



ADVENT



A Daily Devotional



Introduction

Advent comes from Latin meaning "to come." The season of Advent marks the beginning of the church year and comprises the four weeks before Christmas. The church has observed a season of preparation before Christmas since the appearance of regulations on fasting issued by Bishop Perpetuus of Tours in 490 C.E.

Principal Themes

- Hope
- Darkness / light
- Repentance
- Watchfulness
- Preparation
- Expectation of the incarnation of Christ on Christmas
- Anticipation of the fullness of time at Christ's second coming

We decided to prepare this Advent devotional to help us as a faith family prepare for the coming of Christ together. We wanted a way for us to be reading the Scriptures together, praying together and in general making our larger family in a sense smaller. We hope that you will join us on this journey that culminates as we celebrate our Savior's birth on Christmas.

- Pastor Nate

December 1, 2012

Luke 4:16-21

¹⁶⁻²¹ He came to Nazareth where he had been reared. As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place. When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written,

*God's Spirit is on me; he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free, to announce, "This is God's year to act!"*

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, "You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place."

Jesus asked John to baptize Him. Though John objected, he did so in obedience to Jesus' request. One could argue that Jesus did not need to attend the synagogue every Sabbath either, yet He did so faithfully. The importance of consistent fellowship and gathering was crucial to the first century church and it is no less important today. I have said it often, "we really do need each other." The body and its diversity is a beautiful thing.

We are also scripturally mandated to proclaim Good News to all people and I think especially the poor. The Gospel is for everyone. We need to be the hands and feet of Jesus, not just caring during Thanksgiving and Christmas, but all year long. Look for an opportunity this Advent Season to break into someone's life with a message of hope and love and also a sandwich and a cookie.

As Jesus unrolled the scroll of Isaiah, He purposefully read about the Messiah and His earthly mission. Afterward, He sits and announces that, in Him, the Scriptures have been fulfilled. Having resisted the devil for forty days just prior to this event, who but Messiah could make such a claim?

I am so excited to be on this journey with you, I can't wait to see what God has for us next.

Just as the Spirit of the Lord rested on Jesus, so too, God's Spirit rests on us. This Advent Season, let us also proclaim to the world "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled"

Pastor Brian Wiesinger

December 2, 2012

Hebrews 2:1-9

¹⁻⁴ *It's crucial that we keep a firm grip on what we've heard so that we don't drift off. If the old message delivered by the angels was valid and nobody got away with anything, do you think we can risk neglecting this latest message, this magnificent salvation? First of all, it was delivered in person by the Master, then accurately passed on to us by those who heard it from him. All the while God was validating it with gifts through the Holy Spirit, all sorts of signs and miracles, as he saw fit.*

The Salvation Pioneer

⁵⁻⁹ *God didn't put angels in charge of this business of salvation that we're dealing with here. It says in Scripture,*

*What is man and woman that you bother with them; why take a second look their way?
You made them not quite as high as angels, bright with Eden's dawn light;
Then you put them in charge of your entire handcrafted world.*

When God put them in charge of everything, nothing was excluded. But we don't see it yet, don't see everything under human jurisdiction. What we do see is Jesus, made "not quite as high as angels," and then, through the experience of death, crowned so much higher than any angel, with a glory "bright with Eden's dawn light." In that death, by God's grace, he fully experienced death in every person's place.

My family had a summer home on Lake Michigan that was passed down through three generations. I have many fond memories of summer vacations spent at the lake. However, when I was about 10 years old I took what we affectionately called our "little red rented row boat," crawled in while standing in shallow waters and headed out to sea. Laying back and making myself comfortable, I was soon lulled into falling asleep by the gently rolling waves only to be awakened later, in deep water, when larger waves started to spill into the small plastic craft.

I struggled to paddle back to shore until I needed to use my hands and eventually my feet to hold on to the prized vessel that I was too stubborn to let go of, even at the risk of drowning. Finally, understanding the seriousness of my situation, I cried out to my dad who was building sand castles on the shore with my younger brother and he immediately came to my rescue.

Today's Scripture begins with a word of caution: "don't drift off." Most people do not deliberately or suddenly fall into deep sin or turn their backs on God. It is more likely that we slowly "drift" into sin that separates us from our Holy God – a vivid picture of a ship headed for destruction because the pilot fell asleep.

Prayer: Forgive me, Father, for the times I have drifted away. Thank you for always responding to my cries for help. Wake me up to the dangers of being lulled into sin and the perils of a drifting life.

Pastor Janette Mikatich

December 3, 2012

John 1:1-18

¹⁻² *The Word was first, the Word present to God, God present to the Word. The Word was God, in readiness for God from day one.*

³⁻⁵ *Everything was created through him; nothing —not one thing!— came into being without him. What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out.*

⁶⁻⁸ *There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light.*

⁹⁻¹³ *The Life-Light was the real thing: Every person entering Life he brings into Light. He was in the world, the world was there through him, and yet the world didn't even notice. He came to his own people, but they didn't want him. But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves. These are the Godbegotten, not blood-begotten, not flesh-begotten, not sex-begotten.*

¹⁴ *The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.*

¹⁵ *John pointed him out and called, "This is the One! The One I told you was coming after me but in fact was ahead of me. He has always been ahead of me, has always had the first word."*

¹⁶⁻¹⁸ *We all live off his generous bounty, gift after gift after gift. We got the basics from Moses, and then this exuberant giving and receiving, this endless knowing and understanding —all this came through Jesus, the Messiah. No one has ever seen God, not so much as a glimpse. This one-of-a-kind God-Expression, who exists at the very heart of the Father, has made him plain as day.*

There is a wonderful line in this particular translation of these verses: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." God moved into the neighborhood. He did not sit silent like so many other ancient gods of the time. He got dirty, moved into the neighborhood and dwelt among us. One of the parts of the Christian narrative I love so much is this particular aspect: God did not wait for us to come to Him, but He became man to come to us. He is pursuing us, dwelling among us, knows our pain and circumstances because he, too, lived them. As we celebrate this Advent Season, let us dwell on the reality that the God who breathed the universe into existence, who was and is and is to come, intimately knows us.

Prayer: Father, I pray that we humbly understand how much you love us; that you would be willing to leave your place on high to reach down and extend a relationship with us.

Pastor Nathan Sutliff

December 4, 2012

Hebrews 1:1-14

¹⁻³ *Going through a long line of prophets, God has been addressing our ancestors in different ways for centuries. Recently he spoke to us directly through his Son. By his Son, God created the world in the beginning, and it will all belong to the Son at the end. This Son perfectly mirrors God, and is stamped with God's nature. He holds everything together by what he says—powerful words!*

The Son Is Higher than Angels

⁴⁻⁶ *After he finished the sacrifice for sins, the Son took his honored place high in the heavens right alongside God, far higher than any angel in rank and rule. Did God ever say to an angel, "You're my Son; today I celebrate you" or "I'm his Father, he's my Son"? When he presents his honored Son to the world, he says, "All angels must worship him."*

⁷ *Regarding angels he says, the messengers are winds, the servants are tongues of fire.*

⁸⁻⁹ *But he says to the Son, You're God, and on the throne for good; your rule makes everything right. You love it when things are right; you hate it when things are wrong. That is why God, your God, poured fragrant oil on your head, marking you out as king, far above your dear companions.*

¹⁰⁻¹² *And again to the Son, You, Master, started it all, laid earth's foundations, then crafted the stars in the sky. Earth and sky will wear out, but not you; they become threadbare like an old coat; you'll fold them up like a worn-out cloak, and lay them away on the shelf.*

But you'll stay the same, year after year; you'll never fade, you'll never wear out.

¹³ *And did he ever say anything like this to an angel? Sit alongside me here on my throne until I make your enemies a stool for your feet.*

¹⁴ *Isn't it obvious that all angels are sent to help out with those lined up to receive salvation?*

In this passage the writer is showing how much greater Jesus, God's Son, is compared to angels. Jesus is God's honored Son, his firstborn. The title is one of rank and honor because the firstborn receives a special blessing. Jesus was superior to any created being. He is called "Son" of God, a title never given to an angel. God commands the angels to worship Jesus and they obey. Just like the angels worshipped Jesus, He is worthy of our worship and praise, too! He was the sacrifice for our sins and He is seated in a honored place alongside of God. This Advent Season we need to remember the true reason for our celebration, the birth of God's Son, Jesus Christ. May He alone be our focus and receive all of our worship.

Jesus, you are worthy of all the honor and praise! May we honor you with our lives this Advent Season!

Pastor Amy Guthrie

December 5, 2012

Philippians 2:1-11

¹⁻⁴ *If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care — then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.*

⁵⁻⁸ *Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.*

⁹⁻¹¹ *Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.*

In verses 1-4 we are told to have a heart of love for each other. Verse 4 tells us that we should not just be concerned with our own interests, but also the interest of others. Jesus is moving us to put someone else before ourselves. This is what Jesus did when He tirelessly preached the word of God.

Read verses 5-8 again and consider what amazes you about Jesus:

- He "didn't think so much of himself"
- He didn't cling to the advantages
- He "set aside the privileges"
- He "took on the status of a slave"
- He "lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death"

Read verses 9-11 again and consider what amazes you about God:

- He "lifted (Jesus) high and honored him" more than any other.
- He is honored by how people bow to worship Jesus Christ.

Prayer: "Thank you, Jesus, for your willingness to come to earth and humble yourself, to take the status of a slave" and be willing to become our Savior.

Pastor Loyd McLaughlin

December 6, 2012

Luke 2:41-52

⁴¹⁻⁴⁵ Every year Jesus' parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up as they always did for the Feast. When it was over and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents didn't know it. Thinking he was somewhere in the company of pilgrims, they journeyed for a whole day and then began looking for him among relatives and neighbors. When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem looking for him.

⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸ The next day they found him in the Temple seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with the sharpness of his answers. But his parents were not impressed; they were upset and hurt. His mother said, "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you."

⁴⁹⁻⁵⁰ He said, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" But they had no idea what he was talking about.

⁵¹⁻⁵² So he went back to Nazareth with them, and lived obediently with them. His mother held these things dearly, deep within herself. And Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people.

The story of Jesus and His life is the most famous story in human history. Every year we celebrate the birth of Christ with many symbols and traditions that are a very important part of our lives. The cross is a symbol that has become known worldwide. It is interesting that Jesus' famous story is a complete question mark from the birth to when His ministry starts as an adult except for this one story. The only thing that we know about Jesus as a child, we learn from this passage in Luke.

I love how this passage starts with tradition. It starts with a family who has made it a point to celebrate important events in the faith tradition by attending this festival. Jesus was trained at a young age about what was important. He was educated to know what He believed and why He believed it. We know that Jesus did not come into this world with any unfair advantages. In fact, the Bible says that Jesus faced the same testings that we face and was able to combat them without sinning. He was well prepared to face the trials of this world because at a young age He had been raised up in the faith.

In this passage, Jesus shows us His fervor for the things of God even at a young age. He isn't brought down by the foolishness that is so easy to come by in youth, but is steadfast in involving Himself with the things that God cares about. He doesn't say "I should be", or "I might be", He says "I **must** be" in His Father's business. For Jesus, it wasn't an option, it was a mandate. He had to be about His Father's business.

Jesus gives us a great example about our call to action. So many times in our lives we look at things as options. Maybe we should get involved in this ministry, maybe we should donate to that cause. We spend time being Sunday morning Christians, but then don't give a second thought to the things of God throughout the week. In a life lived for the Lord, there is no room for surrender. There can be no retreat. We **MUST** be about our Father's business. Pray that God would call us to action and that we would heed that call. Pray that God would break our hearts for what breaks His and that we would be people of action, not just words.

Pastor Isaac Gilmore

December 7, 2012

Matthew 3:1-17

¹⁻² While Jesus was living in the Galilean hills, John, called “the Baptizer,” was preaching in the desert country of Judea. His message was simple and austere, like his desert surroundings: “Change your life. God’s kingdom is here.”

³ John and his message were authorized by Isaiah’s prophecy: Thunder in the desert! Prepare for God’s arrival! Make the road smooth and straight!

⁴⁻⁶ John dressed in a camel-hair habit tied at the waist by a leather strap. He lived on a diet of locusts and wild field honey. People poured out of Jerusalem, Judea, and the Jordanian countryside to hear and see him in action. There at the Jordan River those who came to confess their sins were baptized into a changed life.

⁷⁻¹⁰ When John realized that a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up for a baptismal experience because it was becoming the popular thing to do, he exploded: “Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? It’s your life that must change, not your skin! And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as father. Being a descendant of Abraham is neither here nor there. Descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.

¹¹⁻¹² “I’m baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. The real action comes next: The main character in this drama—compared to him I’m a mere stagehand—will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”

¹³⁻¹⁴ Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee. He wanted John to baptize him. John objected, “I’m the one who needs to be baptized, not you!”

¹⁵ But Jesus insisted. “Do it. God’s work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.” So John did it.

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God’s Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: “This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.”

I love these phrases from John’s message... “Change your life; God’s kingdom is here; Prepare for God’s arrival!” Isn’t it amazing how much we are able to change our lives during the holiday season? Our schedules are maxed out. Our credit limit is maxed out. Our energy level is maxed out. We spend much time in preparation. But, are we preparing ourselves for the right things? John the Baptist’s job was to deliver the message that his present Messiah was ready to do a great work in the world. John wanted people’s hearts to be ready for the Messiah. He wanted their lives to reflect the kingdom that was being ushered in.

The question we must ask ourselves during Advent is, “Are we ready?” Not just ready to celebrate Christmas once again. But, are we ready to let the Messiah be present in our lives? God’s Son, the delight of His life, is again asking to move into the neighborhood, into EVERY aspect of our lives, public and private. He has to move in, so that we can show the world that His Kingdom is here!

Pastor Chris Johnson

December 8, 2012

Matthew 4:12-25

¹²⁻¹⁷ When Jesus got word that John had been arrested, he returned to Galilee. He moved from his hometown, Nazareth, to the lakeside village Capernaum, nestled at the base of the Zebulun and Naphtali hills. This move completed Isaiah's sermon: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, road to the sea, over Jordan, Galilee, crossroads for the nations. People sitting out their lives in the dark saw a huge light; sitting in that dark, dark country of death, they watched the sun come up." This Isaiah-prophesied sermon came to life in Galilee the moment Jesus started preaching. He picked up where John left off: "Change your life. God's kingdom is here."

¹⁸⁻²⁰ Walking along the beach of Lake Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers: Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew. They were fishing, throwing their nets into the lake. It was their regular work. Jesus said to them, "Come with me. I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass." They didn't ask questions, but simply dropped their nets and followed.

²¹⁻²² A short distance down the beach they came upon another pair of brothers, James and John, Zebedee's sons. These two were sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, mending their fishnets. Jesus made the same offer to them, and they were just as quick to follow, abandoning boat and father.

²³⁻²⁵ From there he went all over Galilee. He used synagogues for meeting places and taught people the truth of God. God's kingdom was his theme—that beginning right now they were under God's government, a good government! He also healed people of their diseases and of the bad effects of their bad lives. Word got around the entire Roman province of Syria. People brought anybody with an ailment, whether mental, emotional, or physical. Jesus healed them, one and all. More and more people came, the momentum gathering. Besides those from Galilee, crowds came from the "Ten Towns" across the lake, others up from Jerusalem and Judea, still others from across the Jordan.

Jesus had literally just come out of the desert where He had been tempted by Satan only to find that John, His forerunner, had been imprisoned by Herod the Tetrarch. John's relationship with the Messiah was two-fold. Not only were they cousins, but John was also Jesus' forerunner as foretold by the Scriptures. When Jesus heard about John's arrest and imprisonment, how did that make Him feel? I have often wondered if Jesus ever wept over John's death as He did with Lazarus. Did Jesus, being fully human, mourn the loss of his cousin? I know the Scriptures do not discuss it, but I believe He did weep for his cousin, whom He described as "the greatest man ever born of a woman."

In the royal order of protocol, the king never makes his appearance until after the forerunner has fulfilled his duties. John had fulfilled his duties and was now in prison. The time had come for Jesus to make His move and reveal Himself as the King of kings, which is how Matthew wrote his Gospel and why he included Jesus Davidic lineage.

Jesus relocation from Nazareth to Capernaum served two purposes to Matthew. First, it fulfilled the prophecy written by Isaiah 9:1 which Matthew included in his Gospel, which states that light would once again dawn in Galilee, a place of darkness because of the oppression of the Romans. Second, many gentiles lived in the area, which gave Jesus access to both the nations and Israel.

God has given every one of us a mission to complete before we leave this earth. Will you fulfill your mission as John did? Even Christ came to earth with a mission. If you do not know what yours is, ask God to reveal it to you so that before this Advent Season ends, you will know God's plan for your life.

Pastor David Baca

December 9, 2012

John 5:17-24

¹⁷ But Jesus defended himself. "My Father is working straight through, even on the Sabbath. So am I."

¹⁸ That really set them off. The Jews were now not only out to expose him; they were out to kill him. Not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was calling God his own Father, putting himself on a level with God.

What the Father Does, the Son Does

¹⁹⁻²⁰ So Jesus explained himself at length. "I'm telling you this straight. The Son can't independently do a thing, only what he sees the Father doing. What the Father does, the Son does. The Father loves the Son and includes him in everything he is doing.

²⁰⁻²³ "But you haven't seen the half of it yet, for in the same way that the Father raises the dead and creates life, so does the Son. The Son gives life to anyone he chooses. Neither he nor the Father shuts anyone out. The Father handed all authority to judge over to the Son so that the Son will be honored equally with the Father. Anyone who dishonors the Son, dishonors the Father, for it was the Father's decision to put the Son in the place of honor.

²⁴ "It's urgent that you listen carefully to this: Anyone here who believes what I am saying right now and aligns himself with the Father, who has in fact put me in charge, has at this very moment the real, lasting life and is no longer condemned to be an outsider. This person has taken a giant step from the world of the dead to the world of the living.

What I find so utterly astounding about this passage of Scripture is that the Jewish leaders did not care about the miracles that Jesus was performing. They were so absorbed and focused on Jesus' breaking the Sabbath. Really? They failed to recognize the truth of His claim to be the Son of God. Jesus' equality with God, the Father, was something that the Jewish leaders would never confess, as such a confession would send their world toppling down. They were not willing to give up their power, position and status, which is what would happen if they acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus then speaks a solemn truth to them: hear what I'm saying, and believe it, and you will have eternal life. The same applies to us today. Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God?

These Jewish leaders liked things in their control, and fed off their own power of position and authority. We must make a conscious effort not to let "self" reign supreme our lives. When we acknowledge Jesus as priority in our lives, He then drives and takes the controls. He will take you on the ride of your life, with purpose and direction. Buckle your seat belt; you won't be sorry.

Heavenly Father, I pray for those who believe in Your Son, but have not made Him Lord of their lives. I pray that your Spirit will move them to accept the gift of eternal life in Jesus' name so that in the end, He will be their Savior and Lord, the director of our lives.

Pastor Brian Wiesinger

December 10, 2012

John 5:25-47

²⁵⁻²⁷ *"It's urgent that you get this right: The time has arrived—I mean right now!—when dead men and women will hear the voice of the Son of God and, hearing, will come alive. Just as the Father has life in himself, he has conferred on the Son life in himself. And he has given him the authority, simply because he is the Son of Man, to decide and carry out matters of Judgment.*

²⁸⁻²⁹ *"Don't act so surprised at all this. The time is coming when everyone dead and buried will hear his voice. Those who have lived the right way will walk out into a resurrection Life; those who have lived the wrong way, into a resurrection Judgment.*

³⁰⁻³³ *"I can't do a solitary thing on my own: I listen, then I decide. You can trust my decision because I'm not out to get my own way but only to carry out orders. If I were simply speaking on my own account, it would be an empty, self-serving witness. But an independent witness confirms me, the most reliable Witness of all. Furthermore, you all saw and heard John, and he gave expert and reliable testimony about me, didn't he?"*

³⁴⁻³⁸ *"But my purpose is not to get your vote, and not to appeal to mere human testimony. I'm speaking to you this way so that you will be saved. John was a torch, blazing and bright, and you were glad enough to dance for an hour or so in his bright light. But the witness that really confirms me far exceeds John's witness. It's the work the Father gave me to complete. These very tasks, as I go about completing them, confirm that the Father, in fact, sent me. The Father who sent me, confirmed me. And you missed it. You never heard his voice, you never saw his appearance. There is nothing left in your memory of his Message because you do not take his Messenger seriously.*

³⁹⁻⁴⁰ *"You have your heads in your Bibles constantly because you think you'll find eternal life there. But you miss the forest for the trees. These Scriptures are all about me! And here I am, standing right before you, and you aren't willing to receive from me the life you say you want.*

⁴¹⁻⁴⁴ *"I'm not interested in crowd approval. And do you know why? Because I know you and your crowds. I know that love, especially God's love, is not on your working agenda. I came with the authority of my Father, and you either dismiss me or avoid me. If another came, acting self-important, you would welcome him with open arms. How do you expect to get anywhere with God when you spend all your time jockeying for position with each other, ranking your rivals and ignoring God?"*

⁴⁵⁻⁴⁷ *"But don't think I'm going to accuse you before my Father. Moses, in whom you put so much stock, is your accuser. If you believed, really believed, what Moses said, you would believe me. He wrote of me. If you won't take seriously what he wrote, how can I expect you to take seriously what I speak?"*

Our Lord declares his authority and character in today's reading, but those to whom He was speaking missed it. They missed it because they had their attention fixed on people, human praise and their own self-serving ambitions. In stark contrast, Jesus stresses his dependence upon the Father. He did nothing without listening first and then carrying out God's orders; everything he did was so that people would be saved (v. 34).

Although the Jewish leaders to whom Jesus was speaking had their "heads in the Bible constantly" (v. 39), they did not recognize the One whom the Father had sent in fulfillment of His ancient promises as recorded in their Scriptures. They overlooked Christ because the Divine and Living Word had no abiding place in their hearts. They neither expected nor wanted a fragile baby who would die on a cross - a symbol of great disgrace in their time.

Do we read the Bible through the lenses of our own expectations or do we diligently search the Scriptures, to truly know Christ? Do we rightly listen, learn and respond in obedience to the Word and follow Christ's example of doing everything God asks of us so that people will be saved?

Prayer: Lord, help me to respond in obedience to your Word. Help me to make decisions that acknowledge your authority over my life and serve as a powerful witness so that others might come to a saving knowledge of you as well.

Pastor Janette Mikatich

December 11, 2012

Matthew 9:32-38

³²⁻³³ Right after that, as the blind men were leaving, a man who had been struck speechless by an evil spirit was brought to Jesus. As soon as Jesus threw the evil tormenting spirit out, the man talked away just as if he'd been talking all his life. The people were up on their feet applauding: "There's never been anything like this in Israel!"

³⁴ The Pharisees were left sputtering, "Hocus-pocus. It's nothing but hocus-pocus. He's probably made a pact with the Devil."

³⁵⁻³⁸ Then Jesus made a circuit of all the towns and villages. He taught in their meeting places, reported kingdom news, and healed their diseased bodies, healed their bruised and hurt lives. When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. "What a huge harvest!" he said to his disciples. "How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!"

Stories of blindness, deafness and dumbness in the Gospel always have a deeper meaning. Far more serious than physical blindness, deafness and dumbness are being spiritually blind, deaf and dumb. The Pharisees in the Gospel represent such people and we see it happening in this story. They are blind because they cannot see or do not want to see God at work in Jesus; they are deaf because they do not hear or do not want to understand what He says. And they are also dumb because they cannot speak the words of life that Jesus gives them.

The very same can happen to each one of us.

Let us pray today to be able to see clearly, to understand what God says to us and to be able to share it with others.

Pastor Nathan Sutliff

December 12, 2012

Matthew 16:21-28

²¹⁻²² Then Jesus made it clear to his disciples that it was now necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, submit to an ordeal of suffering at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed, and then on the third day be raised up alive. Peter took him in hand, protesting, "Impossible, Master! That can never be!"

²³ But Jesus didn't swerve. "Peter, get out of my way. Satan, get lost. You have no idea how God works."

²⁴⁻²⁶ Then Jesus went to work on his disciples. "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?"

²⁷⁻²⁸ "Don't be in such a hurry to go into business for yourself. Before you know it the Son of Man will arrive with all the splendor of his Father, accompanied by an army of angels. You'll get everything you have coming to you, a personal gift. This isn't pie in the sky by and by. Some of you standing here are going to see it take place, see the Son of Man in kingdom glory."

Peter is wanting to protect Jesus from the suffering He is prophesying about. But, Jesus knows He must suffer in order for Peter's sins and all of our sins to be forgiven. Jesus explains that anyone who really wants to follow Him must allow Him to lead and embrace suffering. Jesus knows that for the disciples, following Him would require true commitment, which for most of them, would include the risk of death.

Although most of us will not face death for following Jesus like the disciples, we are still required to allow God to lead our lives. We are still required to put Him first above anything or anyone if we want to truly follow Him. True commitment means following Him in the good times and in the difficult times.

God, we want to be true followers of You! We want you to be in the driver's seat. If there is anything or anyone standing in the way of our commitment to you, we ask you to help us recognize this. Thank you for your example of self-sacrifice and the suffering you went through so that we stand forgiven!

Pastor Amy Guthrie

December 13, 2012

Mark 9:33-37

³³ *They came to Capernaum. When he was safe at home, he asked them, "What were you discussing on the road?"*

³⁴ *The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was greatest.*

³⁵ *He sat down and summoned the Twelve. "So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all."*

³⁶⁻³⁷ *He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me."*

Dianne Neal Matthews has a cogent story to tell that makes a person identify with Mark 9:33-37 very well:

"As a third grader, I loved to be at the head of the lunch line. As soon as we were dismissed, my best friend and I would dash down the hallway – even though our teacher frequently reminded the class to walk, not run. One day we were caught. Instead of going into the lunchroom with the rest of the class, my friend and I had to walk back and forth between our classroom and the top of the stairway, over and over. The teacher allowed us to go to the cafeteria after our classmates had gotten their food and been seated. After that day, running to the lunchroom lost its appeal."

True greatness, according to Jesus, is being a servant to everybody else. That means going against our human drive to give self first priority. Instead of striving to be first in line, we willingly take last place. We build others up instead of ourselves.

The Christian should seek spiritual power rather than ecclesiastical position. The Christian should be more concerned with service than status. Jesus used a little child as an example of humility.

Prayer: "During this Advent Season and throughout the New Year, help each of us to serve you, dear Lord, with a humble spirit."

Pastor Loyd McLaughlin

December 14, 2012

Mark 10:13-31

¹³⁻¹⁶ *The people brought children to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus was irate and let them know it: "Don't push these children away. Don't ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. Mark this: Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in." Then, gathering the children up in his arms, he laid his hands of blessing on them.*

To Enter God's Kingdom

¹⁷ *As he went out into the street, a man came running up, greeted him with great reverence, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to get eternal life?"*

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ *Jesus said, "Why are you calling me good? No one is good, only God. You know the commandments: Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, don't cheat, honor your father and mother."*

²⁰ *He said, "Teacher, I have—from my youth—kept them all!"*

²¹ *Jesus looked him hard in the eye—and loved him! He said, "There's one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come follow me."*

²² *The man's face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, and he walked off with a heavy heart. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go.*

²³⁻²⁵ *Looking at his disciples, Jesus said, "Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who 'have it all' to enter God's kingdom?" The disciples couldn't believe what they were hearing, but Jesus kept on: "You can't imagine how difficult. I'd say it's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for the rich to get into God's kingdom."*

²⁶ *That set the disciples back on their heels. "Then who has any chance at all?" they asked.*

²⁷ *Jesus was blunt: "No chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it."*

²⁸ *Peter tried another angle: "We left everything and followed you."*

²⁹⁻³¹ *Jesus said, "Mark my words, no one who sacrifices house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, land—whatever—because of me and the Message will lose out. They'll get it all back, but multiplied many times in homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and land—but also in troubles. And then the bonus of eternal life! This is once again the Great Reversal: Many who are first will end up last, and the last first."*

The first shall be last and the last shall be first. The age old adage that we all learn as kids when we fight our way to the front of the line or are consoled with when we end up in the back of the line. What do we learn from this famous phrase? The way things are measured in this world, in this kingdom, are not how things are measured in God's kingdom. God's economy is much different than ours. We spend our years on this earth earning and gaining. We gain possessions, houses, cars and other things of earthly value and our success is measured by how much of these things we can gain. We learn at a young age that if we have the cool toys, wear the designer clothes or drive the expensive car—then we are high society and we have made it. But Jesus turns this philosophy on its head. Jesus says that the last will be first. He tells the rich young ruler that he must sell everything that he has, give it to the poor and follow Christ.

This baffles the rich young ruler. He has followed the commandments, he has lived a moral life, but he knows something is missing. He doesn't have the joy and peace that comes with a life lived in Christ and so he seeks out Jesus to find what He is missing. Unfortunately, what he is missing, he refuses to give up. That's the problem with money. It can easily become something to be worshipped. The problem in this whole story is not money, it is the young ruler's love of it. He has made it his god and it has become too important for him to live without.

(continued)

God's economy is different than ours. The things He values are opposite of what the world values. God came to this earth and lived His entire life as a servant. The Jews were waiting on the Messiah, expecting a king who would lead them into war, liberating them from the oppression of Rome's rule, but instead He came as a servant, liberating mankind from sin by love.

The first will be last and the last will be first. Pray that you will be concerned with the things that God is concerned with. Pray that you will find out where God is at and get involved. Pray that God will transform your focus from the material things of this world to the everlasting things of God. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. Live your life not worried about earthly gains and earthly treasures, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. Don't invest in things, invest in people. They are the only things we can take with us when we go to heaven.

Pastor Isaac Gilmore

December 15, 2012

Luke 19:28-40

²⁸⁻³¹ *After saying these things, Jesus headed straight up to Jerusalem. When he got near Bethphage and Bethany at the mountain called Olives, he sent off two of the disciples with instructions: "Go to the village across from you. As soon as you enter, you'll find a colt tethered, one that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it. If anyone says anything, asks, 'What are you doing?' say, 'His Master needs him.'"*

³²⁻³³ *The two left and found it just as he said. As they were untying the colt, its owners said, "What are you doing untying the colt?"*

³⁴ *They said, "His Master needs him."*

³⁵⁻³⁶ *They brought the colt to Jesus. Then, throwing their coats on its back, they helped Jesus get on. As he rode, the people gave him a grand welcome, throwing their coats on the street.*

³⁷⁻³⁸ *Right at the crest, where Mount Olives begins its descent, the whole crowd of disciples burst into enthusiastic praise over all the mighty works they had witnessed: Blessed is he who comes, the king in God's name! All's well in heaven! Glory in the high places!*

³⁹ *Some Pharisees from the crowd told him, "Teacher, get your disciples under control!"*

⁴⁰ *But he said, "If they kept quiet, the stones would do it for them, shouting praise."*

As He rode, the people gave him a grand welcome. They shouted, "Blessed is he who comes, the king in God's name! All's well in heaven!" If you didn't notice, this is the story in Luke called "The Triumphal Entry." In The Message translation it is entitled, "God's Personal Visit." So, let's merge the two thoughts. Through God's personal visit to Earth in the form of Christ, a triumphant victory has been won. Pretty cool if you ask me. Where does the King of kings and Lord of lords show up on His personal visit to our world? In a manger, in a barn, in town. Where does the Son of Man hang out? In the villages with the people, especially with those in need of some help from above. Not in palaces of luxury like ordinary kings. But, then again, He is no ordinary King.

Our King is also a Good Shepherd. The Prophet Isaiah says that we are like sheep that have gone astray. Yet Jesus, our Shepherd King, walked right in the midst of His wayward sheep, just like a good shepherd does. Why did He hang out with the poor and needy? Why did He eat with sinners? Why did He preach Good News to the scum of the earth? Because that's what the Good Shepherd does. He lives in the midst of his flock. And, in order to conquer sin, evil, and even death, He had to come here to be with us. We have a Savior and Lord that we can truly relate to. One that grew up here with us. He is a King that endured temptation, opposition and even death on a cross-all for us. The King enters victorious. This Advent Season I pray that we welcome our Shepherd King shouting, "Blessed is he who comes!" for the entire world to hear. I pray that we don't keep the Good News quiet this holiday season.

Pastor Chris Johnson

December 16, 2012

Luke 12:49-53

⁴⁹⁻⁵³ *"I've come to start a fire on this earth—how I wish it were blazing right now! I've come to change everything, turn everything rightside up—how I long for it to be finished! Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything nice? Not so. I've come to disrupt and confront! From now on, when you find five in a house, it will be—*

Three against two, and two against three; Father against son, and son against father; Mother against daughter, and daughter against mother; Mother-in-law against bride, and bride against mother-in-law."

This was a hard saying for the disciples to hear from their Teacher. After all, Messiah was supposed to unite the people, not divide them. The Jews were expecting Messiah to come in power, not as a servant. The baptism that Jesus mentions is one of suffering and death and He is in distress because He knows what is coming. I have experienced, first hand, the division that walking with Jesus causes within the family. I know of many adult children who have been disowned by their parents because they left the "family religion" for Christianity. Even if that is not the case, how many of us were excluded from family events because "we don't fit in" any longer? Even worse, how many of us exclude ourselves from family events because we think Jesus might "not approve" of their pagan ways?

We, as a family, intentionally go to family events so that God can use us to set an example. We do not intentionally stand out because of our faith because it takes no effort. From His birth to this very day, Jesus calls His children not to hide from the world, but to live in it without being a part of it.

Lord, please remind me during this Christmas season to enter every home with a glad heart, to be kind to those who mock my faith, and to shine like the Star of David to those around me, Amen.

Pastor David Baca

December 17, 2012

1 John 2:24-29

²⁴⁻²⁵ *Stay with what you heard from the beginning, the original message. Let it sink into your life. If what you heard from the beginning lives deeply in you, you will live deeply in both Son and Father. This is exactly what Christ promised: eternal life, real life!*

²⁶⁻²⁷ *I've written to warn you about those who are trying to deceive you. But they're no match for what is embedded deeply within you—Christ's anointing, no less! You don't need any of their so-called teaching. Christ's anointing teaches you the truth on everything you need to know about yourself and him, uncontaminated by a single lie. Live deeply in what you were taught.*

Live Deeply in Christ

²⁸ *And now, children, stay with Christ. Live deeply in Christ. Then we'll be ready for him when he appears, ready to receive him with open arms, with no cause for red-faced guilt or lame excuses when he arrives.*

²⁹ *Once you're convinced that he is right and righteous, you'll recognize that all who practice righteousness are God's true children.*

Accepting Christ as our Lord and Savior is just the beginning of our new life in Christ. John makes it very clear that our relationship with Jesus is to be an intimate and committed one. To remain in the Son as the Son remains in the Father is to declare an intimacy with God that surpasses even that of our spouses. Think about the many relationships in your life and compare them to your relationship with God. Who sits on the throne in the temple of your heart?

It is so easy to put the wrong things on the throne: the acceptance of others, material things, money, another human being, ourselves, Peyton Manning, whatever it might be, BEWARE... anything else besides God doesn't work.

The magi followed a star all the way to Bethlehem. They called Him "The King of the Jews." Make sure He, and He alone, sits on the throne in your heart. Follow and be prepared for the many opportunities that God will present for you to be a blessing in the lives of others.

Pastor Brian Wiesinger

December 18, 2012

Luke 1:8-23

⁸⁻¹² *It so happened that as Zachariah was carrying out his priestly duties before God, working the shift assigned to his regiment, it came his one turn in life to enter the sanctuary of God and burn incense. The congregation was gathered and praying outside the Temple at the hour of the incense offering. Unannounced, an angel of God appeared just to the right of the altar of incense. Zachariah was paralyzed in fear.*

¹³⁻¹⁵ *But the angel reassured him, "Don't fear, Zachariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John. You're going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you—many will delight in his birth. He'll achieve great stature with God.*

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ *"He'll drink neither wine nor beer. He'll be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment he leaves his mother's womb. He will turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God. He will herald God's arrival in the style and strength of Elijah, soften the hearts of parents to children, and kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics—he'll get the people ready for God."*

¹⁸ *Zachariah said to the angel, "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman."*

¹⁹⁻²⁰ *But the angel said, "I am Gabriel, the sentinel of God, sent especially to bring you this glad news. But because you won't believe me, you'll be unable to say a word until the day of your son's birth. Every word I've spoken to you will come true on time—God's time."*

²¹⁻²² *Meanwhile, the congregation waiting for Zachariah was getting restless, wondering what was keeping him so long in the sanctuary. When he came out and couldn't speak, they knew he had seen a vision. He continued speechless and had to use sign language with the people.*

²³⁻²⁵ *When the course of his priestly assignment was completed, he went back home. It wasn't long before his wife, Elizabeth, conceived. She went off by herself for five months, relishing her pregnancy. "So, this is how God acts to remedy my unfortunate condition!" she said.*

Zachariah was alone as he entered the sanctuary of God to perform his priestly duty of burning incense (v. 9). When God draws us into His presence He desires that we be still and quiet before Him so that we can hear clearly as He speaks to our hearts and reveals His mind to us.

Advent is marked by a spirit of expectation, of anticipation, of longing. Zachariah and his wife, Elizabeth, certainly had a joyous sense of expectancy upon the angel's pronouncement that their prayers had been heard and they would have a son. But that was not all – the angel explains to Zachariah that they were to name their son John, which means "the Lord is gracious."

God, in His grace, sent John to prepare the way for the Messiah and to "turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God" (v. 17). In today's harried pace of overloaded lives there is much that vies for our time and attention. Do you listen for God's voice? Or, perhaps the better question is, do you *hear* God's voice? Is He calling you to turn back to Him? Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me." (John 10:27)

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for this time of year when we contemplate the hope embodied and incarnated in the Christ child; the perfect example of newness, potential and possibility. Enable me to continue to grow in grace, hear your voice and obediently follow.

Pastor Janette Mikatich

December 19, 2012

Matthew 1:18-23

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ *The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn't know that.) Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.*

²⁰⁻²³ *While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God's angel spoke in the dream: "Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus — 'God saves'— because he will save his people from their sins." This would bring the prophet's embryonic sermon to full term: Watch for this—a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son; they will name him Immanuel (Hebrew for "God is with us").*

The thing that has always amazed me about this part of the birth story was Joseph's discernment. Through this tumultuous situation, how was he able to discern the voice of God over all the other things speaking into his life at the time? When Mary told Joseph she was pregnant, he had every right to feel disgraced. He knew the child was not his own and Mary's apparent unfaithfulness carried a grave social stigma. Joseph not only had the right to divorce Mary, under Jewish law she could be put to death by stoning. Such pressure fell upon him and yet he heard God's voice through it all. Joseph must have wondered in awe as he remembered the words found in Isaiah 7:14, "Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

Prayer: Lord, help us hear your voice in the darkest of times, toughest of situations and when there are so many voices competing for our attention.

Pastor Nathan Sutliff

December 20, 2012

Luke 1:24-38

²³⁻²⁵ When the course of his priestly assignment was completed, he went back home. It wasn't long before his wife, Elizabeth, conceived. She went off by herself for five months, relishing her pregnancy. "So, this is how God acts to remedy my unfortunate condition!" she said.

A Virgin Conceives

²⁶⁻²⁸ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her: Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, Beautiful inside and out! God be with you.

²⁹⁻³³ She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus. He will be great, be called 'Son of the Highest.' The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; He will rule Jacob's house forever—no end, ever, to his kingdom."

³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "But how? I've never slept with a man."

³⁵ The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Highest hover over you; Therefore, the child you bring to birth will be called Holy, Son of God.

³⁶⁻³⁸ "And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son, old as she is? Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months pregnant! Nothing, you see, is impossible with God."

And Mary said, Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say. Then the angel left her.

The birth of Jesus to Mary, a virgin, is a miracle that a lot of people find hard to believe. Can you imagine how hard it was for Mary to understand? The angel uses Elizabeth as an example of God's power. Elizabeth is too old to have children and everyone thought she was barren. Yet, she conceives. After hearing the example from the angel, Mary's response is that she is "ready to serve."

How often do we question God's power and authority to accomplish things in our own lives? The same God who has the power and authority to create the universe has the power to create a child in a virgin's womb. The same God who has the power and authority to deliver people from sin has the power to accomplish things in our lives. May our response to Him this Advent Season be the same as Mary's, "I am ready to serve!"

Father, we recognize your power and authority in our lives to accomplish great things. Help us to remember that NOTHING is impossible with You!

Pastor Amy Guthrie

December 21, 2012

Luke 1:39-56

³⁹⁻⁴⁵ *Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly,*

*You're so blessed among women, and the babe in your womb, also blessed!
And why am I so blessed that the mother of my Lord visits me?
The moment the sound of your greeting entered my ears,
The babe in my womb skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.
Blessed woman, who believed what God said, believed every word would come true!*

⁴⁶⁻⁵⁵ *And Mary said,*

*I'm bursting with God-news; I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.
God took one good look at me, and look what happened — I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!
What God has done for me will never be forgotten, the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.
His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him.
He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts.
He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold.
He embraced his chosen child, Israel; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.
It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now.*

⁵⁶ *Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and then went back to her own home.*

This passage of scripture is called "The Magnificat," especially covering verses 46-55. It is named from the first word in the Latin version. It is a magnificent hymn-poem. It bears striking resemblance to the Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10) and is much like the Psalms in content and spirit.

Many people will soon be putting up their nativity set. Have you ever thought, "What if Mary had said no?"

But, she didn't. That's why God chose her. Mary considered herself a maidservant, and she was willing to be put to use. Surrender, trust and a willing heart to God's desires are wonderful traits for a mother. Out of all the homes to be raised in, God looked down and desired Jesus to be raised by her.

How willing are we to follow what God has asked us to do? Do I always respond like Mary? Are there things He's asked me to do that I haven't followed through with yet?

God chose a young girl with the mind of a maidservant to raise His only begotten Son. What big task could He have for me if I'm openhearted and willing?

Prayer: "Help each one of us to be obedient to you, O Lord, as was your maidservant, Mary."

Pastor Loyd McLaughlin

December 22, 2012

Luke 1:57-80

⁵⁷⁻⁵⁸ When Elizabeth was full-term in her pregnancy, she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives, seeing that God had overwhelmed her with mercy, celebrated with her.

⁵⁹⁻⁶⁰ On the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child and were calling him Zachariah after his father. But his mother intervened: "No. He is to be called John."

⁶¹⁻⁶² "But," they said, "no one in your family is named that." They used sign language to ask Zachariah what he wanted him named.

⁶³⁻⁶⁴ Asking for a tablet, Zachariah wrote, "His name is to be John." That took everyone by surprise. Surprise followed surprise—Zachariah's mouth was now open, his tongue loose, and he was talking, praising God!

⁶⁵⁻⁶⁶ A deep, reverential fear settled over the neighborhood, and in all that Judean hill country people talked about nothing else. Everyone who heard about it took it to heart, wondering, "What will become of this child? Clearly, God has his hand in this."

⁶⁷⁻⁷⁹ Then Zachariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,

*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; he came and set his people free.
He set the power of salvation in the center of our lives, and in the very house of David his servant,
Just as he promised long ago through the preaching of his holy prophets:
Deliverance from our enemies and every hateful hand;
Mercy to our fathers, as he remembers to do what he said he'd do,
What he swore to our father Abraham—a clean rescue from the enemy camp,
So we can worship him without a care in the world, made holy before him as long as we live.
And you, my child, "Prophet of the Highest," will go ahead of the Master to prepare his ways,
Present the offer of salvation to his people, the forgiveness of their sins.
Through the heartfelt mercies of our God, God's Sunrise will break in upon us,
Shining on those in the darkness, those sitting in the shadow of death,
Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace.*

⁸⁰ The child grew up, healthy and spirited. He lived out in the desert until the day he made his prophetic debut in Israel.

Every Advent Season we hear the story of John the Baptist and we know that Jesus is coming next. John is the opening act for the spectacular story that is Jesus. The story of John also signifies the end of God's silence. God is about to do something special; something so special that the entire world is about to change. Zachariah, filled by the Holy Spirit, prophesies about this seismic event that is about to happen in the little town of Bethlehem.

Pray the prayer of Zachariah's prophecy. Blessed be the God who came to liberate all of us through Christ Jesus, who gives us all the gift of salvation and its power in our lives just as He has told us long ago. He has delivered us from our enemies and the evil one. He has shown us mercy when we deserved something far worse and He always keeps His promises towards us. We can worship Him without any worries of Him not coming through for us.

John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Jesus. He offered salvation to His people. That salvation is offered to all of us and God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. God is not silent. That the salvation of Jesus is for whosoever believes in Him. Whosoever surely means me.

Praise God for the Gift. The gift of Christ. The gift of salvation. Remember in this season of giving that God has already given us the greatest gift, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Thank God for His love and let us, as we reflect on this awesome gift, love others as Christ first loved us.

Pastor Isaac Gilmore

December 23, 2012

Luke 2:1-20

¹⁻⁵ About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.

⁶⁻⁷ While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel.

An Event for Everyone

⁸⁻¹² There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

¹³⁻¹⁴ At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises: Glory to God in the heavenly heights, peace to all men and women on earth who please him.

¹⁵⁻¹⁸ As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherders were impressed.

¹⁹⁻²⁰ Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!

Good shepherds watching over the Good Shepherd. Isn't that an awesome thought? I believe it is so much more than coincidence that God chose to allow this group of "rough around the edges" guys to be a part of the greatest story ever told. As a kid, I always saw the shepherds as extras in the cast at the church Christmas play. They were just some scraggly guys standing in the back of the nativity scene on our mantel. But, now these characters represent so much more. They represent you and me. Look at all the characters in this awesome story. Mary, Elizabeth, the innkeeper, even the Magi. They all represent us. A friend of mine, Zack Hunt, puts it like this. "...in God's sovereignty, God chose to need us. God has chosen to invite us into the divine drama of redemption and to trust us to be more than just audience members, more than just scenery filling up the background."

God has faith in us. He has allowed us to be a part of His mighty movement all throughout history. He continues to use us to be a part of something awesome even today. No matter what your story or background. No matter your present circumstance. God wants you to be a part of changing history. You are more than just a background character. God has continually used ordinary, even "rough around the edges" people like us, to play a major role in the greatest story, the story above all stories, the story of His Glory. Like Mary and Joseph, all we have to do is say "YES!" We can help in changing history, one person, one soul at a time. When we introduce Christ to others, we repeat the Christmas story. And that can happen 365 days a year!

Pastor Chris Johnson

December 24, 2012

Matthew 2:1-11

¹⁻² After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory— this was during Herod's kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, "Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We're on pilgrimage to worship him."

³⁻⁴ When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

⁵⁻⁶ They told him, "Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly:
It's you, Bethlehem, in Judah's land, no longer bringing up the rear.
From you will come the leader who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel."

⁷⁻⁸ Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, "Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I'll join you at once in your worship."

⁹⁻¹⁰ Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!

¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

What a privilege it was for the magi, those eastern mystics, to have been some of the first to pay homage to the Infant King. These men, possibly three in number, if one goes by the number of gifts given, followed a star hundreds of miles to worship the "King" of the Jews. What possessed them to travel so far with exotic gifts to worship a King that was not their own? Tradition has referred to them as kings though they are not mentioned as such. By the end of the sixth century, they were even given names. Melkon (later Melchior), Balthasar, and Gasper were the "Three Wise Men" that Scripture does not name or number, but through tradition, have become as much a part of the Christmas story as Mary, Joseph and Jesus, themselves.

How did you come to know the Lord? We did not have a star to guide us to the Messiah like the Magi, yet something or someone drew each one of us irresistibly to our Lord. Perhaps that is why the Lord calls us to "let our light shine before men" because we are to be a star that leads others to Christ.

Pastor David Baca

December 25, 2012

Titus 2:11-14

¹¹⁻¹⁴ God's readiness to give and forgive is now public. Salvation's available for everyone! We're being shown how to turn our backs on a godless, indulgent life, and how to take on a God-filled, God-honoring life. This new life is starting right now, and is whetting our appetites for the glorious day when our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, appears. He offered himself as a sacrifice to free us from a dark, rebellious life into this good, pure life, making us a people he can be proud of, energetic in goodness.

In speaking with my Christian brothers and sisters, I often hear the phrase "but for the grace of God, there go I." I could not agree more! The appearance of God and His grace into my life and how He changed it, is an understatement. I no longer have to fly solo through life. He joyfully forgave me and wiped the slate clean. He truly has set me free, which means any of those chains that have held me back from being all that God wants me to be have been broken. Not only broken, but empowered to live a life pleasing to God. Lord, help me to get out of the way, while You take over every facet of my life.

Titus writes that Jesus came to free us from "lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are truly his..." What a wonderful mindset to have upon entering into the Advent Season. We are free and we are His!

Thank you, Lord, for the surety of knowing that we belong to You. Thank you for the wonderful gift of grace that You freely give to any and all who accept our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Pastor Brian Wiesinger

You Are Invited!

HIP KIDZ CHRISTMAS CHOIR PRESENTS
**THE SECRET OF
SNOWFLAKE
COUNTY**
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 8, 6 PM
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 9, 9 & 10:45 AM

WORSHIP CHOIR CHRISTMAS MUSICAL
"Carols"
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15, 6 PM &
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16, 9 & 10:45 AM



Christmas Weekend Worship
Saturday, December 22, 6 pm
Sunday, December 23, 9 am & 10:45 am

Christmas Eve
Candlelight Services
MONDAY, DECEMBER 24
3, 4:30 and 6 PM

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