

# A Twist in the Story of God:



**Love is born!**

Come share  
in the wonder



Our Savior's  
Lutheran Church

Advent Devotional † 2014

# A Twist in the Story of God: Love is born! Come share in the wonder



The story of God as told in the Bible is a story of God trying to work with a stubborn and clueless people. Through the Old Testament we have read stories of deep faith, love, and commitment as well as terrible sin and hatred. These stories reveal the brokenness of our world and God's struggle to reach us.

God sends prophets and teachers, leaders and unexpected heroes. God makes covenants, wrestles with humans, and tries again and again to bring us back to faithfulness and compassion.

But now we get a twist in the story: God is coming down to us.

Let's get one thing straight, this was not expected! This is not what people imagined or hoped for even in their wildest dreams. God coming in human form as a baby doesn't even make sense. What is God hoping to accomplish? How will this change anything? What does this even mean?

This Advent and Christmas we invite you to share in the wonder, the mystery, of this twist in the story. We invite you to fall in love with God through the layered meaning of Christmas. God is with us. God is one of us. God is for us. This means something...



## **Advent Preparation: THE WORD OF GOD**

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.*

-Mark 13:31-33

Advent is a time for preparation, and there is a lot we need to do to prepare for the celebration of Christmas. We prepare by hanging the lights, decorating the tree. We prepare lots of good food, and of course we prepare gifts. Kids are preparing to open gifts and parents are trying to figure out how to pay for the gifts. Advent is a time for preparation.

Mark 13 teaches us to be prepared!

In this season of Advent, we are preparing for Christmas...that is, we are preparing for the coming of Christ.

We know how to prepare for the celebration of Christmas, but how do we prepare for the true Christmas? How do we prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ?

Today's gospel text says, "Heaven & earth will pass away, but my Word will last forever"

How do we prepare for the Coming of Christ?

First of all, the Word of God!

Here are a few suggested Advent scripture texts:

Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 7:10-14

Matthew 3:1-12

Isaiah 11:1-5

Luke 1-2

Micah 5:2

Luke 21:25-36

Jeremiah 33:14-16

John 1

## **Advent Preparation: SERVE ONE ANOTHER**

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.*

-Mark 13:31-33

Another way we prepare for the coming of Christ is through service. Mark 13 teaches us to be aware and keep alert.

Be aware! Be aware of the needs of the world! Be aware of the hungry, the sick, the poor, the oppressed, and the grieving.

We have a lot of people in our community and world who are in need...  
in need of food  
in need of healing  
in need of money  
in need of hope  
in need of friendship

If you are interested in serving during this Advent season and would like some help figuring out a way to help, that really helps... contact me! This service could be as simple as visiting with someone in the care center, participating in one of our many ministries, or donating food items to the food pantry!

## **Advent Preparation: REMEMBERING**

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.*

-Mark 13:31-33

While the Advent and Christmas seasons are filled with joy and excitement, I am also reminded every Christmas that our life on this earth is fragile. Every year, both as a congregation and a family, we experience Christmas for the first time without a loved one. In the midst of joy and excitement, we also grieve. We remember those who God has already called home.

For those of us grieving the loss of a friend, family member, parishioner, or neighbor...remember that as we grieve, we grieve with hope...

- Hope of the in-breaking of God into this world in his Son
- Hope in the arrival of a Savior
- Hope in the promise of paradise

But about that day or hour no one knows. But we do know this...we have a God that loves us. He loves us so much that he gives his only son, so that we may live!

### **Advent Preparation: PRAYER**

*The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.*

-Psalm 145:18

Another way we prepare for the coming of Christ is through prayer.

Here are some ideas about how to pray;

Worship prayers

Confession & forgiveness

Prayers at home

Songs of the season

Reading scripture

Silence

Pray alone

Pray with others

Pray with someone on the phone

Maybe your prayer journey includes a discipline such as writing a poem for each week of Advent, or writing a song, or a journal. Or maybe it includes writing letters to people you care about. Maybe your prayer journey includes an art form of drawing, painting, or sculpture.

So as we prepare for the Coming of Christ...may we prepare, in prayer!





### **Sunday, November 30**

*Love is born! Come, share in the wonder. Love is God now asleep in the hay.*

*See the glow in the eyes of his mother, what is the name her heart is saying?*

*Love! Love! Love is the name she whispers, Love! Love! Jesus, Immanuel.*

-Hymn #292 Verse 2

If someone were to stop you on the street and ask you to describe God, what would you say? If there were a single story you could use to introduce people to God, what would you tell?

The Bible is a collection of family stories over thousands of years that tell about their walk with God, their struggle with God. There are many wonderful stories in the Bible. But if you turned to that person on the street and recounted the story of Uzzah being struck dead for trying to steady the Ark of the Covenant (2 Samuel 6), you would prove you know the Bible but don't actually get what it's about. The Bible is moving somewhere. God

is trying to get us somewhere. Jesus is the closest we have to knowing the very heart of God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Above all, Jesus shows a depth of love and mercy for humans that we still struggle to comprehend.

Maybe that is why we need Christmas every single year, and Easter, too! We need to be reminded that this story of Jesus, this amazing grace, this mysterious love is what defines God. Love is coming. Love is born. Love is what it's all about.

### **Monday, December 1** **Faithfulness of Mary**

*The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

-Luke 1:35-38

Throughout the Bible, it's fascinating to hear how people respond when confronted with the presence of

God...when God calls upon people to take action.

For example, when God calls Moses to lead his people out of slavery, Moses responds, “Not me! Take my brother, not me!” (God sends Moses and his brother).

When God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah goes the opposite direction...willing to go anywhere but Nineveh. (Eventually, God delivers Jonah to Nineveh).

When God calls the disciples, they put down their nets and follow.

Zachariah goes mute. Paul goes blind. The leper is healed and the rich man is disgusted.

In these biblical stories, it’s fascinating how people respond standing in the presence of God.

Some believe. Some don’t. Some are offended. Others embrace the moment.

Of all of the stories in the Bible, this response from Mary, standing in the presence of God, is perhaps...the most beautiful.

She faithfully responds, “Here I am Lord. I am your servant. Let it be with me according to your word.”

My hope and prayer for each of us, is that this Christmas season when we are standing in the presence of

God, and God calls us into action, we respond with the faithfulness of Mary. May we respond by saying, “Here I am...a servant of the Lord, let me become what you have called me to be”. Amen

## **Tuesday, December 2**

### **Elizabeth & Mary: The Similarities The Annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist**

*Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.*

-Luke 1:11-13

### **The Annunciation of the birth of Jesus**

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and*

*you will name him Jesus.*

-Luke 1:26-31

There are a lot of similarities in these two stories. First of all, the same angel appears; Gabriel, first to Zechariah (the father of John the Baptist), then to Mary (the mother of Jesus). Zechariah is startled and confused. Mary is startled and confused.

In both stories the angel says, “Do not be afraid”. (Every time in the Bible that we hear, “Do not be afraid”, it is the proclamation of good news. We are about to receive good news!)

(John) The angel announces “Elizabeth will bear a son”

(Jesus) The angel announces, “Mary will bear a son”

(John) “You will name him John”

(Jesus) “You will name him Jesus”

(John) “He will be great”

(Jesus) “He will be great”

(John) John’s birth story concludes as, “the child grew up and his spirit grew strong.” Luke 1:80

(Jesus) Jesus’ birth story concludes, “And as the child grew to maturity, he will fill with wisdom, and God’s favor will be with him.” (Luke 2:40)

Throughout their lives, comparisons would be made between Elizabeth and Mary, John and Jesus.

## Wednesday, December 3

### Elizabeth & Mary: The Differences

There are several similarities between the annunciations, births, and lives of John and Jesus, but there are also several differences.

Differences between the two stories;

1) Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, was old. She was married. She and Zechariah had prayed for years that God would bless them with a child. Elizabeth had life experience.

Mary was young. She was probably only 12 or 13 years old. She was unwed. Mary didn’t have life experience.

2) Another difference between the stories is how Zechariah and Mary responded to the Angel’s annunciation. Initially both Zachariah and Mary were startled and confused. But following the initial response, the two responded differently.

Zechariah responds with doubt. (Luke 1:20)

Mary responds with faith. She says, “Here I am, a servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)

3) The biggest difference between the birth of John and the birth of Jesus concerns divinity.





In the annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus, God announces his plan through the angel Gabriel. Throughout scripture, including Jeremiah 29, God announces that he has a plan for you.

Now maybe you're thinking, "yeah, but I don't have Gabriel knocking on my door saying, 'do not be afraid'. So I don't know what it's like to be in the presence of God. How can I know what God has planned for me?"

Listen, and discern! Listen to what God is calling you into this Advent season! Are you looking for something more? Are you looking for meaning and purpose? Do you want/need to do more? Do you want/need to do less?

God has a plan for you...listen! It's a good plan!

## Friday, December 5 Christmas Music

Martin Luther said, "Next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world."

Martin Luther, the namesake of the "Lutheran Church", is of course well known for his theology, his leadership, and his writing. A great theologian and writer, Luther was also a great songwriter.

John would be filled with the Spirit of God from birth. (John 1:15)

Jesus is God (John 1:35). This, of course, is the difference between John and Jesus. John is truly a great man of God. Jesus is truly man and God.

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Mark 8:27-29

## Thursday, December 4 A Good Plan

*For I know the plans I have for you", says the LORD. They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.*

-Jeremiah 29:11

A future and a hope...this sounds like a good plan.



Martin Luther was very musical. As a child he joined the boys choir and became a proficient musician. He played many instruments and He loved to sing. He composed hundreds of songs during his lifetime, including Hymns like, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”, “All Praise to Thee, Eternal Lord”, “From Heaven High I Come to You”.

Our Hymnal includes 19 songs written by Martin Luther.

Luther, like me, would compose children’s songs and sign them to his kids as he put them to be. One of the songs that has been attributed to the pen of Martin Luther, has become known as Luther’s Cradle Song. Better known to us as, “Away in a Manger”.

In the 19th century, the song was printed in North America, with the heading, “Composed by Martin Luther for his children, and still

sung by German mothers to their little ones.”

But as this has been studied, the words are not found in any of Luther’s works before this date. So... did Luther really write away in a manger? Probably not...but maybe. The author of the lyrics has never been verified, and the source of the tune is still unknown.

## **Saturday, December 6** The Nativity Scene

In the 13th century, the Christian church was dealing with a dilemma. The message of Christ’s birth had become so intellectual that it was aloof and dogmatic. St. Francis of Assisi decided, “It must be simplified so that it might appeal to the heart of the common people”.

Then he had an idea. “Why not dramatize the Christmas story? The people will then be able to better understand the meaning of Christmas.”

So he had a “Nativity Scene” and all the pieces of a stable placed in his church. On Christmas Eve, the people came to the church, and saw Joseph, Mary, and the precious baby Jesus. The people were so excited! Christmas had never seemed so real to them.

Since that time, the “Nativity Scene” has become one of the main symbols of Christmas.

## **Sunday, December 7** Looking for Messiah

I can imagine the wise-men studying the stars in the sky, following the star, arriving at the stable...and being in the presence of God.

I can imagine the shepherds in the field with the angels, leaving their flocks, arriving at the stable...and seeing the newborn Messiah.

I can imagine all of the people in today’s world, lost and looking for something.

Today, we don’t necessarily look for a star, or angels singing...we look for other signs that God is with us.

Well...I’ve got good news! God is with us. You are in the presence of God. God has promised that where 2-3 are gathered in his name, he is here. God has promised to be in the Word and Sacrament. God has

promised to be in the living word of God, the Holy Scriptures.

Look! God is active and present in our lives!

## **Monday, December 8** The Magnificat: MARY’S SONG

*And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 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 powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”*  
*And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.*

-Luke 1:46-56

Mary visits her relative Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, who is

pregnant at the same time as Mary.

And Mary sings this beautiful song of praise to God known as the Magnificat.

Magnificat means, “My soul magnifies. My soul proclaims”

This beautiful song of praise is so much more than words. It is so much more than music. She is not praising God with only her song... She is praising God with her very SOUL, her very being...everything she is, and everything she has.

As we gather together in this Advent and Christmas season, we will sing a song of praise that's more than a song, more than just words...for in our song, our very soul proclaims the Greatness of God!

Lord we offer to you, everything that we are...everything that we have.



## Tuesday, December 9

*An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

- Matthew 1:1

Matthew's Gospel begins with a massive genealogy linking Jesus back to Abraham. Family and Tribe was so important in Jesus' time. People defined themselves by their ancestors, were known for their links to their hometowns and parents. So while Jesus is Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus son of Mary, and Jesus son of the carpenter, he is also Jesus son of David. His importance is his link to history, and a very important history.

If I were to introduce myself not by what I do but by my family name, it would at best link me to all the accomplishments of my family's past. I would be part of a legacy and feel responsibility to be a part of that. At worst, it could be a burden. Or if my family was not well respected and I had some black sheep in the family, it could be embarrassing.

Well, Jesus has both. In the genealogy he has the good, the bad, and the ugly. There are good kings, bad kings, prostitutes, and unknowns in his ancestry. The very names illicit scandalous stories if you look closely enough. But this shows that Jesus is part of the human family. Jesus is a part of our mess. He doesn't just claim King David and Abraham, he also claims Rahab the prostitute and Manassah the King who sacrificed

his son and practiced witchcraft. It's all there.

We are a messy lot, we humans. But Jesus is in that mess. He loves us, even the scoundrels. He came to be with us.

### **Wednesday, December 10**

*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.*

- Matthew 1:18

I said before that love is what God is all about. Jesus personifies that love and Christmas begins the love story.

But let's not get too mushy. This isn't toothless, saccharine, teenage-dream love. This is messy, scary, sacrificial love that is willing to risk everything. So, of course, we have to start with a teenage pregnancy. In Jewish culture marriage was in two stages; in the first, the couple lived separately but were legally committed to each other. It was more serious than just engagement and they were to remain chaste. In the second stage they go through the marriage ceremony, live together, and begin the process of having children.

So, Mary finds out she is pregnant in the first stage. This is risky and scary! If Joseph were the biological father they would still get married but would be shamed by the community

for their indiscretion. But since he's not the father, Mary can be accused of adultery and stoned to death. This is not exactly a simple start to God coming down on earth.

It may be that God knew everything would be fine and just thought it would be extra special to have a virgin birth. Yet I can't help but wonder if this isn't also God stirring the pot. God's never been a fan of labels and always picks the underdog. God uses people others ignore or look down upon to do great things. I can't help but wonder if God is purposely making us look hard at how we judge people. After all, the Messiah was born from an unwed teen. And we can't pretend it wasn't so.

### **Thursday, December 11**

*Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.*

-Matthew 1:19

Joseph could have made a big display of Mary's pregnancy. Trying to save face, he could have sworn on a stack of Torah's that the child wasn't his. But he doesn't. He wants to dismiss her quietly and not make a big deal out of it.

Joseph is often pictured in nativity scenes standing protectively over Mary and the baby with his staff. He is a mysterious man who only appears in the beginning of Matthew's Gospel and then exits. But in his short time on stage, Joseph is a man of some

serious integrity. Even this action of wanting to dismiss Mary quietly shows more compassion than one might expect.

We often think about Mary's character at Christmas. We imagine that God picked her as Jesus' mother for a very good reason. But we often forget that Joseph was chosen as well. God picked Mary AND Joseph to be Jesus' parents and we will see why. Both of them put up with the stigma from the community and both of them are willing to drop everything and accept impossible truths in the journey to being parents to this unusual child.

So, too, I think we are called to that level of integrity. We are called to speak well of those in our lives, or at least to keep quiet about someone's faults. We are also called to protect those in our lives with a strong and gentle devotion. Like Joseph, our children aren't really our children. They all belong to God. We, like Joseph, are called to raise them and love them.

## **Friday, December 12**

*But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'*

-Matthew 1:20-21

Sin in the Old Testament was sometimes understood as the breaking of a relationship. Thus, sin is both things we do and don't do that can hurt our relationship with God, with others, and even with ourselves. We can sin as individuals, but we can also sin communally. Our relationship with God and with each other can be broken because, as a whole, we've got things wrong.

So, God sent Jesus to repair relationships. In Jesus, our relationship to God is restored and always being renewed. By the unconditional grace and love of God we are transformed to see our other relationships differently as well. We know that we are loved as a child of God- no matter what- and that other people are as well. We know that God is working to heal the whole world, all people. Thus, the way we see others and treat others can be restored and renewed as well.

Jesus came to save us from our sins. That doesn't mean we are just stamped on the forehead "bound for heaven" while the world carries on untouched. Jesus came to pluck us out of self-hatred, confusion, resentment, and anger and bring us into joy, hope, reconciliation, forgiveness, and mercy. Those are two very different ways to live right now and every day. Jesus isn't finished saving us.

## Saturday, December 13

*All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:*

*Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel. Which means, God is with us.*

-Matthew 1:22-23

If God is with us, that means that God understands what it means to be a human. God understands fear, jealousy, pain, loneliness, hunger, and exhaustion. Now, while we believe that Jesus was sinless or perfect, I think we have a bizarre notion of what that means. We often imagine that Jesus was almost emotionless or above feelings and desires. But it is not a sin to be angry or afraid or lonely or sad. It isn't even a sin to feel tempted. Thus, because of Jesus, our human experience is literally embodied within God's very being. God is with us, among us, in us. It's an amazing idea.

So if God wanted to be with us that also means that God is for us. God is working to help us, to redeem us, to heal us, to make us whole. We are given the freedom to try things out, go our own way, and make mistakes, but all the while God is working FOR us. Sometimes the way people view life or God almost makes it seem as if God is throwing difficulty and pain at us to see how we deal with it, to test us. But Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection speak against that notion of God. God allows us to fall and helps us learn from that, but ultimately God is FOR us.

Finally, God is on our side. By "our" side, I don't just mean Christians or Americans, but humans. God is like that best friend who tells us what we need to know, whether we want to know it or not because hearing a painful truth about us will help us mature and be better in the future. God is



on our side. God is also like this friend in that if we are in trouble, they will go to great lengths to help us out. Jesus exemplifies this.

When God became human in Jesus, we learn that God so loved the WORLD, that God did something unexpected and miraculous because God is on our side.

God is for us, with us, on our side.  
All of us, together.

### **Sunday, December 14**

*When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relationship with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

- Matthew 1:24-25

Joseph has now entered into a rather tenuous situation. By taking Mary as his wife he is letting people assume he is the father of her child. Talk about awkward. He is sharing her shame out of love for her and to protect the child that is to come.

Sometimes in life we are called to be Joseph in this way, too. We are called to walk with people who are looked down upon, bullied, or shamed. We may risk having our reputation ruined or tainted because we are associating with someone of dubious character.

I've known people who did awful

things and no one in the community even knew about it. I've known people who made mistakes that came out publicly and were nearly crucified for it. As a pastor I've come to understand that we often don't know what we think we know. We can be wrong on character quite a bit. The truth is, it's not always our business.

We know as readers that Mary is innocent. But what if she wasn't? Should Joseph have thrown her to the wolves, so to speak? No. People don't have to be perfect to earn our care. People don't have to be without sin to deserve respect. Walking with people in a difficult time, especially when it might mean people whisper about us behind our backs, is part of our calling as children of God.

### **Monday, December 15**

*It was the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem asking, Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.*

-Matthew 2:1-2

The wise men from the East, also known as Magi, were most likely of the Zoroastrian religion that was well known in the time of Jesus. Most of the adherents to the faith lived in Persia, where many Jews were taken in the Babylonian exile. The Magi acted as royal chaplains and traveled on



both military and diplomatic missions.

In this time period, people often felt as if the heavens reflected the events on the earth. So when the Magi saw an unusual portent in the sky, they assumed a king had been born. They followed the star and wanted to worship this king that the heavens were announcing.

It shows amazing openness to God that these Magi would come to pay homage, offer gifts, and worship a king who belongs to another faith. We don't know what they assumed about Jesus. We don't know if they bothered to check back and see if he would indeed become king of the Jews. We don't really know what they expected. But I love that they were willing to honor God and the presence of God, even when God was showing up in a different form, in a different religion. The Magi's amazing faith is still a marvel to this day.

## **Tuesday, December 16**

*When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.*

- Matthew 2:3-4

There are two reactions in the Gospel of Matthew to Jesus' birth; the Magi and King Herod. The wise men travel



a great distance to worship the child who has been born king of the Jews. And Herod is terrified.

What is the difference between the two? How can the Magi travel a far distance and offer expensive gifts to a child they will never see again, rejoicing all the while? And how is it that Herod reacts with fear and trembling?

The easy answer is that Herod feels immediately threatened, that Jesus will take his throne while the Magi live far away, so what do they care? But that is too easy. Countries conquered countries all the time, so Jesus could grow up to conquer the world- for better or worse. The Magi seemed unafraid of Jesus power. Herod was frightened.

The difference is that that Magi put their trust in God, while Herod put

his trust in his own power. When God moves, the Magi notice and celebrate. But if God moves in a way that threatens Herod's power, his entire universe threatens to crumble. I wonder in what ways we are like Herod and the Magi. Do we embrace the movement of God? Even if it threatens to change things or take away our "power"?

### **Wednesday, December 17**

*They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." '*

– Matthew 2:5-6

God loves underdogs. When we read through the Bible God is always empowering unexpected people. King David was the youngest son, the forgotten son who was brought out of the fields where he was watching his father's flock. Jeremiah was called to be a prophet as a child. Deborah was a woman judge in a male dominated world who led her people into battle. Mary was an unwed girl from a little town of nothing chosen to be the mother of the son of God.

Bethlehem really was a little town. But because it was the city of David people would connect a ruler from Bethlehem to King David and thus the Messiah. And because King David started out as a shepherd, it has great importance

that this ruler who comes from that lineage would shepherd God's people.

Jesus comes from that line of David, from the 'Tribe of Judah, from the little town of Bethlehem. He comes both as an underdog but yet with lots of history behind him. He comes to shepherd God's people. To feed them, to take care of them, to lead them on the right paths. A really good shepherd might even lay down his life to protect the sheep.

God continues to lift up the underdog. God still empowers and selects those who come from poverty, those who are young, those who have criminal backgrounds, to do amazing things. God is still moving in this world, calling shepherds of all kinds. Like you and me.

### **Thursday, December 18**

*Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'*

– Matthew 2:7-8

Secrets are rarely a good thing. There is a time and place for confidentiality and discretion, and sometimes there are things people aren't ready to know. We also have private lives that are nobody's business. But for the most part, if one

lives and operates in secrecy, there can be a serious problem.

King Herod schedules a secret meeting to learn what he can from the Magi. And then he lies, asking the Magi to tell him where the child is so he can worship the child, too. He is operating under secrets and lies. This should be a clue that something is wrong.

As people of faith, we are called to live in transparency. We are called to operate in the light in our work and our play. We are called to admit to our mistakes and share our problems with trusted people who can guide us and forgive us. When we find ourselves justifying, hiding,

pulling away, they are often signs that we have moved into secrecy. And when we have moved to living in secrecy, things can grab hold of us that are not good for us.

Herod has been grabbed by fear, and that fear was born because of his need for power and control. He didn't view his role as king as stewardship or servanthood, but as a way for him to be like God. Thus, when it is threatened, he fights back.

In secret.

## Friday, December 19

*When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were over-*

*whelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.*  
- Matthew 2:9-11a

What did the Magi expect? Did they find what they were looking for? When they went home, what stories did they tell? Were they surprised to find Jesus in such humble surroundings?



What do we expect when we are searching for God?

In Genesis we hear that humans were made in the image of God. We were given qualities of God such as love and creativity, the ability to think and reason. We are smart enough to answer our longing for God with the development of religion. We build temples and create hymns and chants and liturgies and prayers to praise our Creator. This is all very good.

But sometimes I think we return the favor by creating God in our image. Instead of asking what about us is godly, we project our humanness of God. God becomes violent, angry, or jealous. God only loves who we love. God hates who we hate. And somehow, our depictions of Jesus have him looking more like a Norwegian than a man from the Middle East.

What do we expect when we are searching for God?

I think at Christmas we should allow ourselves to be surprised again. To remember that baby Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem born to Mary and Joseph was a radical, un-godlike thing to do. God moves in mysterious ways. STILL! If we can be open to it, we can truly find the Christ child and have the wisdom to kneel down and pay homage.

## **Saturday, December 20**

*Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

-Matthew 2:11b-12

There is the joke that if the wise men had been women they would have cleaned the stable and brought practical gifts such as a casserole and diapers. Leave it to men to give gold

and myrrh to a baby, right?

As much as it's a funny joke, the three gifts say more about who Jesus will be than what kind of baby shower Jesus had. The gifts weren't meant to be practical, but rather expressions of worship. Gold is obvious. It is the greatest currency, something kings have. Frankincense was a costly perfume that was burned in temples for worship. And myrrh was a spice used to embalm the dead.

These gifts mean something. They honor the divinity and royalty that is Jesus, but they also hint at his death. They represent who Jesus will be.

We can offer these same gifts as well. Because Jesus is our king, all our "gold", our possessions, everything we own we offer to him. We do that by taking care of it as if we are doing so on behalf of Jesus. And because Jesus is God, we offer "Frankincense", our best in worship. We let our prayers and songs rise up like incense before God, not just on Sunday but every day of our lives. All that we do we offer it up to God. Finally, because Jesus was destined for the cross, we offer "myrrh" to Jesus. We do this by remembering our human sin and frailty. It was our inability to accept the newness that Jesus offered, the life and grace he showed, it was our desire to be in control that sent Jesus to the cross.

We cannot have Christmas without the reality that Good Friday is just a few months away. We need the reminder that Christ is still being born in your heart and mine and we can miss it. We can even react against it. Because we are human.

## Sunday, December 21

*Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, 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.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'*

—Matthew 2:13-15



It is a great irony of the Bible that once Moses led the people out of Egypt away from slavery and death into new life in the Promised Land. Now, fifteen hundred years later, Jesus is fleeing the Promised Land to go to Egypt for protection from King Herod.

We don't know where God will call

us next. We just know that God calls us to unexpected places for our own good. Joseph had the foresight to understand that God was speaking to him in dreams and that as bizarre as it sounded, God was working for good. It made no sense that Joseph would be called through a dream to marry pregnant Mary. It made no sense that Joseph would flee the country with his wife and child based on a dream. What faith Joseph must have had that God was working for good.

In your life and mine, God is still calling us to ventures unknown, to paths untrodden. We like predictability and we like comfort. Yet we hardly grow when we are comfortable and sometimes in order to remain comfortable we have to ignore a lot of opportunities for change.

As we are on the cusp of a new year, I invited you to relax into the invitation of God. Maybe God is calling you to something new and the prospect makes you anxious and uneasy and you would rather not do it. Yet, learning from Joseph, we can see that God is calling us forward for our own good and for the good of those we are called to shepherd and protect. God is already waiting for us in the future. And God goes with us

every step of the journey.

## Monday, December 22

### Silent Night

The year was 1818, Pastor Josef Mohr was walking home from a Christmas drama. Inspired by the drama, instead of walking straight to his house that night, Mohr took a longer way home. The longer path took him up over a hill overlooking the small village. From that hilltop, Mohr looked down on the peaceful snow-covered village. Reveling in majestic silence of the wintry night, Mohr gazed down at the glowing Christmas-card like scene.

His thoughts about the Christmas play he had just seen made him remember a poem he had written. That poem was about the night when angels announced the birth of the long-awaited Messiah to shepherds on a hillside. Mohr decided those words might make a good carol for his congregation the following evening at their Christmas eve service. The one problem was that he didn't have any music to which that poem could be sung.

So, the next day Mohr went to see the church organist, Franz Xaver Gruber. Although the church organ was broken, Gruber needed to come up with a melody which could be played with a guitar. However, by that evening, Gruber had managed to compose a musical setting for the poem. It no longer mattered to

Mohr and Gruber that their church organ was inoperable. They now had a Christmas carol that could be sung without the organ.

On Christmas Eve, the little congregation heard Gruber and Mohr sing their new composition to the accompaniment of Gruber's guitar. The song...was "Silent Night".

## Tuesday, December 23

### ADVENT INVITATION

I'll always remember being a freshman in high school and being invited by a senior to go with him and his youth group on a church trip to Winnipeg. This was the first time that an upperclassman had reached out to me. It felt good to be included.

I'll always remember being a sophomore in college and being invited by the pastor to be an adult leader at a Sr. High Youth Gathering. It was my first experience being a leader in youth ministry. I felt good to be included.

I'll always remember living in Nashville, TN. It was my first Christmas away from home and family. A friend invited me to go to church. It felt good to be included.

During this season of Advent and Christmas, may we remember our neighbors and friends who don't have a church home or faith tradition and

let's invite them! Sometimes a simple invitation makes all the difference in the world!

### **Wednesday, December 24**

*Love has come and never will leave us! Love is life everlasting and free.*

*Love is Jesus within and among us. Love is the peace our hearts are seeking.*

*Love! Love! Love is the gift of Christmas. Love! Love! Praise to you, God on high.*

-Hymn #292 verse 3

Saint Augustine, who lived from 354-430 A.C.E., wrote that “our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you”. We are all built to long for God, to search for God. That is why we all have that feeling now and again that something is missing. Even if we go to church and pray regularly, we may still get that feeling now and again, because deep down, we want to be united with God. Life on earth will always lack until we are perfectly rested in God.

Jesus comes to embody that Love that is God. He comes to orient our hearts to God so they can finally rest. When we come to the knowledge that God loves us and is with us and for us, we can start to relax. We can start to find meaning and purpose in our life. We get glimpses of what heaven truly will be like.

Christmas honestly has so many layers to it that we could talk endlessly about what it means. It means something that God became human in Jesus. It means something that Jesus was born in poverty in the middle of nowhere. It means something that Jesus used his power to heal and point to God. It means something that Jesus suffered and died on the cross. It means something that God rose Jesus from the dead.

Jesus is showing us that God is Love and Love will win the day, even over our blindness, our violence, and our sin. Love will win. As our hearts run amuck in this world creating chaos in the endless pursuit of happiness, God waits and gently seeks us out. And when we finally come to know this unexpected, mysterious, wonderful, perfect love, our hearts exhale. They rest.

Merry Christmas. May your hearts rest for a moment in this journey of life, safe in the knowledge that you are held fast by the God of Love. Amen.



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