

December Devotions

Written for you to spend a few minutes with
God each day leading up to Christmas

women's
MINISTRY
WELS.NET/WOMEN

Wait and Watch

Paula Sulzke

DAY
1

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel whose origins are from of old, from ancient times (Micah 5:2).

The time is one of political instability, social injustice, and moral degeneration. Nations plot against each other. Hatred spills over between countries as they attempt to gain power. People journey through life to please themselves with no concern for God or those around them. Sounds like the present time, right?

Actually, this describes a place in history in the late 8th century B.C. The divided kingdom - the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah - had been at odds with each other. Israel joined forces with Aram to attack Judah and took down 120,000 Judean soldiers. When Judah pleaded with Assyria for aid, the king gave them more trouble than help. Assyria then captured Samaria and brought an end to the Northern Kingdom, and the downfall of Judah continued. A nation that once feared and followed the Lord was rebelling with all her might as she sought riches and glory during troubling times. Worship had become a mere outward show of sacrifice rather than hearts filled with gratitude and praise toward a loving God. So, God called Micah to minister to Judah in this very difficult atmosphere.

One would think Micah's message would be of complete doom and dread mixed with a hefty dose of harsh judgment and wrath. And it certainly was condemning. The people's hearts were so far from a God who preserved them, brought them out of Egypt, and saved them from certain peril that the prophet had to confront them with their sin. He prophesied Jerusalem's destruction in so much detail it seems as if he already lived it as he called the people to repentance.

We need that same message today. We live in a time of political instability, social injustice and moral degeneration, maybe more now than many of us have seen in our lifetimes. But the problem is not just the world around us. We are part of that problem, too. We rebel first in our hearts. Then as it festers, it works its way to our biting words and our inconsiderate actions. We need the message that helps us see our sin and brings us to our knees in repentance.

God hears our cries for mercy, just as he heard his people's cries in Micah's time. Micah's message from God quickly turned to one of hope and comfort, reassuring the people that God would restore them. He would not forsake them. God gave Micah the words to prophesy the coming of the King to rescue them. He would be more than just an earthly king. This King would reign *over* them, not just among them. This King from eternity would come from the Almighty God himself, a King different than any they'd ever known. God promised it through Micah and other prophets who never saw this King.

And so, it is with us. We also have Scripture that guides us to God's promises. This December, like every other before it, our eyes look to a manger and wait in expectation for the day we celebrate Jesus' birth. But we also wait for another coming of our King as our eyes look to the skies. At his second coming, Jesus will take us to be with him and all the saints and angels in full heavenly glory and splendor. What a glorious day that will be, when God will take all who believe in the promised King to live with him! We don't know when that day will be, but we trust God to keep us in his care until that day comes. Until then, we walk by faith and not by sight, just as his prophets of long ago.

We join Micah in proclaiming: "But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me" (Micah 7:2).

O Lord, walk with us until that glorious day of Jesus' coming! Amen!

Your Job as Prophet

Mollie Schairer

DAY
2

**Let the fields be overjoyed, and everything that is in them.
Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy before the LORD, for he comes,
for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness (Psalm 96:12-13).**

“We’ll get through Covid, I guess. But I figure eventually some superbug will crop up and wipe us all out, and that will be the end of life on earth.”

I had been making small talk with the assistant manager at our local cell phone store while he fixed my phone. The conversation soon turned to the rising case counts in our area. That was when his eyes locked onto mine above his camouflage face mask, and he shared his theory about the end of the world.

He looked down again and continued swiping through screens. I collected my thoughts and said a quick prayer. “I believe, too, that our world has an end date.” I said. “It won’t be due to a virus, though. God has set that end date. It will be when Jesus comes again.”

The Holy Spirit had opened an opportunity for me to be God’s prophet, telling the truth of God’s Word to a stranger in my path.

God has not abandoned us to a world of scary diseases, case counts, and death. He has remained faithful to us, even though our first ancestors’ rebellion against him is the very reason that earth is no longer the paradise that he intended for us.

God still loves us. He did not leave us to be destroyed by our own sin. Two thousand years ago, he sent Jesus to our corrupt earth, to rescue us through the most humble service imaginable. Jesus lived a perfect life in our place and paid the penalty for our rebellion on the cross.

Then God the Father elevated Jesus, giving him all power and authority over everything in heaven and on earth. Jesus, both Judge and King, will return in triumph! He will make public the verdict that the Holy Spirit has already confirmed in our hearts. We are covered by the Judge’s own perfection. We are not guilty!

Then our Judge will condemn and do away with all that corrupts and kills and destroys. These will never hurt us again. We will share in his victory over sin and death, made sinless ourselves. We will be with him in a new heaven and earth, freed from the chains of corruption and decay (Romans 8:20). Unspoiled forever, this new world will rejoice, and we will celebrate with it.

Take a moment today to read Psalm 96. Sing Joy to the World, based in part on this psalm. Meditate on the love and faithfulness of God in sending Jesus at Christmas, and in promising that he will come again.

Then go out in confidence as God’s own prophets, chosen and equipped to be his truth-tellers. The people whom God puts in your path are wondering—and worrying—about disease, about dying, about the future of life on earth.

We know the future through God’s revealed Word. We have the truth that dispels all anxiety. This Advent let us speak up with that joyful truth.

Holy Spirit, give us opportunities this Advent to serve as your prophets, sharing your truth with a troubled world. God our Father forgive us for the times we have remained silent. Lord Jesus, our Savior and Judge, reassure us that because your perfection covers us, your verdict for us is “Not guilty!” We thank you for the sure hope of a joyful reunion with you. Amen.

Faith that Encourages

Naomi Schmidt

DAY
3

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

(Luke 1:39-45)

Can you imagine the conversations that followed this holy greeting?

Constant chatter would have been a sharp contrast to her life of silence with Zechariah! Mary and Elizabeth had months to fill with laughter, love and precious memories; weeks to linger over dreams, hopes and prayers for the future; days filled with talk about unexpected babies.

But this wasn't a social visit.

Elizabeth was a godly, "*upright*" woman who "*blamelessly*" followed God's commands (Luke 1:5-6). God sent Mary to Elizabeth for spiritual encouragement—and we see an outpouring of the Holy Spirit from the first moment of their reunion.

But then what? Did they search prophecies in Scripture to learn about their sons? Did they cry together at the hardships they would face as mothers? Oh, what a marvel it would have been to hear their prayers! The nurturing that followed was certainly founded on the Word and promises of God. But then, with no details to satisfy our curiosity, Mary left, and Elizabeth would become busy with her newborn son.

How did Elizabeth know when the Savior was born? Did she hear the angels singing in the sky or see the shining radiance of the Lord's glory? Did her heart leap for joy at Christ's birth? Scripture doesn't tell us she did. Perhaps, like so many others before and after, she saw it only through eyes of faith.

Elizabeth didn't need to hear the angels, see the Lord's glory, or hold the Christ-child because she trusted it would happen. God promised it. Elizabeth believed it—and the influence of her strong faith wasn't just for Mary. It stands as an encouragement for us as well.

Elizabeth gave birth to the prophet who would prepare the way of Christ and "*turn the hearts of the parents to their children*" (Malachi 4:6). God chose to fulfill this promise through an old, barren woman after years and years of waiting. And then God gave her even more—the evidence of a Holy Spirit filled child, who before he was even born, leapt in the presence of Christ in utero.

How can we live with such certain faith? How can we trust so solidly in God's unfailing promises and the presence of the unseen, eternal Christ? How can we wait and wait yet still live in a way that trusts and draws attention to the goodness of God?

Pour over the Word. Read God's promises. Trust they are for you.

Elizabeth praised Mary saying, "*Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!*" We can live with that same unfaltering faith, encouraging one another to look to the Lord through hardships and difficulties.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the people of Scripture that are a beautiful example of faith. Thank you for the people in my life who have been an encouragement to me. Fill me with your Spirit and strengthen my faith to live in your grace and forgiveness. But Lord, I also want to be an encouragement to others. Show me who I can encourage this Advent season and give me courage to reach out with your love. In your holy name I pray, Amen.

Hospitality For Such a Time as This

Ann M. Penath

DAY
4

“At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth...

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

(Luke 1: 39-40, 56).

A teenaged relative shows up on your doorstep unannounced, and she’s unmarried and pregnant. What to do? Elizabeth has the answer--welcome her, bless her, encourage her, then offer your home as hers for as long as needed!

We have often heard the story of Elizabeth’s prophetic greeting and the baby John “leaping in her womb.” How wonderful Elizabeth’s prophetic words must have been to this young woman still pondering an astounding message from an amazing angel messenger! Elizabeth’s words confirmed Gabriel’s--Elizabeth herself was with child and Mary was to be the mother of the Savior of the world! Mary responded with the exuberant song of praise we still sing today!

We don’t often focus on Elizabeth’s generous hospitality. Three months! That’s a long time to shelter and care for a young woman in her first, perhaps rocky, months of pregnancy while in the last trimester of your own geriatric pregnancy. This time also gave the much older Elizabeth the opportunity to spiritually mentor this young mother, to build her up before she had to face a confused Joseph, possibly judgmental family and friends, a long journey to Bethlehem, a less than normal birth experience, a flight to Egypt... What a sanctuary God provided for Mary!

Elizabeth’s abundant hospitality was unplanned and Spirit-led, a definite blessing for Mary and an example for us. How can we be an Elizabeth to the Marys around us? In normal times, hospitality sounds like welcoming family to your home, friendly neighborhood gatherings, hosting sleepovers or holiday dinners. Now everything has changed, and many of these congenial ways must be reconsidered. Are we to abandon all hope of hospitality?

Although hospitality may look different today, there are still many (and perhaps more) ways to serve. Keep your eyes and ears open for unexpected opportunities. Can you host a weekly virtual “dinner” with extended family to uplift and encourage? Can you pack an open-air picnic for friends? Can you drop off a doorstep meal for a family in need? Can you send a card or make a phone call to a lonely senior or sick member from your church? Is there a food bank that needs donations? Is there an international college student who suddenly goes on-line and needs a home?

Mary may have stayed with Elizabeth until John’s birth. Undoubtedly, Mary not only enjoyed her relative’s kindheartedness, but also proved to be a blessing to her. As we focus on others, not ourselves, we also will be blessed--with a more loving heart, more flexibility, patience, understanding and empathy. And, most importantly, these gifts of hospitality may give us the even greater opportunity to welcome others to God’s heavenly home through his generous gift of Jesus.

Romans 12:13 says, “Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” May God give us opportunities, strength and resources to open our hearts and homes like Elizabeth to a world desperately in need of hospitality!

Dear Lord, thank you for providing Elizabeth’s welcoming home for Mary as she prepared to welcome you to the world! Open our eyes to the many opportunities around us to show hospitality. Please bless our humble efforts. May they serve as pathways to a heavenly welcome through faith in you! Amen.

Doubly Chosen by God

Mollie Schairer

DAY
5

Surely, from now on, all generations will call me blessed, because the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name (Luke 1:48b-49).

Only one woman among billions received the astounding call to be the mother of Jesus the Messiah.

God chose Mary. He set her apart for special work, for a vocation unlike any other. Mary heard God's messenger announce: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35). Five months later, Mary felt the world's Savior kicking and rolling inside her womb. Lying in a stable, Mary held the baby who would fulfill God's plan to conquer Satan. During those miraculous first years, Mary saw the worshipful awe in the eyes of peasants and kings, coming to bow before her child.

What a calling! What a gift! Yes, we call Mary blessed, just as believers have done for 2,000 years. Certainly, God did great things—amazing things—for Mary.

Yet did you know that being Jesus' mother was *not* Mary's greatest calling in life? Long before the angel visited her, God called Mary to saving faith. He chose Mary to believe in the coming Messiah and be made holy and sinless by this Messiah's work. He chose Mary as his own child, and heir of eternal life with him.

God has done great things for us, too! Each of us has received that same call to faith. God chose you even before he created the world! (Ephesians 1:4) Before God declared, "Let there be light," he already knew you, and had already determined that you would become his child. His call has given us purity and perfection through Jesus, acceptance and belonging in his Kingdom, and eternal life in Heaven.

What a calling! What a gift!

And, just like Mary, God has again chosen us, this time for work here on earth uniquely our own. Paul tells us, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Ephesians 2:10). Not only did God choose us for himself literally ahead of time, he also, in advance, planned good tasks for us to accomplish as we live out his unique callings for us.

No, you haven't been visited by an angel (I know I haven't!), but that doesn't make your callings in Christ any less real, or any less important to the Caller. Are you married? He has called you to be a spouse. Grow in all that he intends for you. Are you a parent? He has called you to that vocation and entrusted to you the particular little ones (or not so little ones) that he wants you to nurture. The same goes for all of your grandparents as well! God has chosen you to fulfill a vital role in the lives of the grandchildren he has given you. Are you single? Live out God's calling for you with joy and peace of mind. Run your race with the wisdom and strength he pours out on you.

How blessed we are too! Truly the Mighty One has done great things for us. We are chosen—doubly chosen! God has called us to a relationship with him that provides us with *every* spiritual blessing, from now through eternity. And God has set us apart for special work, giving each of us our own unique avenues of service. In gratitude we fulfill the callings he chose for us, affirming with our lives, "holy is his name!"

Lord God, my Mighty One, I praise you for the great things you have done for me. Thank you for making me your own for eternity and giving me work to do while here on Earth. Today I ask for your help and guidance in my calling as _____. I trust you will provide all I need to fulfill your purposes for me. Holy is your name! Amen.

Mending One Fence at a Time

Jill Dunbar

DAY
6

“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” (Matthew 1:18-19).

Shattered. Everything Joseph was expecting was no longer true. Mary was pregnant. He knew the baby wasn't his.

While we are told later in the text that God sent an angel to reassure Joseph that the baby was in fact conceived by the Holy Spirit, we aren't told exactly how Joseph found out Mary was pregnant. We can only imagine the assumptions made and the hurt that must have existed on both sides of the conversation. How could Mary do this to him? Did she not know what could happen to her? What about the plans they had made?

Joseph was ready to end the relationship and quietly divorce Mary in hopes of saving her public humiliation. Some of us might find it difficult to relate to Joseph. Perhaps we are more likely to side with Mary. After all, why wouldn't Joseph believe her? How could he assume she was with another man?

How often have we made assumptions based on what we've seen or heard? How often have our thoughts gone to worst case scenario, or even judgment, about the way others are living?

Social media allows us to be instantly connected to friends and family, but it's easy to take things people post out of context. It's easy to read what someone somewhere is posting and assume it's true without considering the source. Biases are created based on one or two comments. Sometimes we're even left wondering, "Can I even be friends with this person? How can they believe such things?"

We encounter trouble with social media when we base our opinion of someone solely on our virtual interactions. Let's face it, we would never dare to be so bold if we were conversing face to face with them. If we are not careful, instead of bringing us together, our interactions on social media may actually pull us further apart. Suddenly, like Mary and Joseph, we find ourselves on two very opposite sides; hurt, disillusioned and wondering what went wrong.

Thankfully, God mended the divide between Mary and Joseph when He sent an angel to Joseph and told him the truth. Mary wasn't unfaithful; she was pregnant with God's Son! This changed everything. What seemed to be a scandalous situation became the event that would change the course of history for God's people, the birth of our Savior.

God can also mend the division in our own stories. Because of his overwhelming grace and love shown to us, we too can share that kind of love with others. Christ's love can motivate us to find other ways to nurture and heal our relationships. Perhaps a phone call or a handwritten note to a family member you haven't seen in a while. Or maybe an email or text to let someone know you are thinking of them. Regardless, these simple things this Christmas season can do big things to bring new life to your relationships.

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son. Jesus, thank you for your willing obedience in life and death. Guide us as we extend that same love and grace to those you have placed around us. Forgive us for the times that we fail and give us the courage and humility to keep trying. In Jesus name, Amen.

Beautiful Obedience

Sarah Habben

DAY
7

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife (Matthew 1:24).

It's time for your dental visit. Call TODAY!

Family eye-exams still on your list? Schedule now!

That's the kind of mail I get these days. And I'm horrible at staying on top of those imperatives. I know they're for my good, but I still shuffle them to the bottom of my to-do stack.

How about my obedience to God's requirements? The "best" that God wants from my service at church gets procrastinated until it is just "good enough." The forgiveness God wants me to offer to my family members gets put on hold. God's command to "set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" gets postponed as the shelves fill up with Christmas must-haves.

Obedience is hard. Prompt, unquestioning obedience is even harder.

That's what makes Joseph all the more remarkable.

Mary had just returned from a three-month visit with her cousin, Elizabeth. Inside her womb, the Son of God was patiently, miraculously, following a fetal timeline—our domino-sized Savior was swimming inside her, perfect down to his fingernails. Imagine Mary's wonder. Imagine Joseph's dismay. As a man obedient to the letter of God's law, he could only conclude she'd been unfaithful. And, as a man who was also obedient to the *spirit* of God's law, he decided to divorce her quietly, to spare her at least that public scandal.

But God intervened with an angel and a dream. And what a message the angel delivered! First, the baby growing in Mary's womb had been planted there by God's faithfulness, not by human *unfaithfulness*. Second, Joseph would enter parenthood by adopting none other than the promised Messiah. "Joseph," the angel urged, "*Don't be afraid* to take Mary home as your wife."

What proof did Joseph have of Mary's virginity? None but God's word. What assurance did he have that his reputation and livelihood would survive the barbs of small-town talk? None but the angel's "*Don't be afraid*." But look! Joseph wasted no time. He didn't negotiate for an easier path. He didn't even ask for more time to consider. He woke from his dream and hurried to Mary. He took her home that very day as his cherished bride.

Joseph's obedience is mind-boggling... and beautiful. He cared more about what God said than about what people would say. And God's assurance, "*Don't be afraid*" freed him to obey in love—for Mary, for God, for the future Savior of the world.

Beautiful obedience. God works that in you and me, too. He lays tasks at our feet—to serve and love and encourage and guide. Sometimes we flourish at those tasks. Often we fumble them. But God pulls us to our feet and says: "*Don't be afraid*. My Son was perfectly and completely obedient in your place." And so we are freed to follow God's will with joy at the high privilege of serving the King of kings. His gentle assurance adjusts our attitudes so that we can jump into each day—not feet first, but *faith* first.

Lord, help me reflect your love by diligently doing what you say. Amen.

Strong, Humble and Quiet Faith

Naomi Schmidt

DAY
8

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.” (Matthew 1:19-20) When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son (Matthew 1:24-25).

Where do you put Joseph when you set up your nativity scene?

At our house, Joseph always stands slightly behind Mary, gazing at the Christ-Child. He is much less eye-catching than the Wise Men (who, by the way, don't really belong there since they arrived sometime after Jesus' birth). In fact, he almost blends in with the shepherds and stable animals.

But Matthew gives us a clear and very distinct picture of Joseph. We meet him in the midst of a heart-wrenching situation. And as we get a glimpse of Joseph's heart, we see a man of faith.

Joseph's intention to divorce Mary quietly is meant to spare her the disgrace and aftermath of unfaithfulness. Assuming their marriage vows had been broken, Joseph moved to bring the matter to an end—without accusations or publicity.

Then God intervened.

The angel calmed Joseph's fears and assured him Mary was still pure. He was chosen as Jesus' earthly father and Joseph willingly responded in a demonstration of strong faith, humble willingness, and continued obedience. This godly man is an encouragement and faithful example for us even today.

We watch Joseph follow God's commands and see how faithfully God led and blessed him. We grasp a small glimpse of what it means to glorify God and live as part of His family. We see how God works in the life of Joseph, and delight watching this courageous believer listen to God's Word and trust its promises. Joseph doesn't just teach us about following Jesus—he teaches us how much we need Jesus as our Savior!

It is humbling for us to remember that God appoints redeemed sinners to do amazing tasks—many of which look like simple, daily living. And this is where we can follow Joseph's pattern with our gaze fixed on the Savior hour by hour. Joseph served God by raising Jesus. Too often we are tempted to think that being spiritually strong means standing out or leading loudly. But we can do it quietly and faithfully in our homes. What a blessing when a home has a strong spiritual leader that guides and teaches those he loves! But there are loving, Christian homes without a “Joseph.” Christ is present in homes where there is faith! Each one of us has the Christ-child, not to put out in our nativity set—but to save our souls! The Lord Jesus lives as an ever-present strength in our hearts and homes. We can all live in daily, thankful obedience for the gift of grace—just like Joseph.

Whatever your home looks like, or wherever Joseph stands in your nativity scene, focus on the Christ-child. He is the One who came to forgive your sins and draw you to himself in Word and Sacrament. Gaze on his holiness to guide your daily living.

Lord God, thank you for the quiet faithfulness and strong leadership of Joseph. Strengthen us to follow his example with a clear focus on Christ our Savior. Open our ears to hear and follow you that we may glorify you in holy living that serves your kingdom. Amen.

Hope in the Hardship

Jesus Woller

DAY

9

“But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus” (Luke 1:30).

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 (Matthew 1:19).

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 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 2:4-7).

Have you ever paused to contemplate the difficulty Mary faced in becoming the mother of Jesus? The stability of her marriage was at risk; there was likely gossip; there was a physical and mental toll traveling to Bethlehem, giving birth in a stable, and fleeing from Herod.

We want it to be easier than it is sometimes. We want the miracle of Jesus in our lives to be packaged neatly in the routine of Sunday mornings, tidy tithing, responsible stewardship, disciplined children, cute Christian decor, and uplifting music and devotions.

True faith doesn't always fit in neat packages.

“...Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice...” Romans 12:1

“...In this world you will have trouble...” John 16:33

The difficulty Mary faced isn't so far from the difficulties we can expect to face. Do your relationships reflect the worry, hurt or uncertainty Mary and Joseph may have felt before the angel appeared to Joseph? Have you faced ridicule because of your beliefs? Are you facing challenges and enduring circumstances that are far from your ideal? Have you spoken the words “it wasn't supposed to be this way” this year?

We don't know much of what Mary thought or felt because Scripture doesn't reveal it, but we have incredible moments to provide an example of faith in the midst of uncertainty in our lives. When Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, Scripture shares Mary's song: “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” Luke 1:46-48.

God doesn't expect us to prove ourselves in the struggle. God allows the struggle as a means of drawing us nearer to him, building our character, and aligning our perspective to his. Hardship is inevitable in this sinful world. But God willingly meets us to provide incomprehensible peace and joy right now. Then, with God's help, we can let our faith permeate beyond the neat boxes we've made space for, into every aspect of our lives.

When your thoughts wander towards the difficulties you are facing, fixate on the God whose hand is as present and powerful in your life as it was in Mary's. Dwell in the peace and joy and privilege of knowing Christ Jesus who cares for you deeply and has a plan for your life. Seek him to find purpose and comfort in a terribly uncomfortable world.

And when that peace and joy seem far away and incomprehensible, go back to prayer, and to that great cloud of witnesses who endured in Scripture. Seek teachers and encouragers of the faith as Mary sought Elizabeth.

Eventually all of this hardship will fade beyond memory and we will stand in God's eternal glory with Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth and all the saints who overcame.

Heavenly Father, you never promised an easy road. Help us cling to the hope of heaven and trust in your presence when we face challenges. Let our love for you permeate into all areas of our lives. We praise you regardless of our circumstances. Amen.

Peace in Troubled Times

Kristi Meyer

DAY
10

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:13-14).

Angels appear several times in Luke’s account of the Christmas story, and each time they are greeted by the opposite of peace. Zechariah was startled and gripped with fear, Mary was greatly troubled, and the shepherds were terrified – or “sore afraid” if you prefer the King James Version. These emotions are completely understandable. Angels are holy messengers of a holy God, and sinful human beings have no right to stand in the presence of these heavenly beings or hear the tidings they came to proclaim.

But the first words of assurance spoken by the angels powerfully convey the emotion they sought to instill in Zechariah and Mary and the shepherds: “Do not be afraid.” The message the angels brought that first Christmas was a message of peace, not fear. On the surface, the circumstances surrounding that first Christmas night were anything but peaceful. Mary gave birth to her baby far from home and in unfamiliar surroundings. The Roman government-controlled Israel and was not always supportive of Jewish customs and practices. In the near future, Herod would murder the baby boys of Bethlehem to eliminate a perceived challenger to his throne. According to the world’s definition, these were not peaceful times.

Although the world did not recognize it, the birth of this child did bring peace. Ever since the fall into sin, God’s creatures had rebelled against him. By their thoughts, words, actions, and their very existence, they stood in opposition to a just and holy God. The animal sacrifices prescribed by the law could not restore the broken relationship between God and his people. A perfect sacrifice was needed, and that perfect sacrifice was born that night in Bethlehem. Through his death on the cross – the ultimate act of violence – he brought peace and reconciled God and man once more.

Today our world is full of conflict and devoid of peace. From quarrels with those we love to large-scale acts of violence, from worry and strife about the small everyday things to global illness and disease that have turned our lives upside down, peace is sometimes the farthest thing from our minds. We don’t have an angel telling us “don’t be afraid,” but we do have a peace that comes from the Spirit-worked faith in our hearts. We are no longer enemies of God but now are his dearly loved children. No matter what struggle and turmoil we encounter on this earth, we know that the day is coming when we will be at peace forever in heaven. And until that day, we can take comfort in God’s promise that he will work everything for our good – a promise that brings peace even in the midst of conflict and strife.

This peace is not just the absence of trouble and anxiety. It is a way of life, a peace that permeates every fiber of our being, a peace that passes all understanding. It is a peace that reminds us God is in control of every aspect of our lives, even during the most difficult circumstances. It is a peace that a lost and despairing world around us desperately needs. It is a peace too marvelous to keep to ourselves – a peace we are compelled to share with others.

Lord God, peace can be difficult to find these days. The news just keeps getting worse, and peace sometimes seems like a quaint memory from the distant past. Remind us that the angels’ message for the shepherds is a message meant for us too: the baby born in Bethlehem came to bring a different kind of peace; a peace that passes all understanding, an eternal peace that will outlast any conflict and strife in this world. Be with us this Christmas as we seek that peace – not in the things of this world, but in the One who descended to this world and became one of us. Amen.

Life Interrupted

Rachel Halldorson

DAY
11

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 of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

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 his child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 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 2:8-20).

On the fields near Bethlehem, it was the shepherd’s responsibility to keep the sheep safe from predators or thieves. It was definitely a lowly task and not what one would necessarily aspire to be. But it had to be done. These particular sheep were most likely needed for temple sacrifices. Sins must be atoned for. Blood must be shed.

It was in the middle of this work that their night was suddenly interrupted in a most spectacular way. An angel of the Lord came to the lowliest of mankind and announced the good news of Jesus’ birth! He told them exactly what to look for. And then to proclaim in a most spectacular way the Lord’s eternal glory and faithful love, the sky filled with an army of angels full of praise in response to this message of eternal significance!

They immediately went to see for themselves that which the angels had told them about. They didn’t hesitate! It wasn’t as if what they were doing before wasn’t important. It was! This news, however, took priority in that moment. After all, God himself stepped off his throne and into a lowly manger, for us!

They took this interruption seriously! They could not keep quiet! They had to tell everyone what they had seen and heard. They were no longer only shepherds but were now joyful witnesses and heralds!

Notice though that they were still shepherds. They went back to the sheep that needed them. It was within their vocations that they continued to serve God and praise him for all he had done for them!

Oh, that we would find ourselves so pliable when our lives get interrupted! We might not have hosts of angels calling us to attention in the middle of a diaper change or a meeting at work, but we have plenty of interruptions in our daily lives that call our attention back to him. Our mundane tasks are still important for it is there that we serve God and our neighbor. But sometimes these interruptions are more than an inconvenience. They can rock our world, bring us to our knees, and make us look to him for help! If 2020 has taught us anything, it’s that some of the biggest interruptions in life can offer some of the greatest gifts.

Dear Father in heaven, forgive me when I look at my life’s interruptions as something to avoid or even detest. Help me to see them as opportunities to prioritize and draw me closer to you. Thank you for the gift of faith and the privilege of being able to share the Gospel message with those around me. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Unstoppable Praise

Sarah Habben

DAY
12

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests (Luke 2:13-14).

Some Christmas Eve services go like this: You and your fellow members start preparing for the biggest service of the church year in November. The choir puts in extra hours of practice. Sunday School kids, or the congregation's grade-schoolers, first mangle and finally memorize their passages. The sanctuary gets a Christmas makeover. Invites are designed and printed. Doors are knocked, pavement pounded. So much effort is invested in this one service, because it is an event that draws the unchurched, the drifting, and the doubting back through the church doors.

Christmas Eve finally arrives. The service goes flawlessly. The kids were cute, but not too cute. The tiny choir sounded angelic. But, oh the disappointment! Whole pews were empty. You wonder, was it really worth all the effort?

Well, let's ask the angels, shall we? On that first Christmas Eve, God didn't send a barbershop quartet to the shepherds. He sent thousands of messengers—an angel army! An army to announce peace. An army to erupt in praise. Their *glorias* shook the sky. But now check out the angels' audience. They weren't much to look at. There was just a handful of them. They weren't strategic members of society who would bolster the angels' outreach efforts.

They were shepherds—smelly, scruffy, sidelined. But the size and social connections of their audience did not dismay the angels. That's because their praise had nothing to do with their audience and everything to do with their God of grace. He had gifted earth with his Son, and the angels simply couldn't contain their praise.

This Christmas, as you prepare to share the awesome story of Jesus' birth with your community, don't think about who or how many will be in your pews. Chances are many seats will stand empty in the midst of this year's pandemic. But God's peace was won for that guy in the stained coat, sitting by himself with his head down. The end of fear was won for that small but faithful row of widows in the back. Heavenly joy was won for that neighborhood kid who wandered in because he saw the pretty lights. God's grace was won for you.

So, prepare to share the wonderful message of a Savior with whoever comes to hear. Keep your heart fixed on God's amazing gift—and you simply won't be able to contain your praise.

Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise. Amen.

Bring Joy to the World

Sally Vallaskey

DAY
13

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 (Luke 2:9-11).

An angel. A Message. Joy.

Simple ingredients for a holiday menu. One angel. One message and joy for billions!

Angels are God’s messengers. They were created and entrusted by God for exceptional service and extraordinary tasks. They were sent to announce world-changing events, to confront and destroy, to encourage, to protect and comfort, to gather the elect, and to sing God’s praises. Not the least of their tasks was to bring joy to the world!

We would agree with those who record such things that it’s an amazing event to be visited by angels, no matter the number. The mere presence of one angel along with God’s brilliant glory out in a dark field gripped these shepherds with terror. Nothing prepared them for such a sight of blinding wonder as it ripped through their senses. In that glorious but frightening light, they heard divine, angelic words: “Do not be afraid,” words only possible because of the breaking news that followed. The long-awaited Savior had come! The Messiah, the LORD, was now on earth, here to save his people! Release and freedom from bondage to sin was theirs. Their relationship with the God of free and faithful love was restored. Great joy, indeed! “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” (Luke 2:10-11).

News affects people in different ways. Out in the field that first Christmas night the effect of the angel message was immediate. “...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.” Martin Luther took note of the fact that “simple shepherds are now apostles and prophets!” * The joy from hearing the message was too much for them to contain. It couldn’t be kept—it was for all people!

How does the angel message affect us? At times we might feel like a lowly shepherd isolated out in a dark field. Or we might experience the grip of fear by what’s revealed in broad daylight—our failings and sins, misunderstandings, heavy responsibilities, painful illnesses and losses, endless demands and decisions and the sheer weariness of it all. We go back to the message. The message will probably not change our challenging circumstances, but it sheds light on them; the light of God’s joy that brightens the night and banishes fear. Wrap each troubling thought or circumstance in the angel message and tuck it in with the Christ Child. Then go bring the marvelous message of joy to others. Send a text, make a call, or deliver a card. Just get it out...to your college/apartment roommate, your neighbor, your spouse, children, grandchildren, parents and grandparents, your extended family, your classmate or instructor, your package/food deliverer, your frontline worker, your homebound church member, your caregiver, your co-worker, your congregational leaders.

It’s quite a privilege to be God’s messenger given the task of bringing joy to the world!

Holy Christ Child may the power of your Word turn our darkness to light and our terror to great joy. May we too be your messengers, that we not contain it but proclaim it! Amen.

* *Martin Luther Christmas Book*, Roland H. Bainton, 1948.

Called to Be God's Unlikely Witness

Mollie Schairer

DAY
14

When they had seen [Jesus], 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 2:17-18).

I like to imagine the shepherds spreading the news of Jesus' birth that first Christmas. After seeing for themselves that the Messiah had indeed come, they served as God's first human witnesses that he had fulfilled his promise. Was it still the middle of the night? Did they rouse friends and acquaintances from their beds? Were they singing in the dark streets of Bethlehem? Whatever the circumstances of their telling, the results were the same: all who heard the message were amazed.

Shepherds were an unlikely choice for such a mission. They are not the group that first-century Jews would have chosen for any type of announcement, let alone news that was truly earth-shattering.

In Jewish society, shepherds were low men on the totem pole. They had a reputation for dishonesty and thievery. Rabbis instructed their fellow Jews not to buy wool or milk from shepherds, but rather assume these were stolen property. Shepherds were also barred from testifying in court.*

Think about it. That first Christmas, God chose men with so little social standing that their testimony was inadmissible in court!

It reminds me of another unlikely choice for witnesses. This group also lacked social clout and also were not permitted to testify in court. Thirty-three years after the shepherds heralded Jesus' birth, a small band of women rushed to Jerusalem with another amazing message from angels: the crucified Jesus had risen from the dead!

God bookended Jesus' saving work with witnesses that no human would have chosen.

But God's ways are not our ways. God calls witnesses independent of their social standing, perceived speaking ability (Exodus 4:10-11), education level (Acts 4:13) checkered past (John 4:17-30), terrible reputation (Luke 5:27-30, Luke 19, 1-7) or any other reason that *human* reason would use to disqualify such choices.

And, in his wisdom, God calls *you*. You are God's witnesses, whom he has thoughtfully situated in your own unique sphere of influence.

Perhaps, though, you are thinking to yourself that you really are like the shepherds...not very influential at all.

Are you a college student wondering what you possibly could say to the professor with a string of letters after his name? Are you the "low person on the totem pole" at work, thinking that no one would listen anyway if you spoke up? Do you say to yourself, "I'm just a layperson." Or, "I'm just a grandparent." Or "I'm just [fill in the blank]."

You are not the reason people receive the message with amazement. Neither am I. Isn't that one of the truths God seeks to highlight with his unlikely choices? It's not about the witnesses; it's about the Word.

This Word is a double-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). It slices through the pretensions that sinners have constructed, cutting to the heart and judging it with authority. This Word is dynamite (Romans 1:16). Its explosive power blasts away the hard rock of unbelief and fills the heart with awe. All God calls us to do is simply unleash that awesome, authoritative power.

This Christmas embrace your mission as God's own witnesses. Take the angels' message into your Bethlehem with

renewed confidence. Wake the spiritually asleep with joyful news. Sing in the streets, or your workplace, or the grocery store, or wherever your daily tasks take you. The Messiah has come! The Savior has been born!

Dear Heavenly Father, this Christmas we thank and praise you for choosing us to be your witnesses. Forgive us for the times we have focused on ourselves rather than the power of the Word. Reawaken in us the joy of sharing the angels' good news. Send the Holy Spirit to kindle faith in every heart. In our Savior's name we pray, Amen.

* <https://israelmyglory.org/article/a-night-in-the-fields/>

Star Witnesses

Angie Moberlin

DAY
15

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).

The account of Jesus’ birth mentions many people who were either directly involved with the blessed event or witnesses to it. God wanted us to know how Jesus came into the world to learn from the actions and reactions of those involved.

The shepherds were star witnesses. (Not to be confused with the Wise Men who were witnesses because of a star.) They dropped everything and spread the word. As witnessing goes, they set the standard high – so high that I often find myself repenting for my lack of conviction as a witnessing Christian.

*Seek my Savior? Maybe I after I get one more thing done.
Tell others about Jesus? It’s uncomfortable to be that direct.
Glorify and praise God? It just won’t feel like Christmas this year.*

With a repentant heart, I turn back to the word, looking for some comfort and joy in this Luke 2 account. And then I see it. A gem.

“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 2:20)

The key to being a good witness is not found in what the shepherds did but focusing on what God did. Consider this:

God provided clarity: God sent the angels to tell the shepherds what had happened, what they would see, what they could expect as a result. With simple curiosity and faith, the shepherds went to see.

God spoke truth: The shepherds saw that everything God did was just as they had been told. Wherever they went, the shepherds explained that what they saw was exactly what God said they would see.

God provided a moving experience: God’s words had power to move the hearts of the shepherds to seek Jesus. They were so amazed by what they saw that they talked about it with others. (“You’ll never guess what happened at work today!”) It was all so remarkable that they could not help but praise God.

God kept a promise: Anyone who dug into the scriptures afterward would plainly see that all of these events were indeed the fulfillment of God’s promises: *The long-awaited Savior.*

The witnessing lesson here is beautifully simple: What do you see God doing in your life? What does God say in his Word that relates to your circumstances? Talk about that.

“Feel-Felt-Found” is a common witnessing technique. The shepherds used this method long before it became popular in witnessing workshops.

*Do you **feel** afraid? I know what you mean. One night at work, a bunch of angels appeared out of nowhere and lit up the sky. We **felt** terrified, just like you are now! But God told us not to be afraid. He told us what we could expect to see. And you know what? We **found** his words to be true!*

In 2020, my shepherd-like witnessing might go something like this:

*I understand how you **feel**. I've **felt** lonely, too, with so many events cancelled. I've **found** great comfort in Jesus' words, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." That's the truth I celebrate at Christmas time – God is with us!*

God made the shepherds his witnesses way back then, and he makes us his witnesses now, amid the unique events of our lifetime. Witness wherever he has placed you.

Lord, thank you for all your promises kept at Christmas. Please work in my heart, so that I may be moved to tell others about the work you are doing in my life. Make me an effective witness to the comfort and joy you bring to all people through your Son, Jesus, in whose name I pray. Amen.

Treasuring Whatever God Sends

Gina Grove

DAY
16

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2:19).

The pounding on the front door shatters your sleep. Flood waters are rising--you need to get out NOW! Besides your loved ones, what will you grab before leaving? Photographs? Heirlooms? Important documents? What treasures are worth saving?

Mary, throughout a flood of unexpected circumstances, collected, treasured and pondered *everything* surrounding the life of her baby boy. Perhaps “all these things” included:

A life-altering visit by an angel, a mighty messenger of God.

His amazing proclamation: 1) Mary will become pregnant; 2) God will be the baby’s Father, *not* her fiancé, Joseph; 3) God’s already named the baby Jesus; 4) Jesus will inherit David’s throne and an eternal kingdom.

Mary’s fiancé, Joseph, decides to quietly “divorce” his apparently unfaithful bride-to-be. Instead, after his own angelic visit in a dream, Joseph risks his reputation by marrying his virgin bride.

A forced trip to Bethlehem for a census and taxation. Mary goes into labor, finds no room in the inn, and must tuck her baby into a feeding trough. (A “rustic nursery” before farm chic was a thing!)

Mary’s barely done laboring, when shepherds rush in with a wild story of a night sky filled with an angel choir and the joyous news that the Savior has been born.

“All these things” were part of Mary’s treasure. More would follow: Simeon and Anna prophesied in the temple. Wise men brought expensive gifts. The family fled in the night, bound for Egypt to escape a murderous king. Fast forward to when Jesus was 12 and stayed behind at the temple in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph returned, searched frantically, and found him calmly sitting with the religious teachers who were amazed with his insight. Again, we hear, “*But his mother treasured all these things in her heart*” Luke 2:51 (NIV).

The Greek word for “treasured” includes the idea of intentionally, faithfully, persistently preserving something--keeping it safe--through all circumstances. Mary couldn’t post on Facebook or Instagram, relying on electronic memories to pop up yearly. She worked to remember and preserve all the details of her life with Jesus. “Pondered” in the text involves putting the incidents all together, comparing them and weighing out the facts. Mary intentionally reviewed everything she’d heard and seen, tucked those memories deeply into her heart and considered them. She focused on what God had promised in the Scriptures and was revealing in the life of this baby, her son . . . our Savior.

Life can be hard. It often was for Mary! Rather than complain and long for a different plan, Mary humbly and purposefully weighed out what God had placed before her. She had discomfort and joy, heartache, and peace. And all were tucked safely away, pondered, and treasured, as gifts from her loving Father.

What will we choose to focus on, to ponder this Christmas season? The uneasy dread of a possible illness? The sad reality of fractured traditions and missing family members? Or will we humbly pray, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said” (Luke 1:38). Please focus on Jesus, the ultimate Servant, who intentionally came to seek your good through his life of love, death on the cross, and triumphant resurrection. May God help us cling to and ponder the treasure of our salvation today and always.

Gracious Lord, This Christmas, when I’m tempted to focus on fear and then escape into the numbing rabbit holes of social media or binge-watching, gently nudge my heart to stop and follow Mary’s example. Help me intentionally examine and ponder “all these things” revealed in your Word and the many blessings in my life. Remind me to treasure the laughter of a child, the comfort found in a friend’s text, the miracle of a snowflake, and, most of all, the priceless gift of salvation found warm and real, lying in a manger. Then move me to boldly share this amazing treasure with the world around me. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Seek Christ Where He Promises You Will Find Him

Leah Alair

DAY
17

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.” 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, 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 (Matthew 2:1-2, 4-5, 9-10).

The Wise Men, or *Magi*, were unlike any others who rejoiced at the birth of Jesus. They were foreigners whose people spoke a different language and worshiped other gods. They traveled roads for weeks or months to meet this king. And in spite of their earnest seeking, when they arrived in Jerusalem, they discovered they were lost. There was no knowledge of a new king to be found in the royal city.

These Wise Men knew that the rising of a star meant the birth of a faraway king, but they did not know where to find him. Surely the city of Jewish kings would be a likely place.

Their eventual discovery of where Jesus was came from the Word of God. It was the inspired prophecy of Micah in the fifth chapter of his book that led the Magi to Bethlehem. And so these faithful men trusted the Word of God, left the gleaming palaces of Jerusalem, and went to Bethlehem. There, in the absence of all the impressive marks of earthly royalty, they rejoiced *exceedingly* (KJV) - because they finally arrived at the home of the Messiah. Their diligent efforts resulted in the remarkable opportunity to pay homage and present their gifts to the child king.

We should seek Jesus and we know he is worthy of our worship, but how will we find him? What if he isn’t where we expected or hoped he would be? The Wise Men could not find Jesus in their homeland, the wilderness, or Jerusalem. He was only found in the place where God led them: Bethlehem. In the same way, we are tempted to look for the comfort of Christ in the warm feelings of the perfect Christmas experience, the solitary retreats from our household duties, or the unpredictable affections of family and friends. But Jesus never promised he would reveal himself to us there. Instead, he has blessed us with the promise of his continual presence in his Word, Holy Communion, and the fellowship of believers united by the Holy Spirit. He remains here even when our experience of Christmas falls far short of our expectations. This is his comforting and forgiving presence that can never be taken away from us.

You, too, can rejoice *exceedingly*, because you know exactly where to find your Savior. Seek him in your worship, and don’t be disappointed that he uses such ordinary means to bless you with his saving presence. Rather, rejoice that God has shown you the way to your Savior, and is glad to meet your humble faith with his gracious love.

“I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Isaiah 57:15).

Heavenly Father, I confess that I do not seek you as earnestly as I ought. You are my source of life, my Savior from sin and death, and my hope of eternal joy. Open my eyes to see the treasure of your Holy Scriptures, the Sacraments which give and sustain my faith, and the Church which is my true family both now and in eternity. Bring your Word into our homes and hearts, that you may always be with us through your Son and Spirit. Amen.

Keep planting seeds

Rhoda Wolfe

DAY
18

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.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him (Matthew 2:1-3).

When we arrange our manger scene, we typically place the Wise Men with the shepherds worshipping Jesus in the stable. Although this serene scene serves as a beautiful reminder of Jesus’ early life, it is not historically accurate.

Angels appeared to the shepherds in the field the night of Jesus’ birth. The Magi or Wise Men visited Jesus much later. We can’t be sure exactly how much later, but we know the young family was no longer in the stable but living in a house. And we know that after the Wise Men returned to their country without reporting back to Herod, he ordered the death of all children two years-old and younger living in Bethlehem. So, it seems likely the Wise Men arrived sometime within two years after Jesus’ birth. Scripture mentions three gifts, so we often picture three Magi, but like the manger scene, that’s more for our convenience, than Biblical accuracy.

Where did these Magi come from? Many scholars believe they came from Babylon. In the Old Testament Daniel served as chief of the wise men, astrologers, magicians, and enchanters during Israel’s captivity in Babylon. Might he have told of the coming Messiah? Could that be how these men living in a foreign land hundreds of years later would follow a special star they were led to believe signaled the birth of the Messiah? Had the seeds faithful Daniel planted produced fruit centuries later?

Fast forward to when Scripture allows us to witness the Magi going to a large foreign town and boldly asking for help locating the Messiah. Word spread quickly until it reached a very jealous, insecure, violent King Herod. Have you considered how foolish these men may have looked following a star to distant lands and inquiring about a new king? They could have changed their story for fear of incurring Herod’s wrath. But they didn’t. They were bold and eager to share without fear what they knew to be true about Jesus. They were, like Daniel, unabashedly planting seeds, even on the hardest of hearts.

Can we do the same? Can we follow the example of these Wise Men by faithfully searching for Jesus each day, and never being ashamed or afraid to share what we know to be true?

God could have guided the Magi away from Jerusalem and directly to Bethlehem, but instead He allowed them to go right into a potentially perilous situation. Herod’s jealous rage and violent anger could have snuffed out not only the Messiah, but these Wise Men as well. When we plan our life, we want the path of least resistance. We’d prefer to hang out with friends and people who believe as we do. But the Lord’s ways are different than our ways. He often takes his people on paths that call on us to trust his wisdom and purpose. He often puts unbelievers in our path. Don’t shrink back, and don’t avoid them! Like Daniel and the Wise Men, use it as an opportunity to tell them what you know about Jesus.

Lord, please give us the desire and the strength to be wise. Help us to seek you constantly, that every moment of every day we are praising you and thanking you. And make us bold. Give us the courage and the words to proclaim what we know to be true. Do not allow us to cower in doubt or fear when we have the chance to plant a seed for you. Please use us like you used the Magi to accomplish your perfect and beautiful will. In Jesus’ name we pray and know you hear us. Amen.

The King is and Always Will be On the Throne

Delyn Wagenknecht

DAY
19

“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. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:1-3).

The Magi did not know what they were doing when they approached King Herod. They did not understand the depths of pride and hatred that resided in Herod’s heart. They had simply come to the king in search of The King of Kings, and their goal was to worship the Savior. How were they to know that Herod intended to use them for evil? The situation could have been a disaster!

Herod’s goal was death to an apparent usurper rather than worship. This savior, this “king”, was a threat that needed to be destroyed. Herod summoned the Jewish leaders to find out where the prophets said the Messiah would be born. Bethlehem was the answer. Herod sent the Magi to Bethlehem, not because he supported their mission to worship the Lord, but because he wanted Jesus dead.

Herod’s goals were of no consequence to God. God was in control then, as he always is now. God’s goal was to give the Magi the opportunity to worship. He warned the Magi in a dream not to go back to Herod after they had found and worshiped Jesus. Then he warned Joseph in a dream to take Jesus to safety in Egypt. In the end, God used a proud, tyrannical king to bring praise to himself through the wise men.

Throughout history, God has used governments and individuals, both good and bad, to accomplish his will. This year will be no exception. 2020 will go down in history as an extremely difficult year, for our country, and indeed for the world. A deadly virus, civil unrest, and a contentious election could spell disaster. More personally, there may be individuals who seek to stand between us and God. We may be filled with anxiety about the future. We may worry our leaders will take away our religious freedom or that evil people will keep us from our Lord. Yet, even when times are at their most distressing, God is still in control. This Advent season, we remember that God’s goal is to bring us peace with him through Jesus. He gives us opportunities for worship and relief from our fears. He will always accomplish his goals. There is no Herod who can stop him.

Dear Father, we praise and adore you for your power, your plans, and your amazing love for us. Help us, this Advent season, to remember that you are always in control and that you are able to use the most unlikely sources to accomplish your goals. Thank you that, through your Holy Spirit, you have brought us to faith and enabled us to worship Jesus, our Savior and King of Kings. Amen.

Don't Miss Jesus

Amber Albee Swenson

DAY
20

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.”

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 ... (Matthew 2:2-4).

Most of us have a list of missed opportunities we can easily recall. Years ago, my husband and I looked into buying a 5-acre lot a few houses from ours. We ultimately decided to pass on the investment. A year later a contractor bought it and put five houses on it, two of which, after he cut out all the brush, have a beautiful view of the city. It would have been a gorgeous site to build one house and have a large yard, but we missed out because we didn't have the vision.

The Wise Men followed the star as far as Jerusalem before stopping for directions. Unfortunately, Herod wasn't one to share his glory or his kingdom. His distress at the news of a new king sent the whole city into a panic. He called for the Jewish leaders to identify where this king, who Herod, prompted by the Wise Men, identified as the Messiah, was to be born. They reported the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, a mere five and a half miles away.

Had the chief priests and teachers of the law heard the rumors from Bethlehem a year or two earlier? How far did the shepherds' report travel? Did these leaders leave Herod that day wondering anew if the long-awaited Christ child had arrived? Did they humble themselves in prayer, pleading for open eyes to see God's plan? Or did they let knowledge of the birth of the Savior slip through their hands?

If I'm honest, too often I am just like those Jewish leaders. I miss out on opportunities to spend time with Jesus as I fall for distraction. An hour or two slips away on social media or watching news and gathering facts rather than going to the source of truth. Too often I fall into senseless and divisive quarrels instead of being consumed with God's love. God's abundant grace should motivate me to unyielding love. More often than not, grace goes unheeded and, consequently I fail to follow through with a life of worship.

We have unprecedented access to God's Word. Bibles are easily available. Apps provide the Word at our fingertips. Sermons and studies have never been easier to access. Even in a pandemic that made getting together in person difficult at times, God prepared technology for such a time as this.

How tragic to miss the opportunity to know our creator and redeemer by letting time with him slip through our hands! Jesus was not just the baby in the manger, but the Son of God who carried our sins and paid our debt. And while we too often neglect our relationship with him, he is never too busy or unconcerned to meet with us. Jesus said, "...whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (John 6:37).

I don't want to miss the chance to know what God willingly reveals about himself in His Word. And I certainly don't want to miss all he would give me if I only took the time to meet with him in prayer. Kindle in us a desire to seek you, Lord!

Father use your Spirit to draw us to you. Help us to see and avoid distractions that keep us from the relationship you want with us. Bless us with the closeness of walking with our Savior God, that we bring others to know and love you, too. Amen.

The Unashamed Pursuit of Jesus

Amber Albee Swenson

DAY
21

“After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route” (Matthew 2:9-12).

The Wise Men followed the star as far as Jerusalem. Were they surprised that their inquiries as to the whereabouts of the Messiah were met with confusion, and not, “right this way?” Wasn’t everyone aware something extraordinary had taken place? Wasn’t everyone looking for the promised Son? With guidance from the Jewish leaders, who we’d think would be eager to join the Wise Men in their quest for the Messiah, they headed to Bethlehem and finally arrived at their destination. And they were overjoyed!

What did Mary and Joseph think of the strangers at their door? If they had started to think of Jesus as a normal child, this was their reminder he was the promised Messiah. The Wise Men bowed to worship this young child years before Jesus began his ministry as they worshipped through eyes of faith!

Their gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh were gifts suitable for a king, and apart from the expensive jar of perfume poured out at his feet, would likely be some of the most extravagant gifts Jesus received.

And then the Magi offered one last gift to this king who held their adoration. When told in a dream not to go back to Herod, they obeyed, giving Joseph time to pack up his family and move them out of Bethlehem before Herod unleashed his wrath.

My life is a sharp contrast to these Wise Men. I am not always so overjoyed to spend time with Jesus. At times reading my Bible becomes one more thing to check off the list. I’ve mumbled my way through the liturgy and listened half-heartedly to the sermon; mindlessly invited him to be my guest at dinner without worrying about what I say at the table.

Too often, my worship is clouded with doubt. *Will You show up, Lord? Do you have this under control?*

More often than I want to admit, I’ve brought just my trinkets to Jesus. I am guilty of putting in only so much effort, serving only so much, and complaining when I break that threshold.

And though I am aware of what God asks of me, I am not always so quick to fall in line with God’s will. I turn to grumbling instead of gratitude, and to disrespect (in my mind if not vocally) instead of humble submission.

These men of high standing were unashamed in their pursuit of Jesus. They unabashedly showed their joy and reverence. They brought the Messiah costly gifts and they humbly obeyed God’s sovereign will. Oh, Lord, who brought me the greatest gift possible—salvation, work in my heart, that I may do the same!

Father, thank you for your unfailing kindness even when my love is half-hearted. Fill me so I may be overjoyed. Move me to generosity and work obedience in my reluctant heart. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Christ, Lord of All

Paula Sulzke

DAY
22

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night... Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”... So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger (Luke 2:8, 13, 14, 16).

Shepherding. Not the most glamorous job. Caring for animals at all hours of the day. And not beautiful steeds that follow every command, but slow, dirty, dumb sheep who would wander away from the flock and get caught in thorny bushes. Being a shepherd was burdensome work, considered unskilled labor and usually relegated to the lower strata of society.

Yet, shepherds were the first people to hear that the Messiah, the Savior of all the world, was born. God chose some of the lowliest people by the world's standards to be witnesses of the holy choir of angels announcing the Savior's birth. The shepherds left their flocks, entrusting them to God's care and went to see for themselves. So, they were not only the first to hear about the Savior, but the first worshipers to see him with their own eyes...from the fields of Bethlehem to the cradle of the Savior of the world!

Then in stark contrast, we see some others God chose to be among the first from a distance to learn about the Savior's birth.

After [the Wise Men] had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh” (Matthew 2:9-11).

Wise Men. Influential advisors to the king, knowledgeable in astronomy. These Wise Men knew that this was no normal heavenly body in the sky. They were well versed in Scripture's prophecies to know that this was the star that was leading them to the Savior. When they arrived at the place where the Christ-child was, they presented him with their very costly gifts. They too, like the shepherds, worshiped the Savior. They understood that this little child was more important than any earthly king they served. They knew this child deserved their worship and praise.

What about you? Have you been called to a high position in life or would the world consider you to be of lowly status? No matter who you are, what you do for a living, where you live, your age, race, or nationality - none of it matters. God sees you as his child. You are worthy of his salvation, not because of who you are or what you've done, but because of his mercy and love. When he sees you, he sees Jesus, the babe who humbled himself to come to earth, live a perfect life and die the death you deserve. When he sees you, he sees a white robe of righteousness.

You are part of God's story as much as the shepherds and Wise Men. You are chosen. You are part of God's royal priesthood. You are God's treasured possession. What high status he has given you! Live in confidence knowing that Jesus came for you!

What brought thee to the manger, O Christ-child, sweet and dear?

Thy love for me, a stranger - Oh, be thou ever near!

O Lord, how great is this thy love that reaches down from heav'n above,

Thy love for us, by sin defiled, that made thee, God, a child!

-Christian Worship 43:3, public domain

Are you Ready, Son?

Dawn Schulz

DAY
23

“Your will be done” (Matthew 6:10).

What do you think it was like? You know, before Jesus left his heavenly throne *outside* of time and space to be Emmanuel – God With Us, confined *in* time and space? We can only speculate. But still... don't you kind of wonder what it was like before an eternal God humbled himself and entered humanity? Can you imagine the conversation between Father and Son?

F: “Are you ready, Son?”

S: “We promised them eternal life before the beginning of time, and we don't lie” (Titus 1:2).

F: “You ARE God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, and One with me” (Nicene Creed).

S: “It's the only way, Father. No man can redeem the life of another (Psalm 49:7). We told them to be perfect as you are perfect (Matthew 5:48). And yet, they all have sinned” (Romans 3:23).

F: “Even though all things were made through you, for *them* and for *their* salvation you will be made nothing. You will take the very nature of a servant and be made in human likeness” (Nicene Creed and Philippians 2:7).

S: “Since your children have flesh and blood I too will share in their humanity so that by my death I might destroy the devil and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For this reason, I *have* to be made like my brothers in every way that I might make atonement for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:14-17).

F: “You will suffer when you are tempted” (Hebrews 2:18).

S: “I will be able to sympathize with their weaknesses because I *will be* tempted in every way just as they are—yet I am without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

F: “You will be despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” (Isaiah 53:3).

S: “I will be pierced for *their* transgressions and crushed for *their* iniquities and they will all turn away from me” (Isaiah 53:5-7). Even you, my God will turn away from me. Even you will be far from my groaning” (Psalm 22:1).

F: “Son, I will make YOU, who have no sin to be sin for *them*, so that in YOU... *they* might become **my** righteousness” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

S: “And Father, I will tell them that it is your will that everyone who looks to me and believes in me will have eternal life” (John 6:40).

F: “I *so* love the world, that I am giving you, my one and only son, that whoever believes in you will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Are you ready?

S: “Your will be done” (Matthew 6:10).

F: “The time has fully come. I send you, my Son, to be born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under law, that they might receive the full rights of son” (Galatians 4:4-5).

And in a quiet, simple, private moment a baby was born. And my world changed forever.

My heart swells with wonder as I consider a God who knew everything he would endure and still chose that path for me.

All of sudden my late nights, long to-do list, attempts to create the “perfect” Christmas, and “sacrifices” for others at home, church, and work don’t seem so remarkable. Instead, my mind shifts to the amazing gift of Jesus and the opportunities I have to share him with others.

Quietly. Simply. Privately. Knowing Jesus will change their lives forever.

Dear Jesus, please forgive me for magnifying all I do in my own eyes. I admit I secretly look for others to notice. Considering all you’ve done, change my selfish heart. If you can use me this Christmas to point others to you, to encourage them with your Word, or share the joy of your salvation, so be it. But let them only see you. So that we could enjoy an eternity with you, you endured a humble birth, a scorned life, and a rugged cross. You deserve all praise and honor. Direct my thoughts, so that everything I do is done with humility and gratefulness! In your name, Amen!

Christ, the Hope of the World

Kristi Meyer

DAY
24

**“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.
This is what the ancients were commended for” (Hebrews 11:1-2).**

It might seem odd to start a Christmas Eve devotion with a passage referring to “the ancients.” We talked about the prophets for the first two devotions, but since then we’ve been focusing on New Testament figures: Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, angels, and Wise Men, even Herod and the Jewish leaders. What do “the ancients” have to do with Christmas? Quite a lot, actually...

Ever since the fall into sin, Old Testament believers lived in hope. They hoped for the Messiah as promised to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They hoped to be a great nation as promised to Abraham before he fathered even a single son. They hoped to live in a land flowing with milk and honey as promised to Moses at the burning bush. Sadly, there were also times when all hope seemed to be lost. God’s chosen people disobeyed him again and again, forsaking their commitment to worship the Lord and serve him only. The Assyrian and Babylonian captivities and the return of only a remnant to a decimated land left God’s people with very little to be hopeful about.

But as is so often the case, a small and seemingly insignificant event sparked a new hope. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and promised that he would have a son who would prepare the way for the Messiah. God had not forgotten or deserted his people. Hope sprung anew—hope that this same angel also announced to a young virgin, hope that came to pass with the birth of a baby boy on an otherwise insignificant night in Bethlehem. This baby boy was the fulfillment of thousands of years of prophecy, the One in whom the ancients put their hope, the Son sent to this earth to undo the curse of sin and perfectly live under his Father’s law.

In one sense, we as New Testament believers no longer live in hope. We can see the whole picture—not just the coming of the Messiah as a baby in Bethlehem, but the entirety of his work and ministry, sufferings and death, resurrection and ascension. We can speak with confidence of our Savior coming to this earth. We can tell of the perfect life he lived in our place. We can proclaim with certainty that because he rose, we too will rise to live with him in heaven someday. And so in another sense, we do still live in hope: hope of our own resurrection and life eternal with our Lord and Savior.

This hope is not just wishful thinking, not something that may or may not come to pass. It is a sure and certain hope, a hope promised from the very beginning of time, a hope that will continue for eternity. It is a hope that gives our lives meaning and purpose. It is a hope that a lost and despairing world desperately needs. And—most importantly—it is a hope that is too marvelous to keep to ourselves.

This year, in the midst of so much hopelessness, make it your priority to share the hope that the ancients were sure of and that we can be sure of too. Share the hope of promises kept and sins forgiven. Share the hope yet to come of a perfect life forever in heaven. Share the hope of the baby born in Bethlehem, a hope that sustains us even in the midst of so much chaos and uncertainty. This Christmas share the hope of your Savior with those around you.

Heavenly Father, you know our struggles and weaknesses. You know how easy it is for us to lose hope in the face of so much hurt and so many challenges. As we once again hear the familiar Christmas story, restore our hope in the Messiah—the One who came to earth and who will one day come again in glory. Amen.