 700 years before Christ, it is likely there were some who found it hard to believe Isaiah when he speaks of the incarnation of Christ. “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.” It’s just too good to be true. Unbelievable perhaps. But 2000 years later, we find unbelievable joy and comfort in these words as Christians as we celebrate the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Isaiah writes about this 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.” Immanuel means God with us. This might be where some become suspicious. Wait a minute, God put Himself in the womb of Mary so that He could become one of us so that we might believe in Him and have everlasting life? Yes! God chose such a birth so that He could be with us now and eternally.

Thankfully, God is not limited by the requests we make known to Him. Paul says this in Ephesians 3:20, “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.” God never ceases to amaze us!

In April of this year, Anne and I were blessed with our first grandchild. As we held our grandson, we experienced that too good to be true moment and unbelievable joy! “Fearfully and wonderfully made,” from Psalm 139:14 was on our minds. We stared into his eyes with wonder and amazement. We too wonder at the unbelievable joy Mary and Joseph must have experienced as they held their baby boy. They knew He was special, and this was evident in the words of Gabriel to Mary in Luke 1:35, “therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God.” Jesus is also our “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Jesus, born of a virgin, is the incarnate Son of God, Immanuel.

God repeats this promise of Immanuel throughout scripture as Matthew 28:20 says, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Brothers and sisters, it is not too good to be true! May we continue to be amazed by God and find unbelievable joy in knowing how much He loves us and the lengths He would go to be our “with us” God.

December 3 - 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

“The Image of God”

Written by Pastor Tim Phillips, Director of Congregational Care

“Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

When a child is born the relatives are quick to identify different features that look like one parent or the other. “He has his father’s smile.” “She has her mother’s eyes.” We have four grandsons and it’s fun to see how they are miniatures of our two daughters. As parents we look at these precious little ones and hope they will imitate our good qualities and avoid our faults. As they grow we lay claim to the positives and lay blame on the negatives. “You are just like your father!” “She got that from your side!”

In 2 Corinthian 4 we read about Paul contending with the people of Corinth about His work among them. The Corinthians struggled with many forms of immorality. On top of this, they were an affluent community. Their pride caused them problems as a congregation. Paul calls them out. He calls them to repentance. He calls them to humility. He calls them to obedience. He points out that he was open and honest with them. He didn't manipulate them. He didn't shame the Gospel by living in a sinful way. At times, Paul was maligned and his message rejected. That was because the "god of this age" had blinded his audience from believing.

So it is today. Many are "blind to the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God". Have you seen the open rebellion? Have you see the arrogant immorality? Hatred and violence are promoted and praised. Where is the image of God? Where is Jesus? The answer is surprising!

In Genesis 1:27 we read, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Yes. We are created in God's image. And yes, that image has been disfigured by sin. So, is it possible to still discern the image of our Father? What do you see when you look in the mirror? If you are honest, you see a person with many faults. Where is the image of God? The image of God is Jesus. In this season of Advent we anticipate the birth of our Savior, Jesus. He came to take away the disfigurement of our sin. He came to manifest the love and mercy of our Heavenly Father. He came to replace our fallen image with His glorious image.

December 4 - Philippians 2:1-11

“Being a Servant”

Written by Jenn Fuller, Director of Children’s Ministry

“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

I absolutely love this passage from Philippians 2. Paul is sharing with the church at Philippi to think of others before themselves. To put the interests of others ahead of their own. A lesson that my husband and I strive to teach our three children daily. Especially at Christmastime. Verses 3-4 say, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count

others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” – This is such a struggle for our children. Or maybe, it’s children of all ages that struggle with this. When we wake up in the morning, often we think of ourselves first. My three kids think of themselves first and what they want. Waiting is not an option for them. If one of them wants a cup of milk, they will fuss and even scream until they get their way. Even if one woke up later than the others, they don’t want to wait their turn. They want what they want, now! Yet, here we have Paul sharing what Christ did for us all. Jesus became a servant for all. He took our sins upon himself and went to the cross willingly. And he did it without whining or complaining.

As a result, we need to learn from this example of Jesus. We need to stop thinking of ourselves first and put the needs of others before our own. We need to look to Jesus and follow His example. Being a servant, especially at Christmastime, is so easy. Be patient. Smile and show others kindness and grace. Yet, this isn’t something just to do during Christmastime. This is what we can do each day! We can strive to put others first before ourselves and do that without whining and complaining. It isn’t easy, but Jesus will guide our every move. To Him be all Glory!

December 5 - Romans 9:1-5

“If Only”

Written by Tim Kightlinger, Director of Youth Ministry

I have a few people in my family who for one reason or another do not wish to have a relationship with Jesus. Maybe you have those people in yours as well. You may think at times, “If only they understood the love God has for them,” or “If only they would just put down their pride.” You may have even said, “I’d do anything if it helped them understand the truth about Jesus.” Paul has that same heart pull for those around him.

Paul begins with a cry, a plea, for his fellow Jews to know the truth about Jesus. He even goes to the extreme to say that. He wished that he was separated from Christ if that would save everyone else. Of course, Paul knows that he doesn’t have that power.

Paul starts to list off all the benefits his fellow Jews have. He states that they are adopted (made a part of God’s family by God’s choosing), they have His glory (He is always with them), they have the covenants (promises made by God in which He will never break), they have His law (the protection and provision of God’s love), they have the worship (they know the one true God. The God of Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob.), and they have the promises (that he would be their God and save them). As you look at these blessings, these gifts, you see why Israel was the chosen nation.

In advent we prepare ourselves for the coming of our King, our Lord, Jesus. The anticipation of the babe born in a manger brings us joy as we remember the gifts that God has given us through Jesus. We have the forgiveness of sins, the promise that He is always with us, the blessings of eternal life, the strength that only He can give us, the peace that comes from knowing the love He has for us. The list can go on for a long time. Take some time now and think of a few more blessings you have from our God through Jesus.

Paul concludes this list of blessings with the greatest blessing of all. That is of Jesus, the Christ. Christ means the anointed one. This is His title; He is Jesus the Christ. He is above all things and in control of all things. He is the only one anointed to become the sacrifice of our sins and the victory over death. He is the payment for our sins and resurrection for our salvation.

Just like Paul we yearn for those around us to know the truth of our Savior. So, let us pray, let us share the joy, let us sing his praise with words and actions, and let us hold fast to His promises.

December 6 - Luke 1:26-38

Written by DeAnn McCue, Director of Women's Ministry

The first message of Christmas was a call to look, to see, to behold. The angel told Mary: “behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.”

We can't fully comprehend the Incarnation, nor the truth that this Child, Jesus, was born to die for us, neither could Mary, but she soaked in the scene before her and stored up all that she heard and saw in her heart. Verse 28 tells us that she kept carefully considering what kind of greeting this was. (AMP version) Mary was in awe and wonder that a messenger from God should greet her.

Mary heard the news, “The Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.”

Mary's response was one of humility and surrender, “I am the Lord's servant...May your word to me be fulfilled.”

Mary trusted who God said He was, and simply stated, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word.” (v.38)

The angel's words to Mary were: “nothing (no thing) will be impossible for God.” He can bring forth life from a virgin, He can lead Wise Men with a star in the sky and direct the decisions of kings. He can cause an explosion of celebration in

the sky and make the greatest of the least.

Nothing is impossible with God. Not one thing.

Advent lifts our eyes once more to the God who saves us and the hope of our ultimate salvation – the coming of the Lord in glory. The Christ who was once born in Bethlehem calls us to Himself even now and our hope is fixed heavenward!

God IS with us! The WORD (Jesus) became flesh and dwelt among us. And WE beheld his glory. The impossible occurred and the unexpected was sure.

When we come and see, we come to glorify. That is where we see Christ in Christmas. We have a Savior who knows the troubles of this world and a God who loves us enough to send Him. This Advent, let's come and see and watch as Christmas takes on a new look.

Psalm 46:10-11 says, “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. When the days of anticipation overtake the beauty, be still.

Lord we are waiting here for you. Lord, meet us in the stillness. Help us to look, to see, to behold Jesus, Immanuel. Lift our eyes to You. Amen.

December 7 - Luke 1:39-45

Written by Heather Schmitz, Director of Tiny Treasures

39 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, 40 and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

Mary comes to visit, and Elizabeth knew that John, a baby in her womb, leapt for joy. How? When I was pregnant there was lots of movement from the boys. Kicking, turning, punching. Not to mention the extra digestive movements. How did Elizabeth know this movement meant anything? Was it different? Was it wisdom that came from being “advanced in years”? Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, just as John was in her womb. Being filled with the Holy Spirit she was boldly able to proclaim that Mary was blessed.

We, too, are filled with the Holy Spirit. As we wait to celebrate your entering our world, you are with us. As we wait for your second coming, you are with us. Let us rejoice that you are

with us. Let us boldly proclaim your presence today and always.

How will you boldly proclaim that Jesus is the reason we celebrate this Christmas? Will you put out a nativity? One in your front yard? One in your workspace?

Holy Spirit, let us boldly proclaim the truth that you are with us. That you were born a baby, a baby anticipated for hundreds of years, a baby that will save us from ourselves. As we anticipate your coming, remind us that you are with us, just as you were with Mary and Elizabeth. Amen

December 8 - Luke 2:1-7

“Wrapped Up”

Written by Pastor Joe Meyer, Emeritus Pastor

This is one of those Gospel readings that we are not only thankful for but furthermore encouraged by! Of course, we're thankful for the very personal peak into the lives of Mary and Joseph that first Christmas Night. We're given the intimate account of them experiencing the birth of their “first born Son” as Luke writes it. We consider it a privilege to be let in on this very private and personal moment in the life of their family. But we're clearly most thankful for the presence of the “Little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay” as we sing it every year. We recognize that this family vignette from the “old, old story” is also a reminder of the veracity of John 3:16 and that indeed, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

But as we look into this snippet from the life of Christ and are heartened by the beautiful beginning of the “old, old story”, we're also reminded of and further encouraged by the beautiful ending of this “old, old story” as well. To be sure, we're being reminded here that Jesus was a real baby, fully a human being, and as such He needed to be put down to rest after the arduous birth process He had just gone through. Jesus the infant was tired and needed to rest and recoup. So Mary wrapped Him up in swaddling cloths and laid Him down to rest.

But in saying it that way, we're also reminded of the end of the story and His death for the sins of the world. Said another way, the Gospel story begins with Jesus being "wrapped up" and the Gospel story ends with Jesus being "wrapped up" yet again and for a final time. Luke tells us this at the end of His Gospel: "(Joseph of Arimathea) went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone..." Luke 23:52-53. Wrapped up and laid to rest at the beginning of His earthly life and wrapped up and laid to rest at the end of His earthly life too...and all of that for us and for our salvation!

And yet...we also know that His being wrapped and laid to rest wasn't actually the end of the story, was it? Going back to Bethlehem's stable for a moment, remember that even though the baby Jesus was wrapped up and laid down, the baby Jesus also woke up in the morning to greet this world which He'd come to save (and yes, to get some food from His mama too!). Jesus was wrapped up by Mary that night and Jesus did rest, but ultimately He would rise from His rest in the morning! And I think you understand why I've emphasized that...Jesus did exactly the same thing on Easter after being wrapped up and laid to rest by Joseph of Arimathea! Said plainly, Jesus would lay His life down, be wrapped by Joseph of Arimathea and laid to rest in a tomb, but Jesus would also rise again for us on the third day to conquer death for us and do so forever!

We're indeed thankful and encouraged by His "wrapped-up" entrance into our world and thankful and encouraged by His

rising from sleep! We're thankful and encouraged because what happened to Jesus both at the beginning and ending of the story, will happen to us too! We will likely all "sleep", we will likely all die before the Second Coming, but in and through Christ we will also rise from the dead, shed our wrappings, and greet Him when the One who was wrapped up so long ago, returns to call us forth from the grave!

December 9 - Luke 2:8-14

“God With Us”

Written by Pastor Ben Johnson, Lead Pastor

The Shepherds are the first outcasted group that we meet in Lukes Gospel. Because of their occupation they were ceremonial unclean and could not take part in temple worship & the Rabbi’s had barred them from testifying in court. It seems appropriate that the first recipients of the Lamb of God would be Shepherds.

So it says in Luke 2:8 “And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flocks by night.”

So the Shepherds watched over their sheep day and night and this is where they are at the time Jesus was born. Just imagine this it is pitch black, stars are out...maybe they see one bright unusual star that night...and then

Luke 2:9 “and an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shown around them, and they were filled with fear.”

Every time an angel shows up one of the first things it has to say is Fear Not...because not only is it an angel (which must be an imposing figure) but it says the Glory of Lord shone around them. So the Shepherds now are not focused on the sheep but in a state of fear...

Luke 2: 10-13 ““Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news

of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

Angelos (angel) means a messenger. They are given what to say and they say it. So this means God the Father gave special instructions to the angels to go directly to this group of Shepherds first to tell them what just happened in Bethlehem. Luke 2:13-18 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

God chose to bring the message of salvation to the most lowly of people, to the people we wouldn't expect, to people that frankly didn't deserve it. These people then became His missionaries to carry the Good News of Jesus to anyone who will listen and to become part of this Good News that Leads to great joy.

And no I am not talking about the Shepherds here I am talking about you. I'm talking about me. God came for the humble, for the lowly, for the hurting, for the sinful of this world to bring them good news that will lead to great joy that something brand new has come.

The Shepherds remind us that the Good News & the Great Joy are for all people and that God loves to use the ordinary things of this world for extraordinary purposes by wrapping them up in His love, His glory and making them a part of His salvation story.

It isn't about what this world thinks, or what this world says

but what's most important is what our God thinks and what He has to say and He says to us all Fear Nothing...You are part of the greatest of news that will lead you to the greatest of joys....Jesus Is Born!

December 10 - Luke 2:15-20

“Make Haste”

Written by Mike Martens, Director of Men’s Ministry

When was the last time you hurried off somewhere? Maybe you were late to work, late for a coffee meet-up, or possibly even late to church. No matter the reason, we have all experienced those “hurry up or we’ll be late” moments in our lives. We may have even said or thought the words make haste. All that means is we are in a moment that could really benefit from some speed or urgency.

The shepherds, upon receiving the *good news of great joy*, did just that. We can just picture the shepherds upon reaching Bethlehem. Each of them, bent over with hands on knees, breathing deeply, hearts pounding. The Lord made known to them the most wonderful news! “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” The shepherds did not keep this Good News to themselves, they shared it! They were eyewitnesses and only speaking to what they knew was true (Luke 1:2). And this Good News is something to make haste about!

Does this sound familiar? This is The Great Commission. As you are going, God wants to use us where He already has us. Where we live, work, learn, and play. We get to testify about what we know is true, and our truth is based upon first-hand testimony (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). Just like those shepherds of old, we feel an urgency too, don’t we? We want to

go, we want to share, we want to tell! But maybe we don't feel equipped? Maybe we don't feel worthy? We don't have to be an ordained pastor to share this Good News. Preaching is simply announcing, proclaiming, testifying, or telling. We get to speak of what we have seen and heard and know to be true, so that those who have not seen and heard may have life in Christ as well. In Acts 11:19-21, we get a picture of everyday ordinary Christians sharing the Gospel with like-minded people and other times stepping outside their comfort zones to share it with people who were not like them. We all have a testimony to what God has done in our lives! Don't be afraid to share Jesus! Let's lower the bar when it comes to sharing our faith. It does not need to be complicated.

There will be moments in our life when we are excited about our faith yet feel insecure, and uncertain, about how to share our faith. Please know that our God, Immanuel, is with you always as you are going. *It is the LORD who goes before you*, and we will only be able to do this by the working of the Holy Spirit, through the Word, as He leads and equips us to share.

As with Mary, sometimes our faith is private, "pondering" this truth in our hearts. But our faith is also public as the shepherds *made known* to others what they had seen and heard. Pray that God may open to us a door for the Gospel to be heard. And as He does, let us *make haste* and ask God to grant us boldness to be a witness to this truth and to be salt and light to those around us.

December 11 - John 1:6-13

“True Light Has Come”

Written by Pastor Tim Phillips, Director of Congregational Care

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. 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. 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.”

Last year my grandson and I were standing on the end of our driveway looking up at the stars. It was a beautiful night and the stars seemed in their usual spots. As we looked, we could pick out airplanes with their flashing lights. When you look at the night sky your thoughts go in a few different directions. Which lights are planets? Which lights are satellites? Are UFO's real? What did the shepherds see near Bethlehem? What did the Magi see that guided them from their homes in Mesopotamia?

Then **SUDDENLY I SAW IT!!** A strange string of lights making its way across the sky. What was it? Were they UFO's? I franti-

cally called my wife to come out! We both watched For a few moments until they disappeared. I have always been a skeptic about UFO's so I had to figure this out. I grabbed my iPad and Googled "Star Link". Very quickly the mystery was solved. It was no UFO. Just the crazy satellites of a Tech genius.

In John 1 we read about the True Light that was coming into the world. What or who is the True Light? We of course understand that Jesus is the True Light. Why is he described in that way? To some, the mystery of the Messiah was confusing—all kinds of expectations created by tradition and imagination. When Jesus came He revealed the truth to us. We have learned that He is "the way, the truth and the Life." "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."

So, Jesus is the True Light and as His children we are called to be "the light of the world." As we celebrate all that He did for us 2,000 years ago we can be used by God to bring the light of His love to the dark world we live in.

December 12 - John 1:14-18

“Grace Upon Grace”

Written by Jenn Fuller, Director of Children’s Ministry

John 1:14-18

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.15 (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) 16 For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.

Christmas is a time that I absolutely adore! I love the hustle and bustle of it all. I love to go to the various stores, especially Target, and just get a cup of coffee, put my kids in the cart, and just wander up and down all the aisles looking at all the Christmas items and just seeing what people are purchasing. My husband, not so much. Getting him to go to any store during Christmas, takes a miracle. Forget about going to any type of mall. He hates the crowds, and it just annoys him how everyone waits until the last days before Christmas to do their shopping. Which, by the way, is usually why we are at the store – because he has refused to go any earlier. It sounds so funny and ridiculous, and it is! Yet, it is how it goes each and every year! Maybe this year, we could try something different! Maybe you could too! Maybe, if we just

take our time and have some patience and grace, we could enjoy the venture out shopping. These verses from John, remind us that Jesus came to save us all. He took on flesh and came and dwelt among us. And from His fullness, we have received grace upon grace. How beautiful is that? Grace upon grace is bestowed upon us. How are we showing others grace upon grace? Maybe we need to just change our mindset. Instead of being frustrated or challenged by the large crowds, maybe if we go into the whole situation full of grace and willing to show others grace, it might actually be a joy filled moment. And dare I say it, enjoyable?! So, enjoy this Christmas season, grab that cup of coffee or holiday drink, and take every opportunity to show grace upon grace to each person you come in contact with. Even if it is the last shopping days before Christmas! Show them the grace that Jesus has shown to us all!

December 13 - Galatians 4:4-7

“I Receive What?”

Written by Tim Kightlinger, Director of Youth Ministry

Do you have a family heirloom? Is there something you have that reminds you of a loved one who has passed? Maybe now just thinking about it brings tears of joy and sorrow because you miss them.

In our reading today we read that Jesus came when the “fullness of time” had come. Which means He came when God knew it was time for Him to come. When we look around our world, we may have the thought, “Jesus please come back soon, it’s a mess down here.” Don’t worry, he knows how crazy our world is. He is the King after all. Everything is in God’s timing. He’s never early, He’s never late, He’s always right on time. Jesus came right on time and will come back again, right on time. We still pray, “Maranatha, come Lord quickly.” What a great day that will be when He comes back. But until then we wait in trust and hope.

When Jesus came into our world, it was a mess then as well. Paul tells us that Jesus came to live under the law, meaning He came to be judged by the same law we are judged by. He did this because we are unable to live a perfect life. He, on the other hand, did live the perfect life we could not. That’s what it means that He redeemed us. It was His perfection and obedience to God that fulfilled what we could not do on our own.

Our perfect Savior, through his death and resurrection, brought us out of our messiness, a separated relationship with God, and into a connected relationship with God. He bridged the gap between us and God which allows us to now be called children of God. You have been adopted into God's family. You belong here, not because of how good you are, but because of God's love for you. He has chosen you! Thank you, Jesus.

You now receive the benefits of being a part of God's family. The benefit of 100% complete forgiveness of your sins, the presence of God at every moment of the day, the strength given by the Holy Spirit, the comfort given by Jesus, and the inheritance of eternal life with God. Wait, you mean I get all that? Yes, because you are his heir!

As you continue to prepare for the celebration of our Savior's birth, may we seek to trust in God's promises. Always remember that you are a son or daughter of the one true King!

December 14 - Colossians 1:15-20

Written by DeAnn McCue, Director of Women's Ministry

Colossians 1:15-20

“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. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

Jesus is our Prince of Peace. These passages show us Jesus' supremacy over creation and His work to bring wholeness and peace through His redemptive work on the cross.

Jesus' supremacy over everything and His ability to make peace, brings wholeness and restoration to all things, including you and me.

We can rest on the firm foundation of Jesus and the reality of the hope of the Gospel.

In verse 15, the word image is like that of a mirror: it shows the likeness of the real thing, it is the visible reflection of some-

one. Jesus is the *visible* reflection (the image) of the *invisible* God. He makes the unseen nature of God a living and breathing reality. Jesus is God made flesh. He is the “firstborn over all creation”.

In verse 16, Paul stated that Jesus is the creator and Lord of everything in heaven and on earth, including the realm of spirits and powers. The Colossians believed that the spirits and gods could unleash natural disasters, make them become sick, or destroy their livelihoods. **Jesus** is Lord over all creation, including the realm of invisible powers and authorities.

It’s not enough to say that Jesus created everything. At the end of verse 16 it says, “all things have been created through him and for him.” Everything was created *through* Jesus. The word “for” means that the purpose of creation is *for* Jesus.

Verse 17 says that Jesus holds everything together. Jesus is the reason there is a cosmos and not chaos. The fullness of God dwells in Jesus. He is God. And He is supreme over everything we can see and everything we can’t see.

Verse 19 makes it clear that Jesus is fully God. He is able to save us because he is God. Jesus is the only one who can achieve our salvation – He is the One who has come to save us. He is the Perfect Lamb of God.

Only Someone outside of the curse of sin, only Someone over and above creation, only Someone who is Lord over everything can reach into our mess and fix it.

The birth of Jesus, our Immanuel, is God with us. He is God coming to save us. That is the reason Christmas is such an earth-shattering moment!

Come to Him to be refreshed this Advent season and to find the One Who is the Prince of Peace.

Lord, You are our Prince of Peace. As we seek Your peace in this season of Advent, help us to have fresh eyes to see You in our lives and the world around us. Oh, come, oh come, Emmanuel. Amen

Hark the Glad Sound, LSB Hymn 66, Verses 1 & 5

Hark the glad sound! The Savior comes,
The Savior promised long;
Let ev'ry heart prepare a throne
And ev'ry voice a song.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
Thy welcome shall proclaim
And heav'n's eternal arches ring
With Thy beloved name.

December 15 - Colossians 2:6-10

Written by Heather Schmitz, Director of Tiny Treasures

6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

8 See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

What traditions do you have around Advent and Christmas? Do you decorate a tree, have an Advent calendar, make hundreds of cookies, drive around and look at lights, attend markets, shop for presents, decorate a gingerbread house...? Have you ever wondered why? Where do those traditions come from? Traditions are only as valuable as the meaning we give them. Can you give a faith-filled meaning to your Christmas traditions?

When my boys were little, we decorated a gingerbread nativity instead of a house. Part of the tradition was telling the story of Jesus' birth. We'd mix, roll, bake, and pray that we could get the stable to stand up. We read first from the children's Bible and then learned to look up the passages. As we knew the account well, we started to find other connections

throughout the Bible to the animals (and characters) we put in our nativity. The donkey Mary rode and the donkey Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the sheep and our Good Shepherd, three gifts and God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The boys might not remember each connection we made. But they know the lessons. Even the lesson of forgiving grandpa for eating the sheep that was to stand beside baby Jesus. They know that God is with us, he is in the big and the small. Sometimes we just need to open our eyes, hearts, and minds to make the connections from a tradition to God.

How do your traditions reflect that God is with us? Can you use them to teach others that God is with us?

Dear Jesus, You are everywhere, all the time. Open our eyes, minds, and hearts to see you in all the traditions we carry out this Advent and Christmas season. Slow us down so we can see you. Help us to use our traditions to teach our children, grandchildren, friends, and neighbors that you are with us. Amen.

December 16 - Hebrews 1:1-4

“I Have Spoken”

Written by Pastor Joe Meyer, Emeritus Pastor

Most of you already know that I'm one of those guys who loves the Star Wars series' and the multitude of Star Wars spin-offs as well. In the spin-off television series known as “The Mandalorian”, there was a character called an “Ugnaught”. The curious character repeatedly used the phrase “I have spoken!” What that meant for the funny little man was that he'd made up his mind but furthermore was making a declaration as to what then would be accomplished. “I have spoken!” also meant “This is what I'm going to do!”

When we come to the first chapter of Hebrews here in our Advent journey we hear our Lord and God saying “I have spoken!”, meaning, “This is what I'm going to do!”. The writer of Hebrews pens it this way: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by his Son...” Hebrews 1:1,2. Of course we know that God had been speaking all along through the prophets leading up to Jesus, declaring not only His guiding law but also His amazing love through them.

But Hebrews chapter one reminds us of an amazing truth about Jesus! Sure, God had spoken His law and His love through the prophets before Jesus, but in Jesus, God Himself came to speak and yes, also came to “accomplish” as well!

Notice how clear this is from verse eight: “But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.’” Hebrews 1:8. Jesus was indeed God in the flesh coming to speak. Let me say that again...in Jesus, God Himself came to speak to us! What? If we’re not blown away by that truth, I don’t know what will blow us away! God came to speak and indeed, speak He did!

But remember again, just like the “Ugnaught”, when God came to speak to us in Jesus, He also came to declare, “This is what I’m going to do!”

The short parameters of this devotion prevent me from telling the story in detail, but think about what Christ’s entrance into our world was “speaking” about God: He loved us so much He came Himself...not angel, not a prophet, not an emissary... God Himself showed up! He loved us so much He brought healing and wholeness to those suffering from this world’s brokenness! He loved us so much that He not only fulfilled His law but fulfilled His law for us! He loved us so much He took the eternal punishment we deserved and gave us forgiveness and freedom from sin and sinfulness! He loved us so much He even conquered death for us and rose on the third day that we might rise some day too!

In Jesus, God Himself came to say “I love you” and, in His speaking “I love you”, He also came to prove that love in and through the things He came to do! Clearly and unequivocally He said “I have spoken...I love you!”...and then proved that love most clearly at the Cross and the Grave. Over and

over again, in His life on earth and through His Word and His Sacraments now, in Jesus, God was speaking and continues to speak His eternal and enduring love for us and His voice is followed up by action as He loves, forgives, empowers, strengthens and molds and shapes us everyday!

December 17 - Hebrews 1:5-8

“God With Us”

Written by Pastor Ben Johnson, Lead Pastor

One of the primary aspects of the Old Testament religion was its prophetic tradition. Israel lived not by human insight but by divine revelation as God “spoke through the prophets”. A prophet is someone who receives a public or private revelation from God through the Holy Spirit and delivers a message. We would say Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and Jonah were all spokesmen for God’s word (and there were many more).

Hebrews 1:1 “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”

Prophetic tradition is true even today within Islam who claim Jesus as a prophet but Muhammad as the final prophet. Mormonism claim Joseph Smith as a prophet. Judaism would be looking towards Abraham and Moses and waiting for the final fulfillment still today. There are prophets in Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism & other religious movements. Even in our own tradition we claim in the Nicene Creed in the third article that the Holy Spirit has spoken by the prophets. The prophets were many and varied and their revelations came sporadically over a considerable period of time. But Hebrews is saying that now their place has been taken by a single messenger, God has provided something even greater whose message has been delivered once and for all.

This is the one that all the biblical prophets were looking forward to and now has been fulfilled in “A Son” so who is this Son ?

Hebrews 1:2-3 “whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”

So you can see the writer speaking to the connection The Son has to the created universe and places Him outside the natural orders as its originator and sustainer. Through the Son, God created all things (past), the Son upholds everything by the word of His power (present), and has been made heir of all things (future).

The writer of Hebrews also points to the unique connection The Son has to God Himself because The Son is the radiance of the Glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature. The exact representation... to see The Son is to see the radiance and glory of God incarnate in human form.

So like the face of a person on a coin Jesus is the exact imprint of God in human form and it's not just His connection to the universe or to God but also the reality that the heart, nature, character of this Son of God is the embodiment of sacrificial love for us all. Hebrews says He came to provide purification from sins. The message that Jesus brought was that

God loves and He loves His people so much that God Himself came and bled out on a cross to pay the penalty for our sins.

This Son, 3 days later, would rise in victory and power and He now has created a living way that all people can enter back into a forever relationship with God Himself by repenting and believing that Jesus is the fulfillment of everything good God has ever promised.

December 18 - Matthew 2:1-6

“True Worship”

Written by Mike Martens, Director of Men’s Ministry

Today’s Scripture reading reveals important truths about the nature of true worship. We often see images of the Magi (wise men) worshipping the infant Jesus alongside the shepherds in the stable at Bethlehem. The truth is that they arrived months after Jesus’ birth. What do we know about the Magi? We know that they were a class of priests, astronomers, and astrologers who were influential advisors of the king and likely from Babylon. Why are these Gentile Magi seeking to worship a Jewish King? This is significant because it foreshadows the mission of Jesus to bring salvation to all people regardless of their background or ethnicity. It reminds us that the Good News of Jesus is not limited to a particular group but is meant for everyone. We see the heart of God in 1 Timothy 2:4, “who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” And again in 2 Peter 3:9, “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

We are also given this prophecy in Matthew 2:6 which Micah spoke 700 years earlier, at a time when Assyria threatened Judah. The birth of Christ fulfilled this prophecy of a ruler from Bethlehem. This being Immanuel, God with us. And the paranoid and ruthless ruler, Herod the king, knew this as his question in today’s reading showed he was quite aware of the Old Testament promises of a Messiah. Herod saw Jesus as a threat to his own self-serving nature of earthly power and he

sought to eliminate Him. It is interesting to note that the chief priests and scribes knew the prophecies about the Messiah and where He was to be born, yet they did not seek Him out.

This gets to the *heart* of the matter. Worship involves the heart. Matthew 15:8-9 reminds us that we can possess knowledge about God and be saying and doing all the right things, yet without truly seeking Him with our whole heart. Are there any distractions in our lives or things of this world consuming us more than King Jesus? Paul's exhortation in Colossians 3 is to seek the things above, setting our minds on things above, not the things of this world. It prompts us to examine our lives and challenges us to consider the nature of our own worship. Are we offering God our best, or are we holding back certain areas of our lives? True worship requires giving ourselves fully to God, holding nothing back.

Let us all be inspired by the faith and persistence of the Magi in seeking Jesus. Just as they followed the star to find the newborn King, may we also fix our eyes on Jesus and pursue Him with all our hearts, offering Him the gift of our lives in worship, praise, and adoration. Hebrews 12:2 reminds us to look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. Allow King Jesus to be the center of our lives as we respond to His eternal goodness and faithfulness with deep reverence and worship.

December 19 - Matthew 2:7-12

“They Saw the Child”

Written by Pastor Tim Phillips, Director of Congregational Care

“Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.”

Imagine being an eye-witness to the birth of Jesus! The shepherds saw the newborn Jesus. The magi saw Him a little later. Simeon saw Him at the Temple. Anna, a prophetess, also saw Him at the Temple. Amazing! As a grandparent, we are so excited to get our first glimpse of our newest grandchild. What was Jesus like as a baby? Did those who saw Him understand what they were seeing? Did they reflect back on this experience the rest of their lives?

Of course, when we look at Jesus' birth we know that it was a fulfillment of centuries old prophecies. We know that Jesus came with a mission and purpose—to give His life for our sins. In a sense, Jesus' birth cannot be separated from His ultimate purpose. So, how can we incorporate this purpose in our celebration of Jesus' birth? We have not seen Him as a baby but we have believed in Him and rejoice at His coming. As the Magi offered their gifts we can offer Jesus the gift of our thanks and praise. We can respond by generously giving our time and talents in loving service. We can remember His birth every time we see a baby and marvel that He chose to come in such a humble way.

They saw the child. “Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”” John 20:29 ESV That's us! May God strengthen your faith as you walk through the season of Advent.

December 20 - John 1:1-5

“Light in the Darkness”

Written by Jenn Fuller, Director of Children’s Ministry

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Light. What is Christmas without all the lights? Every year we spend many, many, many hours decorating our homes for Christmas. Putting the lights on the Christmas trees (inside and out), and on our houses, on our fences, or wherever it is traditional for us to put lights. The many, many, many hours come in when we have to untangle all the lights before we can put them up. Am I right? Can you relate?

I absolutely love the lights at Christmas. I’ve shared this many times before with the children of Gloria Dei – Christmas Lights are my favorite! Blue Christmas Lights – that is! They bring such wonderful light to the darkness. As a child, I spent every Christmas traveling with my family to visit my grandparents, who lived in the country about an hour and a half away. It got dark at night. Very dark. Many homes only had one outside light and sometimes you couldn’t even see that. Yet, at Christmas time, when we would drive home, you could see all the Christmas lights lighting up the darkness. The blues, the reds, the whites, and the greens! It didn’t seem so dark all of

a sudden. It always made me think of this passage from John. Jesus is the light – He shines in the darkness! The Christmas lights eventually come down and are stored until the next year, but Jesus – He never ends! His light never stops shining! As we marvel at the wonders of Christmas this year, look at the lights! Enjoy the lights! Enjoy putting up the lights to shine in the darkness. Enjoy the untangling of the strands of lights! And remember, there is one who shines brighter and forever! Jesus is our amazing Light who has come to be the light of us all. May the Light of Jesus shine in and through you!

December 21 - 1 John 5:20

“True”

Written by Tim Kightlinger, Director of Youth Ministry

Has there been a time when you thought something was true, then you found out it wasn't? It's kind of humbling the moment when you realize you're wrong about something. Truth in today's world seems to be something that changes constantly. Yet, truth in its basic definition can't change. What's true today should be true tomorrow as well.

In our verse today, He begins with a basic knowledge that Jesus has come and has given us an understanding of who he is and what He has done. John continues to use the word “true” three times after this acknowledgment of who Jesus is. This means that he's emphasizing something important here. John says that there are three (3) things that we need to be aware of.

First, he says that we are “know him who is true.” This is our basic head knowledge of Jesus. We know who he is, and what he has done. We have the understanding that God loves us, cares for us, will never leave us, and is our strength. These things are completely true, and we know they are.

Secondly, he moves to the truth that not only do we know Jesus, but we are also known by Jesus. This is a heart relationship with him. This relationship with Jesus isn't just knowledge it has feelings too. We have a desire in our hearts to be connected to Him because he has a desire to be connect-

ed to us. He initiated a relationship with us through the Holy Spirit. Through our baptism we are brought into God's family, we are his children. There is no where we can go where Jesus isn't with us. We know that fully in our hearts, in our souls.

Thirdly, John says that God is true and that only through him do we have eternal life. Our world will say there are many roads that lead to God and heaven. But the reality is that if God is true then there can only be one way. He wouldn't make 10 different ways to get to heaven. If it were so, then there is no truth. To have eternal life, we must believe with our heart and minds that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. He is truth!

As we continue to wait for his second coming, we hold fast to His truths and promises today. We will celebrate his birth with joy knowing full well that He is our God, He is our truth, and He is our salvation.

December 22 - 2 Peter 1:1-4

Written by DeAnn McCue, Director of Women's Ministry

2 Peter 1:1-4

“Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.”

In the Christmas carol, “O Holy Night”, we sing the words, “a thrill of hope”.

*Long lay the world in sin and error pining, til he appeared
and the soul felt its worth. A thrill of hope, the weary world
rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.*

The whole world waited for Immanuel, God with us, to arrive. A thrill of hope indeed! We're weary, but rejoicing, morning is breaking, light cancels the darkness. Advent is a season of hope, but more than a passive hope. Deep hope is built on faith and trust in God.

All who confess Christ possess a faith of equal standing.

However our faith in Jesus can weaken as we are tempted into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. But thanks be to God that His grace and peace toward us is even greater than our sin. He is, even now, at work through His Word to strengthen us in faith.

The Holy Spirit works through the Word to call us to faith, giving us the knowledge to know Jesus through faith which results in eternal life. The divine power we possess is useful and necessary to do good and to live eternally.

The God of the universe keeps His Word. God promises eternity in His family. These promises of God are of such great value that merely possessing them has already given us the right to participate in the divine nature. We are already partners with Christ in the work God is doing in the world.

It is by God's glory and excellence that we have been given great and precious promises. These promises relate to the faith which has been delivered to us.

Sin separated us, but the righteousness of Jesus has allowed us to come close to God. God has given us precious promises that enable us to share in the divine nature and escape the corruption of the world.

All of these promises and blessings are made possible by God's glory and excellence, not by our own actions.

The fulfilled promise of Jesus' first coming and the yet-to-

be fulfilled promises of His second coming is the very great promise.

God has always been Immanuel. He has always been with us. But, in Jesus our eyes are open to its new depth in meaning. He is God with us, only better, He's here, with skin on, breathing the same air, in and out.

While the name Jesus (Savior) points to what He'll do (save us), the name Immanuel points to who He is (God with us).

Hebrews 4:15-16

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

That's Immanuel, God with us! That's why He came. The King on the throne of grace was once the child in the manger, the man in the garden, and the sinless sacrifice on the cross.

The night Jesus was born, there was no more waiting for God to send Messiah. Heaven intersected with earth – Messiah had come.

God is writing a story with our lives, and it's all about His glory. As we're called to wait, keep believing, keep trusting, and keep watching. God always keeps His promises.

During this Advent season of waiting, may we find moments daily to praise and worship, with thanksgiving, God who sent His only Son to redeem us. Immanuel, God IS with us. A thrill of hope, indeed!

O Lord, thank You for giving me a faith of equal standing. Enable me through Your Word to overcome all that seeks to weaken my faith. Fill me with a “thrill of hope” the Advent season and everyday. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

December 23 - Ezekiel 34:11-16

Written by Heather Schmitz, Director of Tiny Treasures

“For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. 12 As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. 13 I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. 14 I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. 16 I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.”

These are the words spoken by the Lord, through Ezekiel, while in captivity. The leaders, the shepherds, of Israel were doing a bad job of leading the people. This promise that God will send Jesus to be the leader of the Israelites, to walk among them, to be with them, must have given them hope.

As a parent, it gives me hope to know that God will lead my children, will be with them and with me, even when I, their shepherd, mess up.

Having grown children, I know there were many times I messed up. I've yelled when it wasn't necessary, gotten angry when it wasn't their fault, bought things none of us needed, watched some shows we later questioned, focused too much of my time on them and then too little, skipped church to go to swim meets... The list goes on.

The best part is knowing that when I mess up leading my kids (or my spouse, or staff, or coworkers, or friends...) God is there. He is ready to gather them back to him, to tend to them, to bind them up and strengthen them in ways I cannot.

He loves me just as much. He sent Jesus to be born as a baby on what we call Christmas, to model the leading we should do, and to take away my mistakes. He is with me.

How can you be a good shepherd to your children, spouse, parents, friends? Are you leading them to God through your words and actions?

Pray with me: Jesus, my Good Shepherd, you came to us as a baby in a manger. You gather us to you, tend our needs, and strengthen us. Forgive us for the times we are poor shepherds of those in our care and influence. Help us shepherd others to know that you are with us. God with us, Amen.

December 24 - Micah 5:2

“The Way God Works”

Written by Pastor Joe Meyer, Emeritus Pastor

Most of us understand all too well how our world works. We've "been around the block" enough to know and fully understand how things normally go on this broken planet. By that I mean, our experience tells us that when choices are made by human beings, we always choose the biggest and the best! When you interview someone for a position at your company, you want the top candidate. When you look for a realtor to sell your home, you pick the one who sells the fastest and sells for the mostest. When you look for an investment company you want the one who's known for producing piles of cash for their clients. We always choose the biggest and the best and of course, in many instances, rightfully so. But sadly, what that means, is that we overlook, pass-by, and ignore those who are not the biggest and the best...and you know full-well, that's the way the world works.

But I think you also know full-well, that while the world works that way, the Lord does not. To be honest, the Lord seems to make choices that cause us to raise our eyebrows because of our worldly *modus operandi* towards the biggest and the best. In fact, it's one of the most amazing things about our Lord! He seems to work in the exact opposite fashion than we do and that then means, He chooses those we would not. Our reading from Micah 5:2 reminds us of this very fact. Notice that when the Lord chose to send His Son, He didn't choose to send Him to the biggest and the best but instead,

to the lowest and the least. Micah tells us: “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.” When Jesus came into our world He could have chosen any number of far-more-amazing cities to be born in...but He did not. He chose what we’d never choose, the lowest and the leastest city among the clans of Judah. And remember too, on top of choosing Bethlehem, He also chose to be born in a stable in that city, born among animals, born to sleep through the night in a feed-trough for those animals. But you understand our Lord don’t you? You understand, that’s just the way God works!

And that my friends is extremely heartening and amazingly encouraging for all of us! He chooses what this world would not...and that’s you and me! As mentioned already, we are a part of this broken world. What that means therefore, is that we are broken too! Of course, by “broken” I mean flawed, fallen, and frail. The biggest and the best? Hardly. You and I don’t measure up especially when it when it comes to our standing before God. “Flawed, fallen and frail” describes every human being, describes us all. And so I’ll say it again, since God isn’t looking for the biggest and the best, He turns His attention to us, the flawed, fallen and frail creatures of His world, and comes to us in the same way He came to little, insignificant, Bethlehem of old! You didn’t impress Him. You didn’t win His favor. You didn’t rise to the top of His list and therefore garnered His love and forgiveness. No, He loved you in spite of the fact that you were flawed, fallen and frail

and came to you to forgive your sins and make His home in your heart. Whenever you look in the mirror and think “How could God love a sinner like me?” know that He does love you, even if you believe nobody else does. God loves you Christian. God loves you Christian! Even with the cracks, imperfections, warts, bumps, bruises, and foibles that describe and plague us all. God loves you Christian...because, that’s how God works!

