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ADVENT DEVOTIONALS

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

DAY 1 – JOHN 1:1-5

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

John 1:1-5

John's take on Jesus coming into the world was that He was light driving out darkness. John has barely begun his gospel narrative before introducing this cosmic conflict as the reason God the Father sent the Son. With a confident foreshadowing of the story's end, John assures us who will ultimately come out on top.

"That light shines in the darkness, and yet the darkness did not overcome it."

Right here John sums up the season of Advent. Even amidst the great deal of darkness in this world, the light of Jesus Christ shines bright. He who experienced all of the darkness, even death itself, and was not overcome now *dwells* in us as God's Spirit.

As followers of Jesus, we still live in a world where darkness seems ever-present. This is no surprise to many of us. We experience suffering in relationships, through disease and death, and seeing the world run by and for those in power. Remembering the truth found in John 1:5 and the resurrection of Jesus allows us to have faith that, in the words of Frederick Buechner, “the madness and lostness we see all around us and within us are not the last truth about the world but only the next to the last truth.”

REFLECT

Consider today how the light of Christ may shine into the darkness around you. Are there times in your life where you've accepted the darkness in which you may be called to carry the light of Christ? How might practicing the four tenets of Advent Conspiracy bring about light into our dark world?

PRAY

Jesus, Light of the World,
During this Advent season, may we not ignore or fear darkness, but help us see the same light that came into the world 2,000 years ago still shines in us today. When we grow weary, strengthen our hearts. When we feel despair, encourage us through community and your words, And where there is darkness, lead us to be light. Amen.

DAY 2 – JEREMIAH 33:14-16

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

Jeremiah 33:14-16

It was too dark to see much hope. Our leaders were too susceptible to corruption, our hearts too inclined to selfishness, our affections too prone to idolatry. God told us to repent, but we chose to believe a lie; that it's too hard to return to your first Love when you've loved something new. So we ended up here, exiled in Babylon. Here, it's too dark to see any hope. They want to change our names and our worship. Our homes and our laughter have been stolen. Our identity is slowly slipping away to Babylon's message of "Assimilate! Assimilate!..."

This is the context into which Jeremiah speaks his message. He reminds God's people that God has not forgotten His promises. That there is a future because the line of King

David will be restored. The new King will restore justice and righteousness. Jeremiah dared God's people to risk believing in hope when there was no evidence of it. He challenged them to believe that their hope, salvation, justice, and future were wrapped up in the story of this Righteous King.

He dared them to believe that living out that hope in exile was worth the risk.

REFLECT

We know that this Righteous King is Jesus. Like God's people in Babylon, our hope, our salvation, our justice, and our future are intricately tied to His story, and like God's people in Babylon it's hard to hold on to hope when things feel hopeless and culture pressures us. But the story isn't over. God's not done. Throughout your day come back to Jeremiah's words. Let them challenge you to risk and redirect your hope.

PRAY

God, My heart is too inclined to selfishness, my affections too prone to idolatry, and my life too susceptible to corruption. I can too easily give into the pressure of assimilating to the culture, and too often I place my hope in the false promises of its idols. Forgive me Father. Thank you for your Son. Without Him, I'd be left with my weak substitutes for hope. Please give me the courage to live into true hope even when it's hard. Amen.

DAY 3 – LUKE 1:5-10

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

Luke 1:5-10

The Advent (**CHRISTmas**) season is my favorite time of year, but I always have to wait for it. And then it's a season of waiting... in lines, in traffic, for packages to arrive, for gatherings, and for glimpses of hope and encouragement.

Zechariah and Elizabeth understood what it felt like to wait for hope and encouragement. Although both were from priestly lines, and lived righteous and blameless before the Lord, Elizabeth was unable to have children. But God! Often we're deprived of something in the here-and-now because God has something better for us in the future. Zechariah and

Elizabeth wanted a child and faithfully prayed for one, but what they received was more than they could have imagined – a prophet.

Advent means *coming*. Something we look forward to but that's not here yet. It's not uncommon for us to feel like God is running late in our lives. I often wish in my own life that the Lord would do more and do it faster. As a church planter I wanted a certain sized team on a specific timeline. But the Lord knew exactly who we needed and when we needed them. Our team didn't just sit around waiting though, and neither were Zechariah and the people of God. In the meantime, they faithfully served Him, praying with great anticipation.

This might be a season of waiting for you. Maybe even a long season of waiting...But God is still in control.

REFLECT

What circumstance, relationship, career move, or worry do you need to surrender to His perfect timing? Trust His timing this season, pray with anticipation, God is never late!

PRAY

Heavenly Father, Thank you for always showing up on time, for fulfilling every promise you've ever made, and for having every detail of my life in your loving hands. Help me to trust your perfect timing through this season and into the new year. Amen.

DAY 4 – LUKE 1:11-17

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

Luke 1:11-17

Seeing the angel at the altar must have terrified this priest—no one else was allowed into this special place. This must be a divine act. Yet even more divine was the promise that God not only heard his and Elizabeth's prayers (they were childless) but that their son would one day lead people back to God. There was hope for the people of Israel!

In a time when people's hearts were captivated by the mighty Empire of power, false peace, and materialism; a faithful couple was told that their son would do God's work. Lives would change!

Christmas has always been counter-cultural. A Christian holiday celebrated intentionally during the height of paganism. The early church made the decision to celebrate our King on December 25, the birthday of Mithra and the worship of Saturn. Christmas was an in-your-face celebration stating that God intervenes in time and space with a promise to turn people back to their Lord.

Christmas boldly states that lives can change.

REFLECT

Today the Empire of power, false peace, materialism, and consumerism seeks to capture our hearts and distract us from the daily presence of God, especially during this season of Advent. How are you praying for God to appear in your life this Christmas? Where are you longing to see a message of hope?

PRAY

Lord, You appear where no one else is allowed, and sometimes that is the altar of my heart. You also appear in our lives to offer us hope and You cut through time and space to remind us that today people can turn to You, even in the dark times. May we fall before You in love and go before You in faithfulness. Amen.

DAY 5 – LUKE 1:18-25

And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

Luke 1:18-25

When we juxtapose the situation of Zechariah to that of Abraham's, we can hardly miss the parallels:

- God promises both a son (Gen. 15:4-5; 17:15-16; Luke 1:13).
- Both their wives are unable to have children (Gen. 11:30; 16:2; Luke 1:7).
- Both men are well advanced in age (Gen. 17:1, 17; Luke 1:7, 18),
- And then, both men respond the same to God's promise: Abraham: "How shall I know?" (Gen. 15:8), Zechariah: "How shall I know?" (Luke 1:18).

Though God's response to each is radically different. In response to Abraham, God provides a covenant ceremony. Zechariah ends up mute and deaf. Perhaps Zechariah had begun losing hope in God's desire to answer prayer. Maybe in the busyness of his work he stopped spending time in communion with *El Shaddai, God Almighty*, the One who powerfully intervenes changing circumstances when they seem beyond hope, just as for Abraham (Gen. 17:1).

If God had done it before, He could certainly do it again.

Perhaps the gift of silence was God's grace to Zechariah as an invitation to be still before Him and know that He is God (Ps. 46:10). Maybe God gifted Zechariah with not just a baby, but with the sacred space of stopping and considering the wonder of the God who still meets His creatures' deepest desires.

You may find yourself in a season of hopelessness and constant busyness.

Richard Foster comments that, "our Adversary the devil majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in 'muchness' and 'manyness,' he will rest satisfied."

Perhaps this season God is extending you the same invitation as the grace given to Zechariah, to slow down and know that He is *God Almighty*.

REFLECT

In what ways can you intentionally slow down and spend time with the One who can meet you and powerfully intervene in whatever you are facing, just as He did for Abraham and Zechariah?

PRAY

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
Forgive us for getting so caught up in the busyness of life
that we fail to make spending time with you a priority.
Grant us the grace to trust You enough to intentionally
carve out space for prayer and silence with You, that we
might be surprised with wonder in discerning Your
presence in the midst of life's demands this season. Amen.

DAY 6 – LUKE 1:26-38

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, Behold, the bondslave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:26-38

The story of Mary is a stunning one. A young woman of no reputation or status is visited by an angel and informed that she will become pregnant, by the Holy Spirit, with the *Son of God*. She will carry in her body the Savior of the world, the King all of Israel has been waiting for. Just as amazing to me, though, is the proof Gabriel offers that such a thing is possible. Mary's old and barren cousin Elizabeth is six months pregnant!

Elizabeth, unlike Mary, is a woman of standing and reputation. She is the wife of a temple priest and a daughter of Aaron, meaning her lineage, like her husband's, could be traced back to him. Despite that, she did not and could not have children, which would have been a source of great shame for a wife in those days. But after many years, God, in Elizabeth's words, "looked with favor upon" her and "took away [her] disgrace among men." (Luke 1: 25)

If Mary had any concerns about the scandal or costs of being pregnant and unwed, she could look to her cousin—humiliated for much of her married life, but never left or forsaken.

Mary holds out courage. Elizabeth offers hope. One helps me face the mystery of a life with Christ. The other reminds me that because of Christ, my circumstances don't have the last word; that even in the darkest places, I am seen and not forgotten in God's story. Both women inspire me to greater faith.

REFLECT

Which woman challenges you most? Is it Mary, willing to move forward into the unseen, or Elizabeth, living with hope despite her situation?

PRAY

Abba,
You have said that You would never leave or forsake me.
Remind me daily that no matter where I am, You are with me, rejoicing over me, and calling me Yours. Amen.

DAY 7 – MATTHEW 1:18–21

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Matthew 1:18–21

Almost every family has black sheep. A rebel who can't seem to toe the line, another is making news because of an embarrassing antic. They are the ones in the family picture that others step away from so they are not too closely affiliated.

Jesus had black sheep in His family. When we read through Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1, we find prostitutes, adulterers, murderers, idol worshipers, and every other

sort of black sheep. Not the kind of pedigree we might expect for the Savior of the world.

And then there's Mary. Mary is found to be with child before marriage – a stigma in any society. We know how that news landed on her fiancé Joseph. He was embarrassed. He had in mind to leave her "quietly."

In His sovereignty, God cleared up the matter for Joseph in a dream, but what of the rest of Mary's family? Her closest friends? Her community? It's likely that Jesus walked under a cloud of shame all His life because some could never accept such a fantastical story as a virgin conception. In their minds, Mary, and Jesus Himself, would always be black sheep.

God is apparently perfectly OK with that. In fact, black sheep are exactly the sort of people Jesus came for: "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21).

Jesus really had no other option than to come through a family tree with broken branches, a family tree like yours and mine. Every one of us is a black sheep. But thank God for the perfect Lamb who came to save black sheep like you and me.

REFLECT

Who comes to your mind as the black sheep of your family? Is it you? How does Jesus' mission to save people from their sins change your view of black sheep?

PRAY

Jesus,
Thank You for coming as a perfect Lamb to save black sheep like me – wash me with Your precious blood and make me white as snow. Amen.

DAY 8 – MATTHEW 1:22–25

Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call him, Emmanuel. (Emmanuel means “God with us.”) When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn’t have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

Matthew 1:22-25

Waiting is hard.

Most often, we have the ability to get whatever we want or need in an extremely quick and easy way. Due to this convenience, we have become extremely impatient. As we find ourselves in the midst of the hustle and bustle of this advent season, patience seems to be one of the first things to go. Yet, as we come together to *Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More*, and *Love All*, patience is one of the key aspects needed to fully embrace and live out this countercultural movement.

The scripture for today declares that “Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the

prophet would be fulfilled.” This took over 500 years of patiently waiting for the coming of Emmanuel to break into space and time, so that God could be with us and, ultimately, save us.

REFLECT

As you move through the day, look for opportunities to be a co-conspirator for the transformation of the world by slowing down and waiting.

PRAY

Almighty God,
Allow me to slow down and wait on you. Stir up within me, a vision of your kingdom coming in the stillness and quiet moment of life, so that I might be able join with you and become a conspirator for the transformation of this world through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.

DAY 9 – ISAIAH 7:14

All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us').

Isaiah 7:14

In light of a busy world Jesus invades humanity with a God-sized announcement. You could focus on so many things of this promise verse of the coming savior. You could look at power of the immaculate conception. You could hone in on the God who wants to be found by giving seekers a sign. In this chaotic world Jesus is given a new name. He is given the name Immanuel which means God is with Us.

Here's where I would settle my heart upon during advent; that Jesus is God with us. He invaded a broken world. A world that deserved judgement and rebuke. And what does God provide? He provides Himself.

REFLECT

I would hope in the midst of the chaos of this fractured world you could settle in your heart that Jesus is God's answer to you and me. Our only response and our ultimate response is to worship the God who is with us. He's not afraid of our brokenness. We are not so messy that the Master doesn't want to commune with us. He comes to us as the God who will and can help us get back to right standing.

PRAY

Jesus,
Thank you for loving us enough to humble yourself and identify with us. Thank you for being with us and giving us a path back to God through your sacrifice!

DAY 10 – LUKE 1:39-45

A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."

Luke 1:39-45

It is exciting when you find out that you're going to have a child. You start thinking about who you are going to tell and when you are going to tell them. In today's culture many parents wait a number of weeks before sharing this news with others. For our family, my wife usually tells her parents first.

Now imagine young Mary. The angel Gabriel has told her that she is going to bring the Son of God into the world. Will she wait for a few months before she will tell anyone her news? Can she keep this a secret? How long will she wait?

"A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea."
(Luke 1:39)

Where would she go? Who will she tell? Who would believe her? Who would understand her? Elizabeth. She would go to a relative, Elizabeth, who "has become pregnant in her old age." (vs. 36) Of course, Elizabeth would understand Mary because God has just given her a miraculous child at an old age. Elizabeth was carrying the child that would herald the King and Mary is carrying the King.

The Good News is that Jesus has come into the world at this season of Advent. Mary couldn't wait to tell of the coming news of Jesus! Like Mary, we should be so moved by this that we are hurrying to tell others of Jesus too.

REFLECT

Will you keep Jesus and what He has done in your life a secret this year? How can you begin to share this good news with others?

PRAY

Jesus,

Thank you for coming as a baby into this world and we look forward to Your second coming as a King. Amen.

DAY 11 – LUKE 1:46-56

And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Luke 1:46-56

Mary's song is known by many as the Magnificat, which is a Latin word meaning, "to magnify". This beautiful song arose spontaneously from Mary after the words said by Elizabeth,

"Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished."

When I imagine Mary and Elizabeth in this moment, I see an almost visceral energy circulating around these two remarkable women, both pregnant with a promise that would not only change their own lives, but all of human history. Yet, it's important to remember that Mary's song was offered well before she had received what was promised. She did not wait to give thanks. She did not wait to tell of God's goodness. She did not wait to share her joy.

It can feel vulnerable and risky to share our own stories before we have received what has been promised. We are tempted to wait to give thanks until we can be sure that what we heard whispered in our hearts was true after all. I have seen how doubt can at times be a healthy friend on the journey of seeking God, but when we allow doubt to close our hands in fear rather than open them in worship and awe, we are missing out on the joy of truly trusting in God.

Mary's trust in God's promise is a gift to us. When I read her song, I feel braver in my own faith. That is the power of joyful, genuine worship. It echos longer and reaches farther than we may ever know.

REFLECT

Have you ever worshiped God in the midst of unfinished stories and unfulfilled promises? Was the joy worth the risk of trusting?

PRAY

God,

We confess that we have not always believed what You have promised. We have not always chosen to take You at your word, and have missed out on the true joy and hope that comes from trusting You. May our hearts gain courage in the middle of our stories, worshiping You boldly so that our joy in Christ might be multiplied. Amen.

DAY 12 – LUKE 1:68-69

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David.

Luke 1:68-69

It is often said that “patience is a virtue.” But when is it okay to give up patience? After 10 minutes? A year? A decade? A century??? The Israelites waited hundreds of years for God to raise up a mighty savior. Generations waited in hope. The Israelites did not give up on God’s promise.

After generations of waiting, Zechariah was visited by an angel of God who came with an astonishing message. Your long wait is over. Your hope is fulfilled. The messiah is near. God is entering the world in a new way that will fulfill hope and renew grace. Imagine that. Zechariah’s response to this astounding news is to shout a blessing. What a blessing he was to receive.

Today we have grown increasingly impatient.

We want what we want *right now*. That leaves little room for hope and trust that God will respond. Have you ever given up hope in God? In a world of quick responses, it is easy to give up on God when God doesn't respond as quickly as Siri, Alexa, or Amazon Prime. But what would it look like to be patient and not lose hope?

REFLECT

Imagine what blessings God has in store when you surrender and practice patience like Zechariah. Practicing patience does not mean waiting a lifetime; it means being still and patient enough to await God's wisdom which always comes.

PRAY

Almighty God,
Grant me still patience in my busy life to look and to listen for You. As You were present in the world in the Incarnation, be present with me, that I may know the joys and blessings that you offer this season. Amen.

DAY 13 – LUKE 2:1-5

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child.

Luke 2:1-5

At the start of the Christmas story, Joseph believes that Mary has been unfaithful to him, and he initially plans to divorce from her. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that an angel appears to Joseph, convincing him to stay (Matthew 1:18-24). God has a role in the Christmas story for Joseph. He wants Joseph to stay with Mary and help her raise this child, the Messiah. God's plans for Joseph are bigger than he can imagine at this one moment.

We can imagine this wasn't an easy decision for Joseph - gossip and shame would have followed this young couple everywhere. But Joseph is faithful to this calling from God.

Mary and Joseph get word about the upcoming census and Joseph takes the risk of bringing Mary and their unborn son to Bethlehem. In the midst of a difficult to explain situation, Joseph sticks by Mary and leads her to Bethlehem, where the Christ child will soon be born.

As we think about this passage, Joseph's example can inspire us to be faithful in our own relationship with God. It may be that God is asking us to do something difficult, or something that others won't fully understand. But we trust that God knows what He is doing, and that He has given each of us a role to play in the story of salvation that He is writing.

REFLECT

Is God calling me to do something difficult? How can I be faithful to the work He wants me to do? What is the one step I can take today to be obedient to God's call?

PRAY

Lord,

Thank you for the example of Joseph, who obeyed Your will even when it wasn't easy. Give me the courage this week to listen to Your voice, and follow in whatever direction You call me. Help me to trust that Your will is better than mine and provide all that I need to do the work You are asking me to do. In Jesus' Name - Amen.

DAY 14 – LUKE 2:6-7

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

Luke 2:6-7

Two sentences, a couple of dozen words – that's all Luke uses to describe the birth of the Son of God. None of what we would expect for the birth of a king. But perhaps that's the point. And we can probably learn much from the words Luke did include.

This line really speaks to me: "*She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*"

Of the few details Luke shares, this is perhaps the most striking...and most important. For while it is unbelievable to most of us that no one made room for this expectant mother, this kind of thing happens all the time. Refugees, immigrants, the poor... Does it matter – to the world, to us – if they are pregnant or not, sick or not, hungry or not, the same race or not?

Jesus was born, not only like all of us, but particularly like the most vulnerable of us. God comes to redeem all, and God starts with those most in need. Jesus is found not in the capital city but in a backwoods town, not in the inn but in the stable, not sleeping on fine linens but laid in an ordinary manger with cloth.

I'll never forget the moment my wife and I found out we were having a baby. Nine months later, not everything went the way we had planned or hoped they would have, but he was here. Out came this little brown eyed boy, my son. One of the greatest moments of my life.

My son isn't Jesus, but when I look at the face of my son, I see Jesus. I am reminded of our Creator.

REFLECT

What if we started looking at people like that this Christmas season? Open our eyes God. Help us to see the broken, the lonely, and the hurting.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,
You came once in the form of a vulnerable and helpless child, delivered to an ordinary mother and father, in order to redeem the world. Come again and always into our hearts, that we may see that child in the face of all those in need. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DAY 15 – LUKE 2:8-12

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

Luke 2:8-12

Imagine for a moment being one of those shepherds. You are going about your job, looking after the sheep, you like the solitary. However, the people in the nearby town don't really respect you. Other shepherds haven't helped. People think you are smelly, a likely thief, a bit odd and not deserving of much respect.

Then in the stillness of the night, out of the blue, an amazing power surrounds you, God's glory is in your midst.

How would you feel? Would you be terrified like the shepherds or comforted?

When I look back on my life and I have been placed in the presence of powerful people with authority, I have been like those shepherds. Terrified that I might be in trouble. Terrified that I might mess things up. Terrified that I might be criticised. And as a pastor at times I meet people who feel the same about God. They worry that God will criticise, condemn and even punish them.

But God has a different message for us, just like he had for the shepherds.

God's angel says: "Don't be afraid, I bring you good news that will bring great joy for all the people" This good news is that God uses His power and authority not to condemn or terrify people, but to give us Jesus, who gives us the real gift of Christmas, the gift of a loving life with God forever.

So being in God's presence leads to joy not fear, when we truly hear from God.

REFLECT

As you spend time with God take notice of the good news God gives you, that you can share with everyone you know.

PRAY

Almighty God,
Thank you for using Your power and glory to give us the Good News of Christmas, may everyone know You by Your Good News. Amen.

DAY 16 – LUKE 2:13-14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

Luke 2:13-14

Life is full of *and suddenly* moments. Moments in time that can forever change our perspective. When *and suddenly* moments appear, they can come in all shapes and sizes. They can be full of surprise, delight, joy, and healing but they can also be full of hurt, brokenness, despair, fear, and anguish.

For the shepherds who experienced this *and suddenly* moment their first reaction was one of fear but then peace settled in. Peace, the Shalom of God. In John 14:27 Jesus says “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

It's not difficult to experience His peace in those joyful moments that happen suddenly. To run into an old friend unexpectedly or to receive an unexpected promotion or encouragement.

These are the good *and suddenlys* that are welcomed with much delight.

But what about the other kind? When the car appears out of nowhere or we receive a phone call with devastating news. Maybe we go to our place of employment to find out we have been let go, or the sudden death of someone dearly loved. No matter what the circumstance this one thing remains. His peace will be there, overshadowing, hovering over the pain, the fear the anguish.

He is always present.

REFLECT

Have you experienced any *and suddenly* moments recently? I want to encourage you, His peace was in the chaos. He is always present, in the moment. And He cares deeply for you.

PRAY

Father,
Today, for all the *and suddenly* moments that happen, let us reach out to You knowing that You care and that Your peace is there, ever present in every moments of our lives. Amen.

DAY 17 – LUKE 2:15–18

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Luke 2:15-18

In today's reading, the heavenly host returns to its heavenly abode, and the shepherds are left to decide what to do with the good news that has just been delivered in such wildly improbable fashion. They could have laughed the whole thing off as a kind of mass hallucination, or been so struck with fear that they couldn't even stand let alone walk into Bethlehem, but they believe that God has spoken to them, and they resolve to see for themselves what they have heard.

And so they find the promised child lying in a manger, and while we are told little about their encounter with the new family, we are told that they immediately set out to spread the word concerning all they have seen and heard.

In that moment they take on the role of the angels, messengers of God declaring the birth of a saviour, just as it had been declared to them.

REFLECT

What have you seen and heard of that child lying in a manger? How might you take on the role of the angels this Christmas? Who needs to hear this Good News?

PRAY

Like the shepherds who were first at the manger, may we hear the good news and seek it out. May we become messengers of God, declaring that the one who saves has come amongst us. And may all who hear us be amazed, that they may become seekers and messengers in their turn. Amen.

DAY 18 – LUKE 2:19–20

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

Luke 2:19-20

The shepherds left their visit glorifying and rejoicing about what they had just experienced. It was all true, the angel's song was true!

In the midst of everything going on around her, Mary treasured and pondered all that she had heard in her heart. Imagine her expectation about her son's life! She was already preparing to meet Him and see everything that Jesus would do.

My wife often jokes about me saying that the words I use the most in our marriage are "Did you see the...?" or "Where is the...?" I forget and misplace things all over my home. I am always asking what to do next, because I don't know where the things I need are. But there is something more that my heart needs, and it has to be my main treasure, I can't forget where its place is.

Today, with so many screens flashing in front of us, fighting for our attention, and so much information available, it becomes more difficult to focus on what's important to keep in your heart. Too many things have a little bit of our attention for a short period of time. We must keep the Gospel above them.

If the Gospel is out of place in the room of our heart, the whole life becomes a mess. Do not let the Gospel be in your heart like a forgotten garment in the corner of the room or under some other object. Make Jesus the foundation, the walls, and the decoration of your heart.

REFLECT

Whatever you do today, let it emerge from the joy that comes from meditation and celebration of the good news. It should be the most visible thing in our lives. Take time today to treasure this in your heart and ponder what God has done in your life already.

PRAY

Lord,
Help me to treasure the Gospel as my main thought, through all my days. May Christ rule over all my feelings, and give me courage and wisdom to be your witness. Amen.

DAY 19 – MATTHEW 2:1-2

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

Matthew 2:1-2

“We have come to worship him” was the reason the Magi gave as to why they came to see Jesus. They came to worship a king who had been born, but not just any king, a king who came to bring change to the world.

How can we worship Jesus while at the same time bringing change to the world around us? It's not about a song. It's not about a religious ritual. Real worship and real change happens when we sacrifice. Our faith is increased when we understand the power of sacrifice.

On a trip to Zimbabwe during the Sunday service I witnessed the ultimate sacrifice. The time came to take up an offering which in my mind was an act of futility. With over 85% unemployment and through the struggles of life people there were facing, person after person contributed something to the offering. And they gave with complete

joy! Not reluctantly or out of guilt. They sacrificed what they had to participate in the kingdom of God.

Like the Magi, they came to worship him. They came to worship Jesus and bring a change to the world through their willingness to sacrifice.

The Magi sacrificed time and personal wealth to worship Jesus. They honored him with what they had. We may not have the resources like the Magi, but the value of worship is not measured by the amount we give, it is measured by the willingness to present what we have. I am always struck by the words of the Christmas carol, *The Little Drummer Boy*, because all he gave was what he had. He asked if he could drum for the king.

REFLECT

How will you worship the King this year. What can you sacrifice to bring change to someone's life?

PRAY

Jesus,
Help me to have a spirit of worship this Advent season.
Use my resources, my talents, and my gifts to serve others
in Your name. Amen.

DAY 20 – MATTHEW 2:3–6

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

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

Matthew 2:3-6

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

Disturbed! A big word that in its original Greek can mean agitated, stirred-up, troubled and afraid.

Isn’t it interesting that you don’t have to look far to see the same wide spectrum of responses to Jesus’ birth today? You may not even have to look past your own family to see such different reactions to Jesus.

And yet, nobody could argue with Micah's prophecy, written some 700 years earlier (Micah 5). Herod demanded answers, and a voice from the past echoed truth down long corridors of time. Maybe if Herod had not been so worried about losing his status, his position, his rule, his perceived *control*, he might've noticed something sweetly significant in that last prophetic sentence.

"...a ruler who will *shepherd* my people Israel."

This Ruler is different.

He's come to lead alright, but in the humblest way. On the list of "dirty jobs" it doesn't get much worse than shepherding. What kind of Ruler loves like this?

REFLECT

These days I'm asking, what am I so worried about losing that I'd let it keep me from seeking my Messiah and worshiping Him? What about you? What are you holding onto so hard that the idea of Jesus ruling your life is, frankly, unsettling? Disturbing? He wants to feed you, lead you, love and tenderly care for you.

PRAY

Lord Jesus,
Help me to let go of anything that comes between me and You.
You deserve my wholehearted worship! Amen.

DAY 21 – MATTHEW 2:7-8

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

Matthew 2:7-8

The plot is thickening as the anticipation of the coming savior, Jesus Christ, begins to attract a different audience. The magnitude of His birth is no longer just for worshipers. Now someone else is paying attention.

Have you ever noticed that as soon as you've focused your heart on Jesus, how much interference comes your way? Herod the soon to be originator of a death decree for all male children under two years old is beginning his quest with a question and some encouragement. The question is *where is the King Child?* The encouragement is *go search carefully for Him*. The beginning of treachery is wrapped around a desire to worship.

Even within the context of evil, God is sovereign. Herod has no desire to worship the newborn King, Jesus Christ. Instead he feels threatened by His arrival and

he implements the treacherous plan to rid Jesus from the scene.

Can I stop you for a moment because it's so easy to be appalled at Herod's actions to kill off the Savior under the guise of wanting to worship; however, how's our heart when it comes to complete surrender to God? What are we harboring in our heart? Are we giving Him our secret struggles?

REFLECT

Worship is a heart issue. The secrets of our heart are known by God even if they are not articulated by us. Let's do the opposite and let nothing be in competition with our sincere worship to God. We will search carefully for Him knowing He is to be found.

PRAY

God,
Help us to yield ourselves completely to You in worship.
Let's come boldly to You knowing You are fully aware of our brokenness and let us trust You in the midst of our competing interests. We surrender.

DAY 22 – MATTHEW 2:9-12

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

Matthew 2:9-12

Such familiar words!

Wise men from afar finally found the little family, worshipped Jesus and presented gifts. I'd have taken nappies, babygros and blankets plus a casserole for the parents, but I'd have been wrong. These men were spot on, gold would provide for that refugee family for two years, frankincense would repel desert insects from tender infant skin, and myrrh would serve as baby oil keeping him clean and comfortable.

Practical gifts, but also gifts with the messages we sing of every year. Gold denotes majesty – this child was born

King of the Jews, and now reigns in Heaven. Priests used incense to worship God – this child was God come down to earth, and now is seated in Heaven. Myrrh was used to prepare bodies for burial – this child, both King and God, was born to die – and to rise!

The men wouldn't fully understand what those gifts meant, but gave them anyway. Magi, named because they dealt in magic which was never part of God's purposes for His people, and yet they and their gifts were welcomed and accepted.

This was how God showed the world that all are welcome, no matter our age, gender, or race, no matter what we have been, have believed, or have done in the past, Jesus came for all, and wants all of us to come to Him – He will accept us.

REFLECT

Have you let the words and promises of Jesus settle into your heart?

PRAY

Loving God,
You know me and accept me, just as You knew and accepted the wise men who worshipped Jesus. May that knowledge so thrill me, that I make time to worship You daily, giving you the gifts of my love and my life – even when I don't fully understand what that may mean. I ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

DAY 23 – GALATIANS 4:4-7

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

Galatians 4:4-7

God as my Father?

This was such a foreign concept to me when I began to learn about God. I grew up in a home without a father. Not just an absent father, but a father that abandoned his family for another. So the idea of worshipping a God who said He wanted to be my Father was a bit scary and not something I was interested in.

As a child and a young adult I struggled with feeling good enough, worthy of unconditional love and worth sticking around for. I made terrible life choices that continued to feed into that mindset.

But as I came face to face with God and His heart and desires for me, my life was changed!

God began to do things in my life that were so full of love, forgiveness, and hope that I couldn't help but want to know Him more. As I studied God's word and was loved on by God's people, I saw His unconditional love for me. The love of a Father that I had always desired. He began to heal the deep wounds in my life and show me where His goodness was in all those times I was completely hopeless and broken.

And today I stand on the truth in Galatians 4:7- "...you are no longer a slave but God's own child." I am no longer a slave/victim to the brokenness I grew up in, but I am a victor IN Christ!

I challenge you today to look at your life.

REFLECT

What has God freed you from? What are the beautiful inheritances He is sharing with you as His child?

PRAY

Father,
Thank you for being my Dad! Thank you for your unconditional love for me. I love you! Amen.

DAY 24 – ISAIAH 9:6-7

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

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

Isaiah 9:6-7

It's hard to imagine, in this day of polarity in politics, a government so amazing that we would consider good news the fact that it would never end. Can you picture an earthly kingdom characterized by justice and righteousness – always and forever? It's a stretch, isn't it?

When we consider some of the most successful kingdoms throughout the Earth's history, with the happiest subjects, the fairest laws, the lowest taxes... all have eventually proven flawed by the corruption of power and ambition, weak or greedy leaders, restless, rebellious people or some combination of our universal brokenness.

No matter how good a government may seem for a time, it's clear that mere humans, even with the best intentions, have never been/will never be able to accomplish this sort of ideal civilization. It's impossible. Only God could accomplish this.

But look at the good news of this passage: that's just what God did!

Through the birth of this one babe, this child, God established His Kingdom - overflowing with justice, righteousness and peace with no end, and ruled by the most Wonderful Counselor, the Mightiest God, the Everlasting Father, and Prince of all Peace.

There is one more name for this perfect King, the ruler of this shockingly perfect eternal kingdom. It is "Jesus" and we don't have to wait for some distant future in which He will reign. No, King Jesus reigns now and forever.

If you are a subject of King Jesus, living in His kingdom and under His authority, you already know the goodness of His reign. If not, you are invited to join Him, to be a part of the beautiful Kingdom where justice, righteousness and peace will never end.

What are you waiting for?

REFLECT

If you are a subject of King Jesus, in what ways do you experience His reign every day? Are there areas of your life in which you struggle to submit to His authority? If you have not called Jesus your King, what causes you to hesitate? Ask God to reveal Himself and His Kingdom to you today.

PRAY

Jesus,
Thank You for Your government and Kingdom, which has only ever been and will always be for my good. Thank You for inviting me to be a part of Your glorious Kingdom. Help me to submit to Your authority in every part of my life so that I may increasingly experience Your reign of justice, righteousness and peace unending. I ask in Your name, Jesus, my King.

DAY 25 – JOHN 1:14

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

As a teen, Christmas was often followed by a few days outdoors with the guys: knee deep in snow, no cabin or tents, just a spruce bough lean-to deep in the woods. With -3°F/-19.4°C weather, we were never far from the fire where meals were cooked and hands and toes warmed. Years have passed and it is only the fellowship of those days that I miss.

Our text from John 1 reminds us that although Jesus was the only begotten Son of God, the eternal and living Word, He chose to come and dwell with us.

The Greek word that we so preciously translate as *dwelt among us* reminds us that He ‘tabernacled with us’ or as it has been put, Jesus has pitched His tent with us. He’s taking up residence.

From here He experienced life in every way as we know it and through all of those experiences the glory and

grace of God shown through. No matter how humble our circumstances, how desperate our lives, this truth remains: God is with us and His grace and glory will shine through.

It may be difficult to see or imagine but He is there.

Into a rough straw hewn manger came One from glory to save the world, to save us. Jesus has known our hunger, our cold, smelled the smoke from our fires, and shared fellowship with friends. It is that intimate fellowship that He longs to experience with us once more. It is that fellowship that we need now more than anything else. It is that fellowship that makes this season Christmas.

REFLECT

Where in the midst of this Christmas Day do you need to find Jesus most? Where do you long for His fellowship? Try to picture Him already there.

PRAY

Lord,
Meet us where we are today and draw us nearer to your heart. Help us never to forget that You dwell among us and You long for fellowship with us. May we notice You today. Amen.