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GIVEN



DEVOTIONS
Advent 2022

As an added feature, these devotions have reflection questions for each day's message. These can be used for self-study or as prompts for discussion when reflecting as a group.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, occupying the central portion of the page. It is intended for reflection questions related to the devotions.

*Advent Devotions were written by Dr. Kari Vo.
Brought to you in partnership with Lutheran Hour Ministries*

TELL ME A STORY

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. (Matthew 1:18a)

Do you like stories?

Both Matthew and Luke have a story to tell—the best story in the world. It’s the story of how God sent His own Son Jesus down into the world to become one of us, a human being. It is the story of how God our Creator became God our Savior; and how the Son of God became the Son of Man.

Matthew tells the story simply, and mostly from Joseph’s point of view. The darker parts of the Christmas story are mostly found in Matthew’s Gospel.

Luke tells the story with lots of drama and poetry and humor, with plenty of dialogue. He tells us how the women saw things—Elizabeth and then Mary, Jesus’ mother.

In this Advent season, we’ll be sharing this story together—the story of how Jesus, our Savior, came into this world to save us. Together we’ll celebrate how God kept His promise: “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” (Isaiah 9:6).

Lord Holy Spirit, please open our ears to hear the story of Jesus’ coming. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Is there a story (besides this one) you like to hear again and again?
- If so, what is it? Why do you love it?
- What is your favorite part of the Christmas story?

FAMILY TREE

*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.
(Matthew 1:1)*

It seems funny that God would start the most important story in history with a boring genealogy. Who cares who Jesus' great-great-great-grandparents were?

Well, apparently God does. He knows those people. He knows you, too. And when He sent His Son into the world to become part of the human race, He did it for every single individual—for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; for Ruth and Rahab; for you and me.

Jesus sprang from those people—sinners and saints, rulers and peasants, foreigners and native-born, wise and fools. He suffered, died, and rose again for those people. And He did it for you and me.

Maybe it's no surprise the whole range of humanity shows up in Jesus' family tree. He is theirs, and they are His. And we are His, too. Because God, in His great love, has created us, redeemed us, and called us to be His own—the people who belong to Jesus and trust in Him forever.

Father, thank You for making Your Son our own as well. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Who in your opinion is the greatest in Jesus' family tree (see Matthew 1 for a list)? Who is the worst?
- Why do you think God gave Jesus such a mixed bag of people for a family?
- Does this have anything to do with the kind of people who are in the church, do you think?

NOBODY?

Zerubbabel [was] the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. (Matthew 1:13-16)

I hope whoever has to read this devotion out loud forgives me. Because these ancestors of Jesus are people who are so obscure, most of us can't even pronounce their names right.

By this point in Jesus' family tree, the once-grand line has dwindled to ordinary people—shepherds and farmers and carpenters. Only their names are left to us.

But not to God. God knows far more than their names. God knows their hearts and their souls, what they loved and hated, the interests and work that filled their days. He knows them intimately—just as He knows us. And He loves them.

And He loves us—even me, even you, all these two thousand years later. You are not “Nobody” to Him. God came into this world for you—was conceived by a young woman, carried and born a human baby for you. Jesus came to die and to rise for you—and to give you everlasting life with Him forever. If you belong to Him, you are somebody. You are His.

Lord, let me be forever Yours. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is the first thing you think of when someone says, “Who are you?”
- Is it hard to believe God cares about you?
- How can you be sure He does, whether you are great or small?

WHY?

[Zechariah and Elizabeth] were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. (Luke 1:6-7)

I feel for Zechariah and Elizabeth—two faithful people who loved God and served Him with all their hearts. And yet, they had no children, though they wanted them very much.

No doubt their neighbors had a lot to say about that. “You must have sinned,” they said. “God is punishing you.” As if this family didn’t have enough grief to carry already!

But this was not a punishment from God. The Bible shows us that God doesn’t play mind games. When He disciplines people, He makes the connection between the sin and the result very clear!

No, the fact is, we live in a broken world, and bad things happen, even to the people God loves. And we may go for years, even a lifetime, with no explanation for why God allowed it.

You, too, may be suffering and wondering why. If so, put your trust in the God who saw and loved these two—and you as well. He may not explain Himself, but He sees you and He cares. So much, in fact, that He came into this unfair, broken world to take your suffering on Himself—to mend you, and all creation, with His own blood on the cross. And when He rose from the dead, He gave us the sure and certain hope that some day, He will put all things right.

*Dear Lord, help me trust You as I wait for the day when You make all things new.
Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Why do people blame others for their own troubles?
- When have you asked God “Why?” about some evil?
- How has Jesus helped you carry a heavy burden in your life?

INTERRUPTION

Now while he was serving as priest before God ... there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard ..." (Luke 1:8a, 11-13a)

What do you do when your life gets interrupted?

Zechariah wasn't expecting an angel that day. He was like us—an ordinary believer, someone who served God in his daily life and did the work God put before him.

And then God put something else in front of him. A sudden turn, a swerve in the road. A miracle. Unexpected fatherhood. A child who would grow up to prepare the way for Jesus.

No wonder he was troubled!

What about you, when your life gets interrupted? What do you do, when fear falls on you?

The angel points the way: "Don't be afraid," he says. "Your prayer has been heard ..." Heard by whom? By the Lord who loves us, and who will hold us up, even as the world changes around us.

No matter what happens to us, God isn't taken by surprise. He knew what was coming. He knows how you feel. He will not leave you to deal with it on your own. How could He? He is the God who came into this world—and into your life—to suffer and die and rise again, all to make you His own dearly loved child. He will not desert you now.

Lord, when I'm unsettled, be with me and support me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When were you shocked and surprised—by something good?
- If you feel like sharing, what are you having trouble adjusting to now?
- When you are afraid, how do you find help in Jesus?

DOUBLE-TAKE

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. ... And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ... to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” (Luke 1:13-15a, 16a, 17b)

“Don’t be afraid, because your prayer has been heard!” I can’t help wondering if Zechariah’s first automatic reaction was “Oh dear, do I really want this after all?” Because that can happen, can’t it? You pray so long for something that it becomes a habit, and when God suddenly says yes, you do a double-take and wonder if you really want to raise a baby in old age.

Praise be to God! He knows we have those moments and He doesn’t hold them against us. The angel goes right on with the message while Zechariah gets his brain in gear, and by nine months later, heart and soul and mind have all caught up together and Zechariah rejoices: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel!” (Luke 1:68a)

Are you experiencing a blessing that has its scary side? If so, you can trust in God to carry you through it, second thoughts and all. Jesus came into the world to save all of us—the enthusiastic and reluctant alike. His desire for you carried Him through suffering, death, and resurrection—and He will bring you home to Him.

Thank You, Lord, for being patient with me! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you suddenly got what you wanted and then had second thoughts?
- What was one downside to a major blessing in your life?
- How does God’s patience lead to your blessing?

WORDS

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." (Luke 1:18-20)

Zechariah is ... noticeably unenthusiastic. His first words show doubt: "How shall I know this? Give me some proof. I'm too old to have a baby, and my wife is, too." Man, did you forget you're talking to an angel? What more proof do you need?

I bet it wasn't the answer Gabriel was expecting. Humans are weird! And so he does the heavenly equivalent of pulling out his ID card, and then hands Zechariah a totally appropriate consequence: "You don't believe my words? Fine. You don't get to have any words of your own—until the day when you see these words come true!"

The result? The only words in Zechariah's home for the next nine months are going to be his wife's—and maybe a servant's, yeah—and Mary's, when she comes to visit. The believers get words, sure—lots of them, full of praise and joy. And by God's mercy and patient humor, the unbelieving world gets the Word of God—Jesus—our Savior, who came to lay down His life for us, to win for us life that lasts forever.

Dear Father, thank You for sending Your Word, Jesus, to be our Savior. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you seen God's sense of humor in action?
- When has God been patient with you?
- How does God help you to be patient and kind to others who drive you nuts?

HOME COMING

And when his [Zechariah] 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 1:23-25)

What was that homecoming like, I wonder? I can just see Elizabeth, coming to the door to greet her husband—and getting no answer. Questioning him, touching him, worrying—has he had a stroke? Is he sick, has someone hurt him, what is wrong? She must have imagined the worst before he got the story across to her.

And how did that happen—could Elizabeth read, maybe? If so, that would have made for an interesting half hour—him scribbling as fast as he could, she breathlessly following the story. And then the joy! Oh, the joy—knowing that God had heard her prayers as well, and that finally, finally, they would have a child.

No wonder she hid herself from the general public. It must have been way too much to take in. Five months was not too long to stay quiet and peaceful, thinking about the huge change in her world—and in ours. God was finally sending John, who would prepare the way for the Messiah—and right after him, Jesus, our Savior, who would give Himself up for us all to bring us back to God. What better news could there be?

Father, thank You for such wonderful news—for Your Son Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What changes do you think this news caused in their family life over the next few months?
- Do you think they told anyone else? Why or why not? If so, when?
- How do you adjust to changes in your life, with the help of God?

CALLED TO DO A JOB

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. (Luke 1:26-29)

What was Mary doing when the angel came? Old paintings show her reading or praying. But it might have been humbler than that. She might have been cooking or sweeping the floor. Feeding the chickens, fetching water ...

And now God has another job for her—she will be mother to the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus our Savior.

The angel says it right: "You are the favored one, and the Lord is with you!" But Mary's mind is still with the chickens, the broom, the water. What is this greeting? What does God want from her, humble as she is?

It is not a mistake. God knew what He was doing when He chose Mary, and He made her able to do the work He called her to do. God knew what He was doing when He called you to be His dear child—to trust in His Son Jesus, your Savior, to be forgiven and made new and clean. He has work for you, too. He will carry you through it, however great or small.

Dear Father, show me what You want me to do—and give me the Holy Spirit's help to do it. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why do you think God chose Mary and not, say, a princess or scholar?
- What responsibilities has God given you in your life?
- Tell a story about a time God helped you with a job that seemed too high, hard, or strange for you.

JOY AND FEAR

And 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 call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:30-33)

Mary would have recognized this promise—any Jewish girl would. A son to inherit the throne of David? To rule over Israel forever? This baby will be the Messiah. Two thousand years after He said it to Abraham, God is keeping His promise at last.

And Mary is overjoyed! She will be a part of this great thing. But it's going to be very intimate—her body, for nine long months. Her labor and delivery—for the very first time. She will be nursing this baby, changing His diapers, teaching Him to walk, to talk, to do His chores and mind His manners—all the things any human child must learn.

She must have felt joy. She must have felt fear.

But God would be with her, as He is with us when He asks us to take on life-changing challenges. And as God uses our bodies and minds to care for others, we glorify Jesus, who gave Himself for us first—who lay down His very life for our sakes, and rose from the dead to make us God's own.

Lord, as I face challenges, be closer to me than my own body and mind. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is one intimate kind of care you have had to provide for someone?
- What made it easy? What made it hard?
- What is one intimate kind of care God provides for you?

PRACTICAL

And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the Child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” (Luke 1:34-35)

One must be practical. Mary has a question, and she needs a straight answer: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

Mary is not doubting like Zechariah. But she needs to know: Does God want her to move up the wedding ceremony, or what? Because it sounds like this is going to happen soon. Or does He have entirely different plans?

As it turns out, He does indeed have different plans—He’s going to handle the whole thing by miracle. As God promised long ago through the prophet Isaiah, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel” (7:14b). God is doing a new thing in the world—taking the old, sinful human race and injecting new, pure, divine, holy life into it. The baby will be both fully God and fully Man—God from all eternity, now taking on true human nature as the Man Christ Jesus.

Nobody who knows about His beginning will ever be in doubt that God is doing something special here—something to pay attention to. “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19a) And God is doing it on His own—no human arrangements are necessary. God’s salvation is entirely His own work—from Jesus’ conception to His suffering, death, and resurrection. And we are the joyful receivers!

Dear Lord, thank You that You came to be God with us, Immanuel. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you think Mary was surprised by the answer?
- Why or why not?
- Why does it matter that Jesus is really human and really God both?

TOGETHER

“And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:36-38)

It comforts me to see how God puts us together in hard times. Here is Mary, about to face the trial of her life—young, unmarried, and pregnant. She has a fiancé to tell, parents to deal with, a village to face. What to do? What to do first? God knows.

And so He has Gabriel tell her about Elizabeth her relative, who has also been blessed with a miracle pregnancy and could really use some help right about now! What a great idea, to go and visit her, right?

God is kind. He sees Mary’s needs before she sees them herself, and He provides for them—through Elizabeth.

Sometimes just the fact that someone is “there” for you is the best gift of all, beyond anything they can do for you. Maybe that’s why God Himself came into our world as a human baby—as Jesus, our Savior? Whatever He might have done from heaven on high, He did infinitely better for our hearts when He came close to us in that manger—on the roads of Galilee—on that cross at Jerusalem—greeting His people, alive again. As He suffered and died and rose for our sakes, He kept us close to Him all the way.

Thank You, Lord, for pulling us close to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you prefer to suffer alone or with others nearby?
- Tell about a time when someone else’s presence was a comfort to you.
- How is God with you in dark times?

UPSIDE DOWN

In those days Mary arose and went with haste ... and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." (Luke 1:39a, 40-44)

It must have been odd for Mary to hear Elizabeth saying such things to her. "Blessed are you among women!" she cried. "Why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" As a young woman speaking to a respected elder of her family, Mary would expect to be junior—humble, helpful, even disregarded. I wonder if she felt uncomfortable?

But the joy overcame everything. "My soul magnifies the Lord," she sang, "and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." He is the One who has turned the world upside down, making Mary the mother of Jesus. He makes elderly childless Elizabeth the mother of Jesus' forerunner John. So together they look forward to a day when God will raise the humble and forgotten to places of honor—not through their own deserving, but through the salvation of Jesus.

Because it's like this for us, too, isn't it? Who are we, that our Creator should come into our flesh to be a human being and save us? Who are we, to become His relatives—to be the objects of His love—to be saved by His life and His death and His resurrection?

Thank You, Lord, for honoring us this way. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you felt uncomfortably honored?
- Why do you think God likes to turn things upside down?
- What does it mean to you, that you are Jesus' relative?

BEING WHO YOU ARE

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name." (Luke 1:46-49)

Lots of us grew up with false humility. "Don't think about how great you are, ever," people said. "Be humble; if anybody compliments you, turn it away." But Mary doesn't do that. Look at what she says right here: "From now on all generations will call me blessed!"

And of course she's right. Mary is blessed, and the whole world does say so, because God has made her the mother of Jesus our Savior. What greater blessing could there be? It would be silly to claim otherwise.

So she admits it and rejoices in it. But it doesn't turn poisonous for her because Mary joyfully puts the glory right where it belongs—with God who did this wonderful thing to her.

We can do that, too. No need to hide who we are—whether that's a gifted mechanic, a wonderful singer, a great baker, or simply a person whom God has given special gifts to. You are what God has made you—you give glory to God who made you this way. Because above all, you are God's dear child—redeemed by Jesus Christ who loved you and gave Himself for you. In Him, you are always who you ought to be—forgiven, beloved, and a delight to the God who is remaking you in His own image, ever closer to His will.

Dear Father, thank You for all the gifts You have given me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name one gift God has given you.
- How do you serve God or others with that gift?
- What is a gift in which you are growing right now?

KEEPING PROMISES

“He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” (Luke 1:51-55)

What do promises mean to you?

Small children think promises are wonderful. If they ask to go to the park and Mom or Dad says, “We’ll see,” that’s one thing; but if it’s a promise, well, that’s time to celebrate!

As we grow older, we learn that some people can and do break their promises, but not God. When God says something, it comes true.

Mary sings about this. “God has helped His servant Israel, ... as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever.” God promised to send Jesus to be a Child of Abraham’s family, and to become a blessing to the whole earth. And now it’s finally happening!

Mary is already carrying Jesus, our Savior. Though she can’t feel Him kick yet, and He is only an inch or two long, God’s plan is in motion. Jesus has started His life with us and for us—the life He will lay down for us at the cross, and then take up again in His resurrection. The life He has promised to share with us, forever, because God’s promises are always strong and true.

Dear Father, thank You for keeping Your good promises! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Tell a story about a promise you remember, big or small.
- Do you find it hard to trust people without a promise? Why or why not?
- How do God’s promises affect your actions in life?

FACING THE FUTURE

And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. (Luke 1:56)

So many good things must come to an end. Mary must leave her place of comfort and go home to face Joseph—and possibly her parents and relatives as well.

I imagine she spent a lot of time thinking about this late at night while the family slept. I suspect she spent a lot of time praying about this with Elizabeth and silent Zechariah. They all knew it would be a challenge.

But God would be with her. God had His hand on the future, just as He had on the past. He would not desert her.

He will not desert you either, no matter what you are facing. He knows what is coming, though you may not know yourself yet. He cares for you. And so you can walk step by step toward the future, knowing that your hand is in the hand of your Savior Jesus, who has promised to stay with you. He knows the road you walk. He has been down it before—all the way—if it turns out well, or even if it leads to suffering and death. And He knows the unthinkable paths through to resurrection—the ways that God brings good out of chaos, and redeems all our suffering.

Trust Him.

Dear Lord Jesus, stay with me always. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you do when you are facing uncertainty?
- How has God helped you in the past when you were in trouble?
- How can you comfort others who are walking dark and uncertain roads?

FRUSTRATION

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives ... came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." (Luke 1:57-58a, 59b-63a)

You can just see the frustration level rising at John's circumcision party. First the friends and relatives make assumptions about the baby's name without even asking; then, when Elizabeth corrects them, they aren't happy with the new name. They go over her head to ask Zechariah—apparently they don't trust her! Only after Zechariah confirms the name do the visitors finally settle down.

I wonder if Elizabeth just wanted to grab her baby and run for the hills. Sometimes family is too much.

And yet, it was into our human family that God sent Jesus, His own Son. God knew that was going to mean plenty of conflict. He accepted that—not just in Jesus' earthly home, but in His life with the whole human race as our Savior.

If you are living with family conflict, God understands your feelings. God has been there. He cares about you—yes, and about your family as well. Jesus lay down His life so that you could become a member of His family—a child of God, beloved, known, and wanted.

Dear Father, give me Your peace when I face conflict. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How does family conflict make you feel?
- How do you tend to cope with family conflict—yelling? Discussing? Running away?
- Tell about a time when God helped you during a time of conflict.

VISITED

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people." (Luke 1:67-68)

It's a homely term—God has “visited” His people. It's the same word you'd use for going to see a relative you love, or a friend in the hospital. A phone call is not enough. You go there in person, to see them with your own eyes.

And Zechariah puts it in the past tense, too! That makes sense, actually—because at this point, Jesus has been in Mary's womb for three months. God has in fact already come into the world as a human being—to visit and redeem His people. He didn't write a letter or do a phone call. He came Himself.

That is the kind of God we have—a God who cares about us so much that He came down into our world to be with us, to be one of us, to live and to suffer and die for us so that we could live forever with Him. A God who rose from the dead to share that everlasting life with us—the people He visited, the people He loves. He wants you to be with Him forever.

Dear Lord, thank You for visiting us—and for opening the way for us to be with You forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Who is the last person you visited?
- What makes a visit good or bad? Why?
- How does God's visit to our world make a difference in your life?

SAVED FROM OUR ENEMIES

[Zechariah said,] “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He ... has raised up a horn of salvation for us ... that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us ... that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.”
(Luke 1:68b-69a, 71, 74-75)

Ugh! Who wants to think about enemies at Christmas time? But unfortunately, enemies are a fact of life—and they are a major reason Jesus came into the world.

I’m not just talking about human enemies, though God cares about those as well. But we have spiritual enemies, too—namely, the devil and those who serve him. They hate whatever God loves—and that includes us. And they have power—though it isn’t limitless!—to try to make our lives miserable.

We are not in a good position to fight these enemies. How would we even start? But Jesus can do it for us—and He does. How? Through His birth, life, death, and resurrection.

Jesus came into this world for that very reason, to put an end to the works of “the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12b). This tiny baby, God and Man in a single squirming package—He is our Champion, our Savior. He fought the battle on behalf of us all—and we have the benefit. Now we can “serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.”

Help me to trust in You, dear Lord, and rest in Your peace. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you have enemies? If so, how do you cope with them?
- What makes the devil and his angels so hard for us to cope with?
- How do you take refuge in Jesus when you suspect you are under spiritual attack?

THE SUNRISE FROM ON HIGH

*“And you, child, ... will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”
(Luke 1:76-79)*

Have you ever been completely in the dark—darkness so complete that you could see nothing at all? There is nothing safe to do but sit down. You cannot walk—you can’t avoid danger. You will certainly get lost. All you can do is wait to be found. And oh, the joy when you first see a distant flashlight!

God has given us something even better—He has sent the sunrise itself to give us light, Jesus, His own Son. A flashlight will do for temporary use. But for peace and joy and all-around usefulness—you really need the sun itself, right? Then you will never go astray. The shadows of danger and death are lifted; you can walk freely.

This is the gift of Jesus—the knowledge that the True Light of heaven has come down to earth and never again will we shiver in the darkness. He Himself will be with us to guide our steps in the pathways of peace. Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will still have light; for Jesus, who lay down His life for us, will guide us through death and out the other side—into His glorious resurrection.

Dear Lord, give me Your light forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Which do you like better, sunrise or sunset? Why?
- Tell a story about a time you walked in physical darkness.
- If you are willing, tell about a time God’s light shown for you during a time of spiritual darkness.

A LONG TIME GROWING

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. (Luke 1:80)

John was probably about thirty years old when he began his ministry, getting the people of Israel ready for Jesus. Before that, what was his life like? We don't know. Only that he "grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness." It sounds like a long, quiet time of growth.

Did his parents live to see it? We don't know, but since they were already old when he was born, maybe not. They saw their young child grow and become stronger day by day; and that was their joy and comfort. Beyond that, they lived by the promise God had given them—that He would use their son, and that Jesus, the Messiah, was even then living on earth.

You probably have projects like this in your own life—things or people that you care passionately about, but know that you are not likely to see the fulfillment. You may be raising children, or educating people, or planting a church, or shaping a neighborhood. You may be doing something as simple and lovely as growing a garden. Whatever it is, you entrust it to the faithful God who has watched over it, and you, from the beginning. He faithfully promised us a Savior way back in the beginning, and He kept His promise when Jesus was born for us. The same love that sent Jesus will watch over those we love as well.

Dear Lord, You know who and what I love. Please keep watch over them, even when I cannot. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What long-term concerns do you have?
- Do you ever worry about what will happen when you're gone?
- How do you remind yourself to trust in the Lord?

HELPLESS AND ALONE

When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with Child from the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18b)

This whole verse seems to emphasize Mary's helplessness. It says she "had been betrothed" to Joseph—apparently somebody else did the marriage arrangement. It says she "was found to be with Child"—which sounds like someone made an unexpected discovery. And then there's the phrase "before they came together"—which only emphasizes how alone Mary is, right here and now.

But she isn't really, is she? As awful as things are, the Lord is still with her. She's carrying Jesus. The Holy Spirit is guiding her, though she doesn't yet see how or where. This is probably the lowest point of her life, at least until she sees her Son Jesus hanging on a cross. And yet, God is still with her.

God is with you, too—no matter how terrible your situation is, or how helpless and alone you feel. He has not abandoned you. He will not give you up. God came into the world as a tiny baby in order to make you His own, to live and to die for you. You matter to Him that much—when He suffered, when He died, when He rose again. And you matter now. Let Him care for you.

Dear Savior, I cannot help myself. Help me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why do you think Jesus came as a helpless infant?
- When have you felt helpless and alone?
- Tell about a time when God helped you, though you could not imagine how He would do that.

A HUMAN REFLECTION OF GOD

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:19)

I like Joseph. As far as he knows, his fiancée has cheated on him and gotten pregnant, and yet he isn't stomping around and yelling so the whole neighborhood can hear. Instead, he goes home to think it out in peace and quiet. That's self-control.

And one of the people he's thinking about is his fiancée, Mary. He's worried about her future, even though he thinks she's carrying another man's child. He doesn't want her put to shame or harmed in any way. Joseph isn't out for revenge.

But he can't see any better way out of this mess than a quiet divorce. And while he's thinking about it, he falls asleep ... only to have God give him a much better solution.

I am glad that God chose a man like this to be the earthly father of Jesus. In his own small human way, Joseph reflects God the Father—wise, slow to anger, quick to show mercy and kindness. Joseph will go on to take excellent care of God's Son Jesus for the rest of his life. And Jesus will grow up to do the same for us—laying down His life for us, sinners always in need of His mercy, kindness, and love.

Lord, thank You for Your patient kindness and mercy. Make me more like You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When someone hurts you, do you withdraw, or burst out in anger?
- When has someone shown unexpected mercy on you?
- How has God's mercy made it possible for you to show mercy to someone else?

SON OF DAVID

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:20-21)

Why did the angel call Joseph “son of David”?

God had promised many years ago that the Messiah would come from David’s family. As a son of David, Joseph would pass that on to his legal son Jesus (along with the natural descent from David Jesus had through His mother).

But I think there might be more to it, important as that is. David was known as the “man after God’s own heart,” the one who sinned deeply, but loved God just as deeply. When God sent David’s life in strange new directions, David listened and followed. He relied on God’s promises. Now the angel calls this son of David, Joseph, to an even stranger life—protecting and caring for God’s own Son Jesus and His mother.

“Do not fear,” the angel says. God will be with him at every step. This Son that God is giving into Joseph’s hands will be his Savior as well—so Joseph will have the privilege of saving his Savior, providing for his Provider. And Joseph will name Him Jesus—this Child, God Himself, come into the world to save us from our sins and to provide us with everlasting life.

Help me to trust You, dear Lord, like Joseph and David did. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Has your life been mostly as you expected when you were young, or not?
- What do you think must have been odd about raising the Child Jesus?
- Tell about a time when your life took a strange turn and you found help in the Lord.

SENDING A BABY TO WAR

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:22-23)

Why did God choose a virgin to conceive Jesus? It certainly wasn't because there's something bad or terrible about sex, as some people think. And it has nothing to do with His status as the Son of God. He isn't some half-and-half creature!

No, this is the fulfillment of a promise God made to a very frustrating king named Ahaz years ago through the prophet Isaiah. Ahaz was facing war, and he was trying to cope with it on his own instead of asking God for help. God promised that help anyway—and even invited him to name a miracle as proof and God would do it! But Ahaz actually refused. Can you believe it? So God chose the miracle instead: A virgin would conceive and bear a Son, and call His name Immanuel (see Isaiah 7).

Who sends a baby to war? Only the Lord—the God who delights in using the weak to overturn the strong. And in this case, He came Himself—not some lesser person or messenger. God came as a human baby into this world to overcome all the power of the devil. Through His life and death on the cross, He rescued us and set us free. And through His resurrection, He gave us everlasting life with Him forever.

Who else would think of such a thing?

What You do amazes me, Lord. Thank You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- If God offered you Ahaz's choice, what would you pick?
- When in your life have you seen God use something weak to defeat the strong?
- Read Psalm 2, which is about Jesus. Does anything surprise you about the way they describe Him?

TOGETHER

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a Son. (Matthew 1:24-25a)

It must have been an uncomfortable time for Mary—the days after she left Elizabeth, but before she went to live with Joseph. Who did she have to confide in? Was there anyone who believed her—a parent, a sister or brother, a friend? Was there shouting and crying—or cold silence?

We don't know. But we do know that God spoke to Joseph, and soon afterward, Mary had someone on her side again. Someone who believed her; someone who understood. Joseph would be there for her as she dealt with whatever uproar there might have been among their friends and family, and coped with the later months of pregnancy, too.

God knows we need other people; He could have made Mary do it all on her own, but did not. Even Jesus did not do it all on His own—He chose twelve apostles, and had many, many more who loved and followed Him—including you. And you, who do you have? Maybe a spouse or a child or a friend or a neighbor. Hopefully the church. And above all, Jesus Himself—who has promised He will always be with you, and never leave you alone. He is the Son of God, who loved you and gave Himself for you (see Galatians 2:20), and He intends you to be with Him forever. You are His beloved, and He is yours (see Song of Solomon 6:3).

When I am lonely, Lord Jesus, help me to lean on You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you cope with loneliness?
- How could the church do better at helping people who feel alone?
- How does the Lord support you when you are feeling alone?

JESUS

And he called His name Jesus. (Matthew 1:25b)

The name Jesus comes from a longer Hebrew form Yehoshua, “The Lord is salvation,” though by the time our Lord was born, people usually used a shorter form, Yeshua. As the name passed through Greek and Latin, we got our English version, Jesus.

It was a popular name in Jesus’ day—He might not have been the only boy in Nazareth with that name. He’s not even the only person in the Bible to carry it—the Old Testament leader Joshua shares it. And yet, for all eternity, Jesus our Lord will forever be the One we think of when we say this name.

Jesus is God’s own self-chosen name for His incarnation as a human being. It sums up in a single word exactly why He came to earth—to become our Savior. Not to judge us, not to crush us, not to rule over us in power—but to rescue us. To save us from the power of sin, death, and the devil.

The name Jesus shows us God’s heart for us—and it is a heart full of love. It’s a heart that took Him to the cross for us, knowing that through His suffering, death, and resurrection, He would set us free from the power of evil. Nobody else could do it—but the Lord could, and did. He laid aside His glory, stepped down from His heavenly throne, and came down to us.

And Joseph named Him Jesus.

Dear Lord, thank You for becoming my Savior. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you know what your name means? If so, what?
- How well do you think Mary and Joseph understood Jesus’ mission when He was born?
- Jesus’ other name, Immanuel, means “God with us.” How does that comfort you?

SUBJECT

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. (Luke 2:1-5)

You would think that of everyone, God would be exempt from a tax registration. But God didn't think so. At almost nine months along, Jesus traveled to Bethlehem within His mother's womb, going with Joseph to be registered for a project of the Roman government. Even God didn't get out of that one.

It couldn't have been comfortable for any of them. In pictures we usually see Mary riding a donkey—but there's nothing in the Bible text to say she had one. She may have walked, like everybody else. The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem was a long one—about 80 or 90 miles. It would have involved camping on the side of the road if they were not lucky enough to find a family kind enough to take them in. And how Joseph must have worried!

This is the way God chose to enter the world—subject to human laws, even the annoying ones; subject to the uncertainties and dangers of ordinary life; subject to, well, everything. God came down from His throne to be, not the ruler, but a subject. A Roman subject. Why? For us. For you. For the ones He came to save.

Thank You, Lord, for humbling Yourself for me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you think was the hardest part of Mary's experience?
- Why do you think God chose to handle things this way?
- What does God's humility say about the way He will care for you?

A SON IS GIVEN

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7)

Labor. Long, painful contractions, coming closer and closer together. A frantic search for a place to give birth. Is there a midwife? Is there a clean place, any place to lie down? A cloth to lie on. Water, we need water. A light. Confusion. Pushing.

And then a baby's cry. Joy. Voices babbling, excited. Happiness. Where are the swaddling clothes? Nursing for the first time. I'm not sure we're doing this right ... ah yes ... a sleeping baby. An exhausted mother, and a radiant father. A Son is given.

This is the gift God gave the world that first Christmas—a baby, a Son, God Himself come in the flesh to be one of us. The Son of God now made the Son of Man, so that all mankind could become children of God through faith in Him. Through His life, death, and resurrection, God's Son Jesus has made us sons and daughters of the Lord. What a wonderful gift!

Dear Father, thank You for the gift of Your Son. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is the best gift you ever received?
- Why?
- Why do you think God came Himself, instead of sending an angel?

UNEXPECTED JOY

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:8-12)

Who could blame the shepherds for being afraid? They were ordinary men, not highly educated, not used to angel visits. Their work tended to keep them away from worship, and they knew people looked down on them. Why would God pick them for the first witnesses to Jesus' birth?

But He did. And it makes sense to us—humble witnesses for a humble Savior, shepherds for the Good Shepherd who would grow up to lay down His life for all God's sheep.

So the angels came. And the shepherds were afraid, like sensible men. But the angels calmed them down, and told them: "Fear not, for I bring you good news of great joy that will be for *all* the people. For unto *you* is born a Savior ..." All the people. Unto YOU.

So they went, and they saw God's sign—a baby, wrapped in ordinary baby clothes and lying in a manger. Who could be afraid of that? And they rejoiced.

We, too, can go and look by faith at Jesus, lying in the manger there for us—our Shepherd. A Son given to us; a Savior born to us. Jesus our Lord.

Thank You, Father! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is one of the best pieces of news you have had in your life?
- Why?
- Who would you guess were the second witnesses to Jesus' birth?

CELEBRATE!

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!” When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this Child. (Luke 2:13-17)

Why do you think so many angels came? I doubt God had to give orders. Imagine the chance to celebrate the human birth of the One you love best in the world, the Lord God Himself—there must have been volunteers for miles.

You see the same thing with the shepherds, once they picked their jaws up off the ground. They go to Bethlehem—not walking but running!—to see the baby as fast as they can. And once they see Him, they tell everybody they know.

Some things are worth running. Worth celebrating. Worth telling everybody you know. And Jesus is one of those things. Because He feels that way about you, you know? You were worth it to Him—to come all this way, to lay down His life to make you His own. And now that you trust in Him, He celebrates. As the prophet Zephaniah writes, “The Lord your God is in your midst, a Mighty One who will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His love; He will exult over you with loud singing” (Zephaniah 3:17).

Lord, I am so glad You have come to me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What’s the last thing you celebrated?
- Does it surprise you to know God celebrates you?
- Ask the Lord if there’s someone you might celebrate in some small way who needs that now.

UNDER THE LAW

And at the end of eight days, when He was circumcised, He was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” (Luke 2:21-24)

We remember Jesus’ circumcision for an important reason—this was the first time He officially came under the Law of God. This was the complex system of rules and rituals God gave Moses for the people of Israel. It showed them how to worship and relate to God. Now at eight days old, Jesus, God’s own Son, is carrying those responsibilities, and we see it again when He is forty days old at the temple.

Why do these things matter? Because Jesus is doing all this on our behalf, even as a baby. And not just things like temple ceremonies. What about the Ten Commandments—those Laws that we all know we should do, and we all fail to carry out perfectly? What about our daily failures in love, in patience, in justice, in mercy?

Without Jesus, our failures would crush us. But with Jesus we have relief. He takes our failures and substitutes His own perfection. He lays down His life to remove the weight of sin that lies against us—and rises again to give us freedom, and life, forever.

We couldn’t do it. But Jesus could—and did, because He loves us. Now we will live with Him in joy and peace and forgiveness, forever.

Dear Savior, thank You for taking away my failures. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you feel about God’s Law?
- Why?
- How does the Law drive you to Jesus, your Savior?

DELIGHT

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon ... And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the Child Jesus ... he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation." (Luke 2:25a, 26-27a, 28-30)

What it must have been like, to have God's promise that you would see the Savior some day! And then he saw them. Two parents trying to figure out what they were supposed to do next, one clutching a baby. And that baby was the Son of God.

Simeon took Jesus up in his arms immediately. The Messiah, the Savior of the world, was here! And his joy burst forth in a poem of praise to God.

This was the high point of Simeon's life. We know nothing else about Simeon—not even his age. But we do know that he saw Jesus and took delight in Him.

Let that be true of us as well—whether we are young or old, strong or weak, happy or troubled. Let us look at Jesus and take delight in Him.

Let us look at Him—this baby, this God come in the flesh. Let us see the love that drove Him to come to be one of us, to live and work among us. Let us see the mercy that took Him to the cross to suffer and die for us. And let us see the joyful Man who rose from the dead for our sakes, who offers us everlasting life now, this very day, if we will put our trust in Him. Let us delight in Him.

Dearest Jesus, I love You. Thank You for coming to me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name one thing you delight in.
- How do you show delight in a person?
- What specific thing delights you the most about Jesus?

THE VALUE OF A HUMAN BEING

And there was a prophetess, Anna ... She was advanced in years, having lived ... as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36-38)

I have friends in their eighties who occasionally say to me, “Well, I just don’t feel like I’m good for anything anymore. I can’t do anything to help anybody. Why doesn’t God take me home?”

People could easily say the same thing of Anna in this story, you realize. She too is old; she spends all her time in worship and prayer—not in teaching Sunday School, not in running a food pantry or singing in the choir. She is not a “productive citizen.” And yet she is the one who recognizes and greets the Christ Child, and she tells all the believers she knows about Him.

In this story, God gives an honored place to people who are valuable in His eyes though not in the world: a displaced worker, a new mother, a very old woman. And of course the least and lowest—a newborn baby. Jesus.

It isn’t what people do that matters to God; it is who they are. And these people are ... forgiven sinners. Beloved by the Lord. Redeemed by Jesus, who would suffer, die, and rise again to make them God’s own children.

You are loved—not for what you do, but for who you are. You are Jesus’ own, because the Holy Spirit has brought you to trust in Him. He thinks you worth His very life. You are loved.

Lord Holy Spirit, help me to see how You value me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you ever feel valueless?
- How do you know that God values you?
- How could you help someone else feel the value God sets on them?

GUILT AND GRIEF

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him." (Matthew 2:1-2)

I wonder whether the wise men ever found out about the children who died as a result of their visit. I hope not. They were doing a very normal thing—taking presents to the new heir to the throne of a nearby country. From their viewpoint, it was a diplomatic mission like dozens of others. How were they to know it would end up in tragedy?

It wasn't their fault, of course. Looking for a new royal baby? You should look in the capital city, of course—in the palace, in the king's family! And they did—and babies died as a result.

What do you do, when your innocent action brings unintended harm? The only thing you can do—run to Jesus for help. He whose own innocent birth resulted in massacre, how could He not understand what you are feeling? Seek comfort in Him. He is well able to deal with your guilt, rational and irrational alike. He understands the whole mess, nobody better. And He will draw you close to Him, enfold you in His mercy, and heal you. He will hear your prayers for those caught up in evil. It's what He does—because He gave Himself to become your Savior.

Lord, draw near to me when I can't draw near to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you think the wise men found out?
- What would you say to someone facing this kind of irrational guilt and grief?
- Has God helped you through a time when your well-meant actions led to trouble? If you are willing, tell the story.

TROUBLED

*When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.
(Matthew 2:3)*

Someone asked me once, “But why was Jerusalem troubled along with King Herod?” I was very surprised. Then I realized they’d probably never worked or lived with an abusive person. When your abuser is upset, believe me, you know it. You’re afraid to be his next target.

This makes daily life a misery, of course. But it does something else—it can also mess up the way you think about God. If someone in authority over you mistreats you in serious ways, you can start to wonder: Is God abusive too? Will He understand the situation I am in or the mistake I made? Will He forgive, or will He berate me and make me feel two inches tall? Even though our minds know better, our hearts still expect a blow.

Jesus understands this, and He is immeasurably gentle with those of us who have suffered harm like this. His patience and kindness are deep, so deep. As Isaiah puts it, “He will not cry aloud or lift up His voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed He will not break, and a faintly burning wick He will not quench” (Isaiah 42:2-3a). God Himself has suffered abuse—what else was the cross, and what went before it?—and come out the other side, in His resurrection. And He will lead us to share in that same new life with gentleness, teaching us to trust an atom at a time—because His love is real. He will wait for us as long as it takes.

Dearest Lord, thank You for Your patience with me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How did you first learn about God?
- How did that impact the way you think about God?
- How can you make sure others see Jesus clearly through you?

A GIFT FOREVER

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the Child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:9-11)

What a contrast! Imagine the foreigners trooping through Bethlehem with their servants and animals, bright with strange fabrics and gold trappings. They stop before an utterly ordinary house. Joseph doesn't seem to be home—has he found work by now?—but Mary is there with Jesus, who is probably a toddler at this point, playing on the floor while His mother cooks and cleans. Were the wise men surprised?

No matter. They fall down and worship Him. Here, finally, is a king worthy of worship—innocent, gentle, at peace with the people around Him. They offer Jesus gifts which hint at His future—gold, for His kingship; frankincense, for His deity; and myrrh, for His suffering and death for His people. And they are happy.

It doesn't last long. The young King will soon be a refugee in Egypt; the wise men, on their way home in a hurry. But they will remember the Child they gave gifts to—Jesus who is God's gift to them and to the whole world. Jesus, who lay down His life for them and for us—and who rose from the dead, so that we might share His gift of everlasting life.

Holy Father, thank You for the gift of Your Son Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name one favorite gift you have received in your life.
- What made it special?
- Tell about a time when you were able to share the gift of Jesus with someone else.

TRUSTING

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the Child, to destroy Him." And he rose and took the Child and His mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." (Matthew 2:13-15)

Look at the trust Joseph shows here. There's no "Are you sure?" or "Can we wait till the morning?" He just gets up, wakes Mary, and they get on the road. That's what you want in the man in charge of Jesus' safety. He gets his orders and he does it.

Maybe that's why it's so easy to overlook the number of miracles Joseph has a part in. I count four prophetic dreams overall—and Jesus' birth, of course. But Joseph does his part so faithfully that he makes it look ordinary. For him, it probably was ordinary. There would have been no way to survive Jesus' infancy without a strong trust in God.

I'd like to trust God like Joseph did. And knowing Jesus, I can start learning. Because He has never let me down—and He never will. He saw all of us struggling in this broken world under the power of death and evil, and He had compassion on us. He came to us. He lay down His life for us. And He rose again so that we could live forever with Him, in trust and joy.

Lord Jesus, help me to trust You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you know when someone is trustworthy?
- Who do you know who sets a great example of trusting the Lord?
- Tell about a time when you really had to trust in God to make it through.

EVIL

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." (Matthew 2:16-18)

There are some things that nobody on earth can explain, because they are evil. They cannot be explained away, and they cannot be tolerated. We can only weep and cry out to God when they happen. The death of the children in Bethlehem is one of those things. We too have our unbearable evils—and we cry out to God when they come.

It does no good to rationalize these evils. Nothing will make them bearable. We need someone to destroy them—a Savior who will break the power of evil, right at its source, so that it will never rule again.

That was the job of the final baby of Bethlehem—the last survivor, Jesus. He escaped the sword that day, not for Himself, but for all of us. There was a cross waiting in His future, where He had a battle to fight. On that cross He would put a decisive end to the works of the devil and all his angels, conquering them with His own blood. And three days later He would rise from the dead, breaking the power of death forever—for Himself, and for everyone who trusts in Him.

Our hope is in that last baby, the Son of God and Man. He is our Rescuer, and we put our trust in Him—until the day He returns in glory, and all evils are gone forever.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What evils in the world trouble you now?
- How do you find peace and help when you are grieving or horrified?
- When has God helped you through a time of great evil?

PLANNING

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the Child and His mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the Child's life are dead." And he rose and took the Child and His mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth. (Matthew 2:19-23)

It looks very much like Joseph had been planning to take his family back to Bethlehem originally, instead of Nazareth. But Joseph felt uneasy about that. Herod's sons had divided up his country to rule, and Bethlehem belonged to Archelaus now—and he was the worst of them all. Would he try to kill Jesus like his father? Then God sent a prophetic dream to Joseph, and that settled things. They went home to Nazareth, in far-off Galilee. And Jesus grew up in safety.

Joseph did right to use his common sense—and to listen to God's direction as well. And we do right when we listen to both—and most of all, when we put our trust in Jesus, who "became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30b). No one who trusts in Him will ever be destroyed. He is our Savior and Keeper.

You are my wisdom, Lord. Help me to trust in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you tend to trust logic or intuition more?
- What do you do when you don't know what to do?
- Tell about a time you got wise advice from a fellow Christian.

ORDINARY LIFE

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon Him. (Luke 2:39-40)

We know very little about the rest of Jesus' childhood. We have a little story about Jesus visiting the temple when He was twelve (see Luke 2:41-52). Other than that, His childhood is a blank. Why?

Well, probably because nothing extraordinary happened! We can be sure He went to school like other Jewish boys and learned to read and study the Bible. No doubt Joseph taught Him building skills. I expect His mother taught Him other skills—how to do chores, keeping His things neat, and even some cooking (see John 21:9). It was in this ordinary world that He grew to manhood.

This was God's plan for Jesus. After all, He came to be our Savior—and most of us live very ordinary lives. We don't travel to visit sages and wise men far away, as some dreamers have imagined about the young Jesus. We don't do miracles at the drop of a hat, as other silly stories say about him. No, He lived as one of us—and we can be sure He understands us.

During those years, what was He doing? He was learning and growing. He was studying the Scripture, as we all must do. He was learning to know His people—to know us—because we are the people He loves, even to the point of laying down His life for us—so that we can live with Him forever in His kingdom.

Lord, let me live with You all the days of my life. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What does an ordinary day look like for you?
- Are you glad Jesus had an ordinary childhood? Why or why not?
- What would it be like to have Jesus as a brother? Why do you think so?

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