

*The Hopes and
Fears of
All the Years*



Advent Scripture Readings
and Meditations

CONTENTS

3 / FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT
God's Sufficient Comfort

11 / SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT
God's Sufficient Grace

19 / THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT
God's Sufficient Provision

27 / FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT
Our All-Sufficient Savior

This devotional book is a product of the thoughts and meditations of members of Trinity Presbyterian Church. We have taken time while writing these past weeks to reflect on the Word of God, and His promises concerning the coming of His Son, Jesus. Our thoughts are not meant to be theological commentaries, but merely reflections on these passages. We invite you now to meditate with us on the transforming reality of His Advent among us. May your hearts and prayers be directed towards our Savior and King this Advent Season, as you reflect on the truths contained in this book.

The risk of birth

This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war & hate
And a nova lighting the sky to warn
That time runs out & the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honour & truth were trampled by scorn—
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by greed & pride the sky is torn—
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

Madeline L'Engle

**FIRST WEEK
OF ADVENT**
God's Sufficient Comfort



2 Corinthians 1:1-7

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT

"I dream to heal your wounds, but I bleed myself." – Sunny Day Real Estate, "In Circles"

You've probably felt this way at some point in your life. "I can't do another thing." "I'm too tired." "I've been hurt too badly to help anyone else." When everyone shares this sentiment, the church starts to look like a battlefield, littered with dying soldiers writhing in pain.

Paul, however, promotes an alternate vision: "God...comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction..." (2 Cor 1:3-4). Suffering in this life is certain—a given. But for those who follow Jesus, dying and rising with him, suffering takes on a new meaning and becomes the conduit for loving like he does. Perhaps Paul would have written: "I work to heal your wounds because I bleed myself."

We run the risk again this year of remaining the forever wounded, of doing nothing but dreaming about healing. If so, paganism has triumphed rather than Christianity because, as Paul Miller argues, paganism is simply evil management, an attempt to keep things safe, a way to lessen the bleeding. Jesus, on the contrary, as Miller says: "is the massive center of surprise." When he arrives, God arrives in surprisingly human ways: hidden in a dark womb, confined to a dirty manger, obligated to unsuspecting parents. He cries, bleeds, and dies "to heal your wounds."

Let the church then not remain a battle field, littered with dying soldiers writhing in pain, but become an army of the walking wounded—a mobile hospital for sinners caring compassionately for others in the name of Jesus, whose father is "the God of all comfort" (2 Cor 1:3).

*Father, comfort us in every affliction
by revealing to us the power of Jesus' affliction.
And help us to comfort others around us who need
comfort with the comfort we have received
in his resurrection. Amen*

Genesis 17:1-8

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."

A NEW NAME

Were the two commands God asked of Abram really so hard? Walk before me. Be blameless. The commandments may look possible on paper, but they are something else in the context of real life. In real life Abram was 99 years old, and it had been 25 years since he left Haran, wandering at the will of God. It had been 13 years since Ishmael had been born, not the promised heir Abram waited for but a source of domestic strife and heartache. Along the way there had been danger in Egypt, conflict in Canaan, and a pitched battle to free a captive Lot. Abram's life had been on the line without an heir in sight, without the word of God fulfilled. Walk before me, be blameless? To what end? a weary Abram might wonder, falling on his face.

To this end, said God: I give you a new name. *Abram*, the exalted father, became *Abraham*, the father of a multitude. As God once spoke into existence the world with Adam in it, he now spoke into being a nation of chosen people called Israel. A promise from the Lord is the same as its deliverance; it's only the fullness of time we wait for. In that same fullness of time, "God sent forth his Son," he gives his people new names, and new hearts. Walk before the Lord. Be blameless.

*Father of heaven and earth, of time past, present, and future, give us in our weary days hearts and minds to wait for the fullness of time.
Give us confidence and faith in your promises, even those that to us look unfulfilled, perhaps even unfulfillable. Help us to know you as the author of new and eternal life found in Jesus, trusting that in his coming we may walk before you, blameless.*

Genesis 17:15-21

And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year."

THE FULLNESS OF GOD'S TIMING

Sarai's quiet, settled, predictable life with Abram was interrupted by God's command to leave their homeland. Unknown to her, stressful events on the horizon would make her life noisy, unsettled and unpredictable.

At this point in her life, she had waited nearly 25 years for the fulfillment of God's initial covenant promise to her husband concerning his offspring. She had experienced the consequences of her husband's deception in Egypt (passing her off as his sister); the conflict with Abram's nephew Lot and their separation; Lot's capture by four pagan kings and the subsequent bold rescue by his uncle.

How had God's promise resonated in her spirit through all these experiences? Not deeply rooted in trusting the Promiser, she sought a way to assist His plan. How bitterly Sarai must have regretted the decision to give her handmaid Hagar to her husband. This surrogate mother and her son Ishmael spelled trouble in the camp!

Then the Lord spoke again to Abram in a vision providing a name-change for Sarai and promising him a son with the added personal touch of the name Isaac who would be born within the year. We know the rest of the story - in the fullness of God's timing all would be as He decreed.

Do you ever try to relate to the experiences of Biblical personalities? If I find myself doubting God's promises, perhaps suggesting a way to speed up their fulfillment, even engineering an alternate plan.....am I a daughter of Sarai?

Father, I confess that I too often follow Sarai's path of doubt and impatience with Your timing.

Keep reminding me that the work of prayer is to bring my will in line with Yours.

Thank You for Your covenant promises fulfilled through the lives of Abraham and Sarah.

How grateful I am for Your overarching sovereignty which extends through the centuries.

Genesis 21:1-7

The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

A PROMISE FULFILLED

I'm sure it was not in Sarah's life plan to wait until she was 90 to have a child. In fact, in her hope for a son and fear that it would not happen, she tried to "help", with the disastrous result of Abraham fathering Ishmael with her maid. Then, a year before Isaac is born, Sarah laughs in unbelief, scoffing at the promise she overhears God make to Abraham that she will indeed give birth to a son within the year. But when Isaac is born, her derision turns to rejoicing and celebration, and they name him Isaac, which means laughter.

Verse 1 makes it clear that in spite of her scoffing, God has been at work, and indeed Sarah credits him with bringing her this laughter, marveling that she has borne a son in her and Abraham's old age. Only God could do this amazing thing, and she rejoices at the wonder of it all.

My response when God "interrupted" my life to send me to the mission field was very much like Sarah's reaction of "You must be kidding" or "Surely not" to God's plan. And although it hasn't been all rejoicing, laughter, and celebration, God's plan has been far better than I could have imagined. So I see two lessons here: 1) don't respond in unbelief to God's interruptions and 2) remember that because God is at work, there will be reasons to rejoice.

*Lord, help us, in faith,
to accept your plans for our lives.
And may we, like Sarah,
celebrate when we experience
the fulfillment of your promises,
rejoicing to give you the credit.*

Genesis 22:1-8

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

WHAT WE KNOW TO BE TRUE

"Take out your pencil and paper, we are going to have a little quiz today." The truth is what my high school chemistry teacher Mr. Pechonick called a "quiz" was a full blown unannounced AP Chemistry test. In fact all tests in his class were unannounced. Talk about changing the course of your day! Unlike most school tests, that is the way tests come into our lives – unannounced – unplanned interruptions. Another interesting thing about Mr. Pechonick is that he never graded our tests. There was no Pass/Fail. He simply pointed about what we had missed so that we could grow in our understanding of chemistry.

When God "tests" our faith as he did Abraham's, it is not to determine whether or not we "pass." His desire is to reveal our faith, to grow our faith and to deepen our understanding of His character.

How do you react when God brings unannounced tests or trials into your life? God might just test your faith using that which you hold most precious – your son, your job, your spouse, your finances, etc. Abraham did not know the outcome of his trial. Nor do I think that he necessarily trusted the outcome would be what he desired, what he had prayed for and how He believed God was keeping His promise. But it is evident that Abraham trusted The One who held the outcome in His hands. When we experience unannounced tests we must choose to believe what we know to be true rather than the circumstances we are experiencing.

Lord my heart's desire is to value you above all else.

Would you give me the faith to choose to trust your goodness and your sovereignty when life tells me to protect what I hold do dear?

When my fear beckons me to run, would you remind me that it is You that hold me in your grasp?

Genesis 22:9-18

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

THE LORD WILL PROVIDE

Is God cruel? It is hard to read God's command for Abraham to sacrifice his dear Isaac without asking the question. Never mind the promises that were to come through this child, this is Abraham and Sarah's source of delight! How could God command an act so seemingly contrary to His character and the joy of His people?

To be honest, I don't understand. This is trauma of the highest order; the stuff that convulses a parent with tears. We may not or cannot grasp God's motives (no surprise there), but Abraham clung to two realities. First, God owns the rights to everything and everyone as their Creator. Who can bargain with I AM? But, the counterweight to that sobering reality is Abraham's mantra, "The LORD will provide." God is the only sovereign, but He is good and He *will* provide.

Here's what Abraham couldn't know: God required nothing of him that He was not willing to give Himself. As God's Son clung to the cross, there would be no reprieve, no ram in the thicket. Again, how could God command such a thing? He is in control. He is good. And He is intent on rescuing us from ourselves, no matter the cost.

Do we understand the circumstances of our lives from God's perspective? Hardly. But we know that, in Christ, God is for us. As Flannery O'Connor said of the disease that took her life at thirty-nine, "I can with one eye squinted take it all as a blessing."

*Heavenly Father, our lovely source of true delight,
give us grace to live freely as Your people.*

*Lead us not into discouragement about our
circumstances, but enable us to revel in Your
goodness and love knowing that You have withheld
nothing from us, not even Your own Son.*

*So, give what You command
and command what You will.*

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Micah 5:1-5

*Now muster your troops,
O daughter of troops;
siege is laid against us;
with a rod they strike the
judge of Israel on the
cheek.*

*But you, O Bethlehem
Ephrathah, who are too
little to be among the
clans of Judah, from you
shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in
Israel, whose coming
forth is from of old, from
ancient days.*

*Therefore he shall give
them up until the time
when she who is in labor
has given birth; then the
rest of his brothers shall
return to the people of
Israel.*

*And he shall stand and
shepherd his flock in the
strength of the LORD, in
the majesty of the name
of the LORD his God.*

*And they shall dwell
secure, for now he shall
be great to the ends of
the earth.*

*And he shall be their
peace.*

AND HE SHALL BE THEIR PEACE

The tender, beautiful story of the birth of Jesus in a poor stable to humble parents is especially compelling. What could be more moving than the God of the universe condescending to enter human history in order to save us from our sins? Yet as Micah 5:1-5 tells us, Jesus also came to rule the world as its king. Micah underscores that this shepherd king will rule in strength, majesty, and greatness. "He will be our peace when the Assyrians invade and march through our fortresses." The implication is that at the birth of Jesus all the pagan gods of antiquity were doomed to defeat, disarray, and destruction. The 17th century English poet John Milton wrote about this in his poem, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity." Milton suggests that at Christ's birth, Satan, the Greek oracles at Delphi, the Roman gods of the dead, Baal, Ashtaroath, Jupiter, Moloch, and the Egyptian gods Isis, Orus, and Anubis were struck dumb and filled with horror. Milton writes: "The dreaded Infant's hand, /The rays of Bethlehem blind their dusky eyes; / Nor all the gods beside, / Longer dare abide . . . Our Babe, to shew his Godhead true, / Can in his swaddling bands control the damned crew." What great good news—the Gospel indeed!

*Lord we give you thanks for Jesus' incarnation into
human history, both saving us from our sins and
defeating the cosmic forces of evil.*

*He alone can defeat every
power and principality of darkness
while at the same time bringing peace to our hearts.*

SECOND WEEK
OF ADVENT
God's Sufficient Grace



2 Corinthians 1:8-11

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

HE WILL DELIVER

Paul was not a stranger to suffering. He didn't sugar coat it or pretend to "rise above" it. In fact, he says that his suffering crushed him far beyond his ability to endure it, so much so that he felt the sentence of death in his heart.

Yet, Paul mentions God's deliverance three times in three short verses--once in the past, once in the future, and then, an ongoing, continuous deliverance.

Why was Paul so confident of God's deliverance in the face of such despair?

First, he could look back and see the deliverance God had already provided (2 Cor 1:10). Like the Psalmist, He could "appeal to the years of the right hand of the Most High and consider all His mighty deeds (Psalm 77)." God's work in the past gave him hope for the present and the future.

Second, he was confident in the prayers of God's people. He knew that God heard those prayers and would use them to help him. In fact, he looked forward to the day that many praised God because those very prayers were answered.

Isn't it amazing that God uses our weak prayers in His story of deliverance and redemption in the lives of others?

Instead of downplaying the seriousness of his suffering, Paul admits his need for prayer from God's people, and He hopes in a God who has delivered, will deliver, and will continue to deliver.

Lord, let our sufferings lead us to You.

Let the sufferings of others lead us to pray for your deliverance. By your grace, may we overflow with the comfort we've received from your Spirit. Amen.

Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

*A voice cries:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.*

And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

THE HISTORY OF DELIVERANCE

I've heard this passage put to song every Christmas for as long as I can remember. I almost can't read it without hearing Handel's *Messiah*. It is so familiar it can almost become another decoration that adds to the flavor of our holiday celebrations. But when we take time to dwell on this passage, we realize it is anything but a holiday embellishment or quaint tradition.

This text is a clear and strong picture of our God's heart towards the hurting and downtrodden. It is a declaration of God's character and a testament to His faithfulness. This passage of deliverance extends far beyond a wounded Israel in Babylonian captivity. It extends to us. This passage and promise of deliverance extends to the homeless, the addict, the Syrian, the heartbroken, the fearful, and beyond.

As we enter this season with a great awareness of the suffering and pain around us, let us remember that our God has a history of delving into the depths of despair to deliver His people. Jesus taking on human form is the ultimate example of God delving into despair to deliver us. Because of this great gift there is no crooked path that cannot be made straight. There is no rough place where our God cannot – and will not – enter in order to deliver us.

*God of All Comfort, thank you for giving us
Your son so that we may be included
in your history of deliverance.*

THE WORD OF OUR LORD STANDS FOREVER

Isaiah 40:6-8

A voice says, "Cry!"

*And I said,
"What shall I cry?"*

*All flesh is grass, and
all its beauty is like the
flower of the field.*

*The grass withers, the
flower fades when the
breath of the LORD
blows on it; surely the
people are grass.*

*The grass withers, the
flower fades, but the
word of our God will
stand forever.*

When our life is "interrupted" and we find ourselves in a place of suffering, confusion, or without control, we tend to hear and listen to the many lies that Satan whispers into our ears:

"You are alone..."
"You are hopeless..."
"You are not worthy..."

In the midst of these lies, we must listen to a voice that can be trusted---one that is steadfast, unwavering, and reminds us of what is true. That voice is the word of God. His trustworthy word will never prove false and will always be comforting in our weakness, because it "stands forever". The Lord gives us new life through his son Jesus who was sent into the world to rescue us. Though our flesh so often clings to what is fading, Jesus frees us to cling on to what is unfading, permanent, and true. God will never whisper the lies above, but instead will always speak truth that comforts us in our confusion, strengthens us in our pain, and frees us from our fears:

"You are not alone...I am with you"
"You are not hopeless...I am making you beautiful"
"You are worthy in Jesus...my love for you is unfading"

*Father, I pray that you would remind me
of what is true in light of the Gospel:
that your love for me is unfading,
that your word stands forever,
and that I can fully trust you.*

Isaiah 40:9-11

Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah,

“Behold your God!” Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

BEHOLD, YOUR GOD

It's amazing how slowly time moves in a hospital waiting room. And yet that is the only purpose of the room. As you look around the room it's not hard to pick out those who are here for the first time – there is fear in their eyes and usually a crowd surrounding them. Then you see the ones in the corners – they have been here many times and maybe even for a long time. Most are alone and numbed by the waiting.

But you don't have to be in a hospital to be waiting. We wait on the phone call with test results, the email with our grade, the text from our distant child, the promotion that has never come, the life that we dreamed of.

How do you react when it comes to waiting? Maybe like the Israelites, you have been waiting for a long hard time. In Isaiah 40 the Lord is telling Isaiah to proclaim that the Israelites' waiting is coming to an end, their Sovereign Lord is coming with power. The hardest part about waiting is not knowing when, how or even if it will come to an end. Take courage. Look to God's Word and His promises. The Lord promises that our waiting will come to an end and He will be there to gather us, tend to us, and gently lead us even as He carries us. No matter the outcome.

Lord, I am tired of waiting. Would you help me to look beyond this time of waiting and see Your gentle loving arms reaching out to me? Would you guard my heart from growing fearful or numb but allow me to sense the closeness of Your heart to me? Father, as this waiting comes to an end, would your name be shouted from the mountain tops and your glory revealed to all.

Isaiah 11:1-5

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

THE STUMP OF JESSE

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse...

We have two beautiful wooden bowls fashioned for us by a friend, by a dear brother here at Trinity. In the course of building a new garage over this past year, we had to give up a maple tree. It was a maple that stood beside our house and watched over ten years of sidewalk chalk swirls and scooter laden paths leading to ice cream shops and fire stations and schools—all right there in our driveway. This maple watched as child after child braved riding without training wheels. It offered shade and a place to lean when any one of ours or a neighborhood child bowed out after one too many rounds of capture the flag. It was a climbing tree, its branches tall enough for brave climbers to look me in the eye as I stood on the deck and saw children peer back at me through deep red leaves in the fall. One day about a year ago, all that was left of our maple was a stump. And from that stump, a friend made us two bowls. They are light in color and smooth bearing the dark and light variations that only God authors in every fiber of a tree trunk and in the stump left when the tree, at last, has come down.

...and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

Isn't it beautiful how often the gifts of this world are a shadow of the life-giving gifts of the Spirit? A friend brought forth bowls from the stump left in our yard. They rest on our counter and often hold grapes or nuts as they speak of days past. But from the stump of Jesse comes forth infinitely, eternally more. Jesus, the shoot bearing the Spirit of the Lord--of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And His delight shall be in fearing the Lord. If my delight were in fearing the Lord day after day, oh how I would rest! In Jesus, this wisdom, this understanding is mine and it is yours, dear one. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. Jesus' righteousness, Jesus' faithfulness are yours and mine to bear! Let it be so, Lord, let it be so!

Father, as we celebrate your coming anew this season, would you be gracious to reveal all else that we delight in? Would you reveal and gently remove the places where we attempt to find rest? We praise you that in Jesus your righteousness, your faithfulness are ours. Amen.

Isaiah 9:2-5

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Cancer can plunge you into deep darkness. Fear, depression, and anxiety cover the eyes of the heart. Yet it is in dark places that the power of the great light is experienced.

It is a gift to have a picture of hope where light shines on those who walked and have dwelt in the land of deep darkness.

God pierces through the darkness of the soul and produces joy and gladness. He alone offers a yoke that eases our burden and a staff that comforts. He breaks the rod of oppression. We cannot do this by trying harder and putting on a happy face.

The battle belongs to the Lord and the reference to the day of Midian reminds us of when God defeated a vast army with Gideon and a few men using trumpets in one hand and torches in the other. God receives the glory and salvation is found in His hand alone.

I am my own worst enemy. I have listened to the whispers of Satan that I could never be good enough. I have allowed my mind to entertain thoughts that God is withholding His blessing. I try harder and battle in my own strength. Yet Jesus pierces this deep darkness and his blood fuels the fire in my heart to trust Him. He promises to those who follow him that they will not walk in darkness but will have the Light of Life.

Lord God there is no place so dark that you cannot enter in and bring light and joy. Spirit, set our hearts on fire and bring forth joy and gladness. Grow and mature our faith as ones who have been called into the light. Praise and honor belong to Jesus who bears our burdens, breaks the rod of oppression, and leads us victoriously.

*To God be the Glory great things He has done.
Amen.*

Isaiah 9:6-7

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

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

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN

If you really want to see the depths of depravity the human race can reach, take up a job in retail: Especially during the holidays.

A part of me speaks in jest, of course, as there is undeniably much, much greater evil in the world than the imagined entitlement of a middle-aged housewife who just discovered that your store ran out of her favorite holiday item, but many people in our culture will never experience this evil. The above scenario, however, while humorous, can describe each and every one of us. In the depths of our hearts, we are stained and soiled by greed, malice, jealousy, impatience, self-importance, and on and on. Amazingly enough, it is during what is supposed to be the most selfless time of the year that these things can break through our practiced veneer.

The prophecy in Isaiah 9:6-7 tells of the dissolution of this side of humanity. This Child that is to come encompasses and fulfills every desire of our hearts: peace, justice, righteousness, forgiveness, a Perfect Father. And who is he given to? "For unto us a child is born, to us a Son is given."

Unto us.

Us; we humans who can take something good and find the worst in it, we humans driven by greed and jealousy, we humans who have given up what is real and pure for what will crumble in the dust.

Unto us.

Don't let the chaos and commercialism create cynicism in your heart during this special season. Let every instance, whether in your own heart or in the world at large, remind you just how great a gift the prophesied child is, and how unworthy we—us—really are.

*Father, thank you for your boundless grace and mercy,
Though we could not be any more undeserving.
Help me not to lose sight of the true Gift this season,
And to look past the chaos and cynicism
For giving your Son to us
To focus on the depth of your love
For me and those around me.
Amen*

THIRD WEEK
OF ADVENT
God's Sufficient Provision



2 Corinthians 1:12-14

For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.

For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand—just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.

ALL THAT JESUS HAS ACCOMPLISHED

Boasting is bad—usually. However, when Paul speaks to the believers at Corinth (and to us), he makes an exception. He tells that we are to boast of the gracious work God in our lives and in our midst in such a way so that Jesus will be exalted. We might summarize Paul's thoughts in these few verses this way: We are encouraged to boast in the grace of Christ (present), and on the day of Christ (future).

After all, it is because of God's grace in Jesus that we can live with a clear conscience. We could never cleanse or change ourselves in such a way to satisfy the holiness of God. But look at what His Son did for us! His offering of Himself on the cross as payment for our sins removed our guilt, satisfying God's justice. Further, the gift of His Spirit enables us to believe and to live in the light of all Jesus has accomplished!

The apostle tells us, then, as we behave with simplicity and godly sincerity, it is all because Christ has gone before us creating in us the faith to believe in Him and the way in which we follow Him.

So what's next? We are told here that our lifestyle of boasting in Jesus is a public thing: we live in light of the gospel before our heavenly Father and also before others. Note also it is a lifetime journey with the finish line being the day of Christ.

It is helpful for us to see in Scripture that Paul always measures the fruit of His life in Christ, not from his physical nor his spiritual birth to his physical death; rather, he measures fruitfulness from his birth in Christ to the day of Christ (the appearing of Christ upon His return).

We need to think the same way according to verse 14 of this passage. We boast in everything about Jesus as we live by His love, grace and strength here and now. When we see Him face to face our boasting in Him will continue as we see the sum total of His Spirit's work in us and through us, overflowing to the lives of others for His glory!

Dear Father, give us a deepening understanding of your grace, operating in and through our lives. Give us your joy and hope as we boast in Jesus all along our journey. And please give us a long range view as we become increasingly fruitful by Your Spirit's work, all for Your glory! (John 15:1-11)

Luke 1:5-17

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they 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.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And 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, 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 must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

YOUR PRAYER HAS BEEN HEARD

In some ways I find it hard to identify with Zechariah, probably because I am not "righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord." He and his wife Elizabeth strike me as holy, Godly people, intent on knowing and following the will of God. Yet I can imagine their anguished longing to have child. After having prayed for a child for years, perhaps now they had given up this hope. Then, unexpectedly, an angel appears, and Zechariah "was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him." Now his fear I can understand. Scripture is clear that when angels appear, they are so awesome and magnificent that those seeing them are overcome with fear. I can also imagine Zechariah's wonder at the angel's message. After all those years of fruitlessly longing for a child, the angel promises not only that he and Elizabeth will have child, but what child! The promise is that their child, a son named John, will bring them great personal joy. But more than that, John will play a central role in God's spiritual renewal of Israel. Like Elijah before him, John will turn hearts, bring about repentance, and prepare the people for the coming Messiah. Like Zechariah, I think I would have been stunned.

*Lord, soften our hearts for the great work
that You carry out daily.
Give us not a spirit of fear,
but one of bold belief
in your sustaining, enabling,
and empowering grace.*

Luke 1:18-25

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

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

HELP ME IN MY UNBELIEF

Doubt is a constant companion, persistently obscuring the path. Alternate versions of "Truth" call out like the Sirens did for Ulysses in our sea of modern thought and culture. "Truth depends on your experience." "Truth is unknowable." "Truth is an illusion." Even if we try to hide away by unplugging from media, deep in our own hearts our fears breed doubt and cause us to sin against our Creator.

Zechariah is just like us, suspicious both of the messenger and the message. "How can I be sure...?" We are like Eve in the garden. What if this is just some big lie? What is on the other side of THAT question? Chaos? Emptiness? Hades?

God is full of mercy, he doesn't strike Zechariah down, but he takes away foolish empty talk and replaces it with right worship. In the silence the angel confirms God's promise is coming. In those quiet ensuing months Elizabeth glorifies God. She has not yet heard Zechariah tell of the angel's visit yet she recognizes God favor at work for her.

Providentially for us, "... we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin." Hebrews 4:15 The promised One, Jesus, covers our mouths and himself claims God's favor on our behalf, interceding for us. Like the angel, He stands in the presence of God, the Good News in Person.

Lord, help me in my unbelief.

Have mercy on me.

*Thank you Jesus for cutting through
time and space to be my ransom*

and setting me free from the tyranny of the Devil.

Help me to trust your Lordship over all things.

*Help me to recognize your Favor in Jesus
who has removed my disgrace among the people.*

Luke 1:26-33

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. 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."

THE LORD IS WITH YOU

Gabriel, one of the two angels named in Scripture, had been busy. A few months after his commission to tell Zechariah of the birth of his son John the Baptist, he is sent again to earth with even more startling news. Is it any wonder Mary was greatly troubled by this Angel Visitant with his strange greeting and message of a magnitude never before revealed!

The boundaries of this passage focus on Gabriel's Birth Announcement of the Son of the Most High Who will be given the throne of his father David Whose kingdom will last forever. These words must have been awesome enough but they were followed by an incredible Conception Announcement that turned Mary's world upside down and altogether changed her life. Up to this point she had probably led a quiet life, reared in a godly home and was betrothed to Joseph.

Remember the saying of the day: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Yet the Lord reached down into this village and chose a young woman of vibrant faith through whom His Son would become Incarnate. Could any assignment have been more life-challenging? Not only would she bring Him into the world, she would be His mother for all His days on earth - a daunting, unimaginable responsibility.

Father, I am stunned by the depth of Mary's commitment that enabled her to respond so quickly with absolute trust. How grateful I am that she believed Your Messenger and was willing to accept this amazing assignment. Prepare my heart to receive Your Word that challenges me to fulfill the tasks that You have in mind for me.

LET IT BE TO ME

Luke 1:34-38

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. 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.

I've often wondered what must have been going through Mary's head when she heard that she, a virgin, was going to bear God's child. I don't know exactly what Mary's plans were for her future, but I imagine her future didn't go according to her plan. My guess is that she never would have dreamed she'd be chosen by God to be the mother of the Most High. She didn't know what the task entailed, but how selfless was her response? To completely throw out her plans, and without hesitation say "yes" to God's.

In the last year, I've often thought about how God can intervene in our lives and completely change what we thought was going to happen. Before our daughter was born, my husband and I made the personal decision to not make any plans concerning her arrival. Of course we had preferences but we wanted to be flexible so that we wouldn't be thrown off if things didn't go how we had planned. Our "un-plan" worked out great. We wouldn't have chosen the different circumstances that arrived but we love our daughter's birth story and are so grateful for how it turned out. Boy, were we awesome or what?! Remember how we didn't make plans for her birth? I had a very detailed list basically written out of exactly what was going to take place the first week she was home. I went over it with our family regularly before the birth. The first two days started off great. And then I had life threatening complications that had me spending that first week back in the hospital. It took me three entire days in the hospital (with much crying and complaining) to get over the fact that my plan wasn't going to happen. My first week didn't go as planned and neither did my first seven months as I continued to recover from the complications. After I realized that God had a different plan in mind, I was finally able to let go of mine. I have no idea why God had things go the way He did, but I could list off a variety of wonderful things that came from it.

Big or small, how often has God changed your plans? How quickly are we to say to Him, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to Your word"?

Heavenly Father, Thank you for giving us an example of humble servitude in the life of Mary. May we be quick to accept Your plans for our lives even when it means giving up our plans. Please use our lives for the glory of Your Kingdom and to bring others to You. Thank You for bringing Your Son into the world to save us so that we may have fellowship with You. Please allow us to realize what a big deal that is and what that means for our lives as we look forward to celebrating Jesus's birth. Amen.

Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. 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. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

BLESSED IS SHE WHO BELIEVES

Unsettling news raises questions concerning your belief in God and the dreams you hold in your heart. Mary was dealing with this kind of news. She trusted God and had surrendered her will to be His servant. She goes in haste to receive encouragement and help to believe God would do the impossible.

Faith in a sovereign, loving God is challenged during times of interruptions and failed plans. Elizabeth had waited for many years in faith for a child. Now her womb was carrying the fore runner to the savior of the world. Elizabeth was enabled by the Holy Spirit to declare that Mary's faith would see God's fulfillment. Their faith and hope in God to do the impossible would bear fruit. Both women's hearts were strengthened to trust and hope in God and His promises.

I grab for what I think I deserve and want control over most everything. I believe I deserve happiness, health and safety for my children, and meaningful work for my husband. Yet it is God's kindness and a "severe mercy" when these things fail. We have to go in haste to the foot of the cross to hear the truth about Jesus and His great love. The assurance from the Spirit comes and He enables faith that Jesus is our only hope. He is enough.

Father God, thank you for the amazing truth that you keep your Word and all that you have spoken will be accomplished. Thank you, Jesus, for fully submitting to your Father's will and coming to be a servant and give your life to save selfish people like me.

Thank you for the gift of your Spirit that now dwells in our hearts and is enabling us to believe in Jesus in all circumstances.

Luke 1:46-56

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.

And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

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.”

And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

MY SOUL MAGNIFIES THE LORD

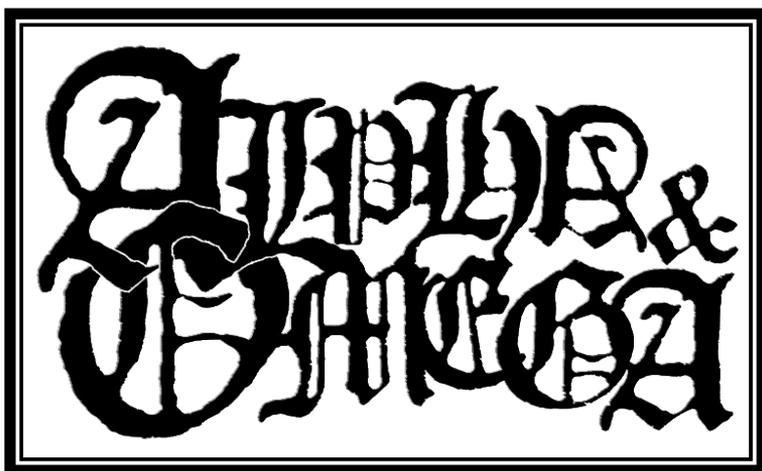
Everything about the Magnificat, or Song of Mary, contradicts the common image of the woman chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus. We picture a poor youth, perhaps alone but for her betrothed Joseph, a teen without wealth or resources, too young to be too wise. But listen to her sing! Her hymn of praise is a burst of confidence—and intellect. It follows the meter and measure of the Psalms, and retraces the composition, even exact phrases, of Hannah’s hymn recorded in 1 Samuel 2.

God often uses people of “humble estate” to carry a significant message to his people, but that doesn’t mean they are not equipped, even disciplined, for the task when appointed. Mary brings to bear in one spontaneous moment a past grounded in Hebrew scripture, a present brimming with emotion and gratitude, and a future willingly entrusted to a Lord who has provided past and present. She leads the way in what it means to celebrate Advent with a full heart and a ready mind.

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
who has done mighty things in the life of Mary
and all who humble themselves before him.*

*We praise you, Father,
for the gift of the Messiah,
and for the example of those
who anticipated and welcomed him.*

FOURTH WEEK
OF ADVENT
Our All-Sufficient Savior



*“Behold, I am making all things new.
It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega,
the beginning and the end.”*

2 Corinthians 1:15-22

Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say "Yes, yes" and "No, no" at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

THE PROMISES OF GOD

The apostle Paul looked forward to visiting the believers at Corinth, so much so, that he arranged his plans so he could visit with them twice! As you know there were no such luxuries in that day such as email, texting, and other means of instant communication we enjoy with our technologies.

He didn't want the Corinthians to be confused by his shift in plans, so he reminded them of His ministry to them, that just as God Himself is faithful in all He has said and done on their behalf through His Son Jesus Christ, so Paul is showing that same faithfulness to them as a servant of Christ.

Someone once said, "It is better to be faithful than fascinating." Paul certainly believed that! His ministry was never a business of big talk and bright lights; no, it was one of simplicity and sincerity. And here, as he assures the flock of God of his desires for them, He brings home the all-important truth upon which every aspect of our mutual ministry is built: the certainty of God's promises to us in Christ!

Think about it! God has been making promises in His Word for thousands of years, and every one of them has and is coming true! Not only that, but every promise He's made somehow ties in with His loving and redeeming work toward us through Christ, His Son.

There will be times in your life when you will feel God has forgotten you and forgotten His promises. Go to this passage, and to the Psalms, and to the Gospels (and all through Scripture) and review God's promises to you as His redeemed child, and remember that there may be waiting where God is building your trust in him, so that His promises will always be very precious as He shows you their fulfillment in Christ.

Heavenly Father, thank you that all Your promises are "Yes!" in Jesus. Thank you also that you "time" and plan their fulfillment, as you unfold Your story of redemption and also as you apply them in my/our personal experiences. Help me to treasure your promises in Christ every day and in all my situations. And to believe Your word over momentary feelings that say otherwise. In Jesus' Name.

Luke 1:57-66

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they 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." And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

THE GIFTS OF GOD

One of the hardest parts of having a gift for something is accepting that that gift doesn't really belong to you. If you're anything like me, when you find your niche, you want to build on it. We make plans on how we are going to best utilize our talents, how big of a part they're going to have in our life, and in what capacity they will bring us the most joy. In reality, we are often extremely shortsighted.

Though the Bible doesn't give us a detailed account of Elizabeth's thoughts when she gave birth to John the Baptist, I imagine some of her thoughts on the gift of her child were not so different from how we view our gifts. Her first and only son, born many years after she was physically unable to bear children, would be able to carry on the family's lineage. She probably had high hopes on how he might serve the Lord—perhaps be a priest in the temple like his father. Instead, we see that even such a rich blessing as a child cannot fully be owned. With humble acquiescence, Elizabeth gives her son back to the Lord to lead a very hard and painful life. John would go on to prepare a nation for the coming of the Lord.

How are you responding to the gifts God has given you? Are you being resistant to where God wants to lead you because you are too shortsighted or because you desire ownership?

*Father, thank you
for the gifts and talents you've given me.
Help me to be attentive to your calling in my life,
and to give up ownership and shortsighted desires
so that I may better serve you and your kingdom.
Amen.*

Luke 2:1-7

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. 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.

HUMBLE SUBMISSION

Obedience takes faith. It isn't convenient, comfortable, or easy. It flows from a humble heart. Pride insists on its own way. It feels right, justified and ready to defend itself, suspicious of others, critical and cynical. Humility is a heart posture towards God in times of blessing or difficulty. Pride is a stubborn heart towards God in times of blessing or difficulty. Pride seeks self-sovereignty, comfort and what is best for self. Humility accepts God's sovereignty and participates in God's promises.

Through God's providence, Joseph humbled himself and obeyed the law of the land by returning to Bethlehem to be registered. Roman rule was entrenched in Palestine by the time Jesus was born. Jewish uprisings were being regularly crushed by "King" Herod who had the support of Mark Anthony and Octavius when he retook Palestine by force in 37 BC. The journey would have been difficult and dangerous.

God's promise to the world, the Savior, was arriving amid the darkness of political dissension, corrupt rule, and inconvenient travel. And the words written in Micah 5:2 were fulfilled through the humble obedience of Joseph and Mary.

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days."

Dear Jesus, I have a heart of pride. I am so glad your plan is greater than mine. I'm so thankful that you came for us, to save us from pride because I am destitute without you. Help me to humble myself before you and to accept your best for me and not my ideas of what is best. Help me to submit to you with joy, and in this way to put aside my rebellious ways. Thank you that your blood covers over my sin, forgive me for trying to hide my sins away under layers of pride. Instead Lord Jesus, clothe me with your righteous robes and rule my life.

Luke 2:8-20

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." 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. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

WELCOME BOTH TO MORE AND LESS

The shepherds were keeping watch over their flock when an angel of the Lord appeared to them. This swift angelic appearance interrupted their everyday routine and welcomed them into the bright awareness of the Christ child.

This passage reminds me of a line of text from Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*: "Welcome both to more and less." Upon hearing the good news, the shepherds were whisked away from their ordinary lives and were asked to welcome both more and less.

We often focus on the wonder the shepherds must have felt as they laid eyes on Christ. We dwell on what great abundance the shepherds gained by seeing Him, but we may spend less time considering what they lost to go in search of Him. What earthly comfort or security did they relinquish to go in haste to find Jesus? What fear did they have to surrender to seek Him? What did they give up just to be near to Him?

When we hear and see Jesus, we are welcomed into an eternity of "more". We become the recipients of God's grace and love. We become the heirs to His faithful promises. However, when we surrender our hearts to Jesus we also welcome "less". We have to loosen the grip to self that we hold so dearly. Jesus' invitation is free and a call to all true abundance, but to be ready to accept that invitation we must count the cost of our "less" so that like the shepherds we can "go with haste" to see our Lord.

*Heavenly King, we welcome you into our hearts.
Help us to know more of the abundant life you offer
and less of the self we crave.*

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 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." 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).

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. And he called his name Jesus.

HE CALLED HIS NAME JESUS

Years ago, my son expressed disappointment when he was assigned the role of Joseph in a Christmas play. His lack of enthusiasm was not entirely due to the fact that Joseph didn't have many lines to say: to an adventurous boy, Joseph seemed a lackluster character. Over the centuries Joseph hasn't gotten the respect he deserves. Unfairly, the unbelieving have caricatured Joseph as an old man whose fiancée made a fool of him.

This passage gives us more than one reason to respect Joseph and to emulate his quiet faith. Joseph was a "just man" unwilling to bring shame upon Mary. Going beyond justice, Joseph planned to divorce her "quietly." Even before he learned that Mary's pregnancy was sinless and, indeed, unlike any pregnancy in human history, Joseph had resolved to be merciful in his treatment of a woman who, in his eyes, had done him wrong.

Through a dream, Joseph learned the truth about Mary's unborn child, a truth that fulfilled a promise made to Joseph's ancestors. Again, Joseph's response wins our respect: he believed the dream and took Mary as his wife. The Bible does not tell us of reluctance or doubt on Joseph's part—only that "he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." Was Joseph the laughingstock of the neighborhood? Did he regret that his plans had been altered? We hear only of his justice (tempered with mercy) and his obedience.

Father, may we be like your servant Joseph, acting with kindness and justice towards those who appear to have wronged us. May we, like him, obey your Word without question and without regard for the mocking voices of those who do not know You. Increase our faith, Lord, that Your truth may seem—as, indeed, it is—greater than the present reality of our distracted days. Amen.

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All Scripture passages are printed in the ESV.

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