



# ADVENT

*PREPARE for CHRIST*

2024



# ADVENT

SEASON *of* PREPARATION

**It can be argued that Advent, more than any other season of the church year, is immediately relevant to our concrete lives as individuals, to the concrete life of the church under stress, and to the concrete headlines in the newspaper. The reason for that is that Advent tells us about our own lives as Christians, here and now. Advent is where we live, work, play, laugh, struggle, and die. Advent is the Time Between —between the first coming of Christ and the second coming, between darkness and dawn, between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. It is not the time of fulfillment; it is the time of waiting. It is not the time of seeing face-to-face; it is the time of seeing ‘through a glass, darkly’ (1 Cor. 13:12). It is not the time of triumphant victory; it is the time of bearing the cross.**

**To help us through this Time Between, we offer the following reflections by members of our church family. You can interact with our reflections in one of two ways. You can read through this printed copy of the booklet, or, if you scan the QR code at the bottom of this page, it will take you to the electronic version of this booklet on the GPBC website. Whatever format you prefer, we encourage you to tarry with each devotion and listen for the voice of God in His Word and these reflections.**



## Directory of Readings

1. Sunday, December 1 — Genesis 3:14-15 — Rev. Dale S. Cain
2. Monday, December 2 — Isaiah 7:14 — Mrs. Janice Byrd
3. Tuesday, December 3 — Micah 5:2 — Dr. Matthew Byrd
4. Wednesday, December 4 — Hosea 11:1 — Mrs. Kim Cain
5. Thursday, December 5 — Isaiah 9:2 — Mrs. Janice Byrd
6. Friday, December 6 — Psalm 78:1-2 — Dr. Matthew Byrd
7. Saturday, December 7 — Zechariah 9:9-10 — Ms. Marian Brewer
8. Sunday, December 8 — Exodus 12:21-27 — Mrs. Nancy Cardwell Webster
9. Monday, December 9 — Zechariah 11:12-13 — Rev. Dale S. Cain
10. Tuesday, December 10 — Isaiah 52:13-53:12 — Rev. Dale S. Cain
11. Wednesday, December 11 — Psalm 22 — Mrs. Eliza Sanders
12. Thursday, December 12 — Psalm 16:9-10 — Mrs. Beth Canada
13. Friday, December 13 — Isaiah 9:6-7 — Rev. Marc Sanders
14. Saturday, December 14 — Genesis 49:10 — Mrs. Kim Cain
15. Sunday, December 15 — Daniel 7:13-14 — Mr. Bob Webster
16. Monday, December 16 — Matthew 1:18-20,24-25 — Mrs. Eliza Sanders
17. Tuesday, December 17 — Matthew 1:18-25 — Mrs. Lynnette Warren
18. Wednesday, December 18 — Matthew 2:1-6,9-12 — Mrs. Kim Cain
19. Thursday, December 19 — Matthew 2:3-4,7-8,16-18 — Rev. Terry Ransom (submitted by Mr. John Moore)
20. Friday, December 20 — Luke 1 — Zechariah — Mr. Jim Etheridge
21. Saturday, December 21 — Luke 1 — Gabriel — Mrs. Nancy Cardwell Webster
22. Sunday, December 22 — Luke 1 — Elizabeth — Mrs. Susan Cowles Hudson
23. Monday, December 23 — Luke 1 — Mary — Mrs. Cynthia Willets
24. Tuesday, December 24 — Luke 2 — Mr. Gene Willets
25. Wednesday, December 25 — Luke 2:8-14 — Rev. Marc Sanders

## **Genesis 3:14-15**

**15 “...he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel.”**

-----

It was the worst day in the history of humanity — the day that Eve listened to the serpent, took the bite, and led her husband to listen to his wife instead of to his Father. On that day, everything changed. Openness was replaced with hiding, honesty with shame. Relationship between husband and wife was damaged, and fellowship between humanity and God was breached. It was a terrible, awful day.

On that day, God stepped into the breach and spoke to everyone involved. He told Eve that she would suffer pain for what she had done. He told Adam that the blissfully easy life he had enjoyed was over, replaced with the struggle of hard work. He reserved His harshest words, though, for the one who was the prime cause of the damage. Adam and Eve had been innocent; their knowledge was limited and all they had known was what they had seen around them. The serpent, however, knew better; he had seen God in His heaven as an angel of light, had left that all behind to go his own way, and now had taken Adam and Eve with him.

God had specific words of condemnation for the serpent. “You are cursed.” “Your power is limited.” “You will be hated.” God did concede that the serpent would continue to cause damage; “you will bruise his heel.” But He also pronounced victory; “he will bruise your head.” People can live with a sore heel, but it’s much harder to survive a crushed head.

I’m so grateful that God stepped into this terrible, awful day and spoke mercy into the judgment. He pointed ahead to the best days in human history — when His Son would take his human flesh to the cross, carry all the sin of humanity to the grave, and snatch the victory away, once for all time, from the adversary.

On your terrible, awful days, remember this story. Remember that God always comes alongside us and proclaims mercy into the judgment. Times of difficulty still come; we still bear the pain and struggle that comes with being the kin of Adam and Eve. But, that’s never the end of the story. We may hobble on bruised heels from time to time, but our adversary’s head has been crushed. Jesus has known the victory, and we get to share in that victory because of God’s mercy.

- Rev. Dale S. Cain

2. Monday, December 02

## **Isaiah 7:14**

***14 “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”***

-----

We can be stubborn people. In chapter 7 of the book of Isaiah, King Ahaz did not want to accept the word from the Lord. He needed to trust God, but he just didn't want to hear what God had to say. The Lord challenged Ahaz to ask for a sign; however, the king replied that he would not test the Lord.

In spite of his unwillingness to cooperate, Ahaz was addressed by Isaiah the prophet. His message was clear. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

No timeline is given for the fulfillment of the prophecy. The message is simply that a young woman, a virgin, would have a son. She would name him Immanuel, meaning “God with us.” Thousands of years later we know there was so much more to this word from the Lord.

In the book of Matthew we read, “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.’”

It is quite possible that Ahaz never fully understood the power of this prophecy. We, however, know the “rest of the story.” It is now our responsibility to share the significance of this sign to the rest of the world.

- Mrs. Janice Byrd

## **Micah 5:2**

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

-----

Under the threat of Assyrian oppression, Micah prophesied against the injustice and unfaithfulness of Judah's leaders. But he also prophesied about the day the Lord would restore His people by raising up a new shepherd to lead them. Instead of hailing from a "significant" city like Bethel, where Jacob met the Lord in a dream, or Shiloh, where Joshua renewed the people's covenant with God, or Jerusalem, where Solomon built the magnificent temple, this leader would come from a lowly village. Located a day's walk from Jerusalem, the small town of Bethlehem was the ancestral home of David, and that connection suggested the new ruler would have royal roots. But it was more than that. Not only would the shepherd rule over the southern kingdom of Judah, but he would be "ruler in Israel" — once again uniting the kingdom that had been divided due to human sin.

When the oppressed Jews were looking for this Messiah centuries later, it was no secret from where He would come, at least to those who took seriously the study of God's Word. When King Herod heard that a new king had been born, he quickly tried to assess the potential threat to his own throne. "Assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, [Herod] inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet . . .'" (Matthew 2:4–5).

For Herod, the problem was not recognition, but acceptance. He could recognize that the one revealed to the magi might be the Messiah if He were born in Bethlehem (which He was), but Herod could not accept that someone could have greater authority than he had. Despite his disbelief and subsequent killing of the male children in Bethlehem, Herod could not prevent the prophecy from being fulfilled. Jesus, the new King "whose coming forth is from old" was destined from all eternity to bring light and life to God's people — not only to Israel, but to the entire world! May we not lose sight of how God uses the smallest details to bring about His perfect will in our lives.

- Dr. Matthew Byrd

## **Hosea 11:1**

***1 When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.***

-----

As we read in the Old Testament, Egypt is seen as a place of both refuge and bondage. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers but rose to a high position in Egypt. His family moved to Egypt in order to survive a famine in Canaan. The Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians but God worked through Moses and led the Israelites out of Egypt.

Hosea speaks of this time in Hosea 11:1. In spite of Israel's continued sin, God continues to love them.

While Hosea was speaking historically about Israel, Matthew 2:15 refers to this same verse as a fulfillment of prophecy to refer to Mary and Joseph moving to Egypt to escape Herod's attempt to kill Jesus. The family stayed in Egypt until Herod's death and then returned to Nazareth.

The verse in Hosea speaks of God freeing the Israelites from Egypt. The verse in Matthew shows God's love by sending Jesus to free all people, including the Israelites, the Egyptians, and us from sin.

- Mrs. Kim Cain



## **Isaiah 9:2**

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

-----

Isaiah the prophet speaks not only to the people of Israel, but also to every person who has lived since his time on earth. Israel, God’s chosen people, had lived many years in darkness. They refused to listen to God but instead turned their backs on Him. Their lives were consumed with sin; however, God continued to bring them back into fellowship with Himself.

In chapter 9 verse 2, Isaiah tells of their dark past but also offers the promise of a brighter, more glorious future. God’s promise to send a Savior was prophesied by Isaiah as the light that would forever shine upon them — the light so bright it would cover every person on earth for as long as the earth existed.

Jesus, the Messiah, the One Isaiah speaks of declares, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

We, too, live in a sinful world. Many people on earth continue to turn their backs on the promise of a light in the darkness. We allow apathy, pride, personal gain, hatred, and so much more to cover our hearts and minds in darkness. The gospel of Matthew reminds us that we are the light to those around us. “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16 ESV).

During this Advent season, let us be the light that is so desperately needed in our world, our community, our family.

- Mrs. Janice Byrd

## **Psalm 78:1-2**

*1 Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;  
incline your ears to the words of my mouth!  
2 I will open my mouth in a parable;  
I will utter dark sayings from of old.*

-----

As one of the court psalmists under King David and later Solomon, Asaph brought a lifetime of knowledge about Israel's history to his writing. Psalm 78 covers centuries of God's favor and blessing in the face of disobedience and idolatry on the part of His chosen people. Asaph's parable of history that reveals the individual sinful heart of each person would be adapted by the coming Messiah for the same end: to show what the kingdom-minded Christ-follower must be like. Parables are subtle. To those who hear but do not listen, a parable may seem like a tidy story with a vaguely moral focus. To those who aren't paying attention, it's just noise. But to those whose eyes and ears are trained on Jesus, a parable can teach like nothing else. As Jesus would later phrase it, "For to the one who has, more will be given" (Matthew 13:12).

Whether Asaph knew his words were prophetic we are not told, but Matthew certainly recognized their fulfillment when Jesus began to teach. "All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world'" (Matthew 13:34–35). When God the Father sent His Son, He used Him to reveal "what has been hidden" from our prideful human nature, and He made known the mystery of how God Himself could take on humanity in order to redeem us. And he used the humble parable to do so. As we consider Advent, may we remember this fulfillment of God's Word written a thousand years before!

- Dr. Matthew Byrd

## Zechariah 9:9-10

*9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;  
righteous and having salvation is he,  
humble and mounted on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
10 I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the war horse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle bow shall be cut off,  
and he shall speak peace to the nations;  
his rule shall be from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

-----

Zechariah was a prophet of the Lord during the years of rebuilding the Temple, about 400 years before the birth of Christ. His family history includes a lineage of God's prophets. We can see through them just how much God loves His people and how He works all things through the ages to accomplish His divine purposes. Zechariah's name is translated, "Yahweh remembers."

An important aspect of the book of Zechariah is the Messianic prophecies, one of which is the passage above. This one is the prophecy of the Messiah riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, on the day we now call Palm Sunday.

What's important in reading God's Word is what we can glean from it beyond the surface level. We want to reach the deeper level of all God has to say to us.

What was God telling His people, through Zechariah, about the future? "Hope is coming! Don't give up! Trust Me, I'm with you all the way!" He specifically commissioned Zechariah to encourage His people to complete the rebuilding the Temple, so that blessings He had in mind for their future would begin through their obedience to God in the present. And their hope for both their future and ours would be that they would get to be a part of preparing the Temple for the coming Messiah, Jesus.

How would they recognize Him, our gentle Savior, at the time? He would come to Jerusalem just like they would in the day, "riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey." God further told them in verse 10, "He shall speak peace to the nations. He shall rule...to the ends of the earth."

Just like the people of Biblical times, when we're aware of the presence of God, we get energized to do the work He has planned for us. We can trust Him because He sees all the way to the end, even though we don't. He's willing to guide our steps and show us the way we need to go, through His Son, Jesus. We may stumble and fall, but He will be there to pick us up and to start again. Trust the Son He sent for our benefit, the tiny Babe born in a manger, who would grow up to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. They never got to see that promised event, but it did happen, just as God said. "Trust Him! Don't quit! I'll be with you."

Jesus is the blessing for our posterity. Let's make sure they come to know Him, the tiny Babe, born in a manger, heralded by the angels as the Savior of the world. That's what God said.

- Ms. Marian Brewer

## Exodus 12:21-27

*21 Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. 22 Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. None of you shall go out of the door of your house until morning. 23 When the Lord goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.*

*24 "Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. 25 When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. 26 And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' 27 then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'" Then the people bowed down and worshiped.*

-----

When you run into Moses in heaven some day (perhaps at the local Krispy Kreme where they serve up heavenly ho-ho-host Christmas do-nut holes and angel food cupcakes), there are a few things you'll probably want to ask him.

- How did that little basket not leak, and did you meet any turtles or snakes before the pharaoh's daughter fished you out of the Nile?
- What kind of pencil did you use to write the 10 commandments on the stone tablets?
- Did you consider stopping and asking for directions during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness? (Just kidding. We know about the cloud and the pillar of fire. This is a 20th century joke women tell about men.)
- Did you realize that youth groups would still be singing "I will sing unto the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously, the horse and rider thrown into the sea" in 2024—about your adventures leading the Israelites across the Red Sea?
- How well did you and your brother Aaron really get along?
- It's a shame S'mores had not been invented at the time of the burning bush.... But, I digress.
- What was your favorite plague (of the first nine. The tenth is nothing to joke about.)
- Did you take a cat with you from Egypt?
- Did manna taste like chicken?
- How long did it take for your face to stop glowing after being in the Lord God's presence? Or did you just continue to glow in the dark occasionally afterwards? Did this keep you awake at night?
- How long did it take you to realize that God can use reluctant leaders who doubt their qualifications to do what he calls us to do? (Some of us are still working on that one, by the way.)
- Most importantly, how do you view Jesus, the Son of God, the Savior of all Israel, the Gentiles, and everyone to walk to face of the earth forevermore? What foreshadowing of understanding did God the Father share with you about what was to come in the second half of the Bible?

In today's passage, here we are again at #10, the plague of the firstborn. Our Jewish brothers and sisters still celebrate the Passover, when the angel of death passed over Hebrew families who did as God required and spread the blood of a sacrificed lamb on their doorposts. The Egyptians did not follow God's command, and even the firstborn son of the pharaoh was killed that night, along with all the other eldest

(continued next page)

who were unprotected by the blood. This was the final straw, and the Israelites were freed. Chased later, but set free, nonetheless.

Christians still sing a hymn called “Power in the Blood” because of this universal truth. There IS power in the sacrificial blood of Jesus, who took our place and died on a cross to free us from death and sin. Jesus has many names across the years of human existence: The Prince of Peace, the Lord of Lord, the King of Kings, Immanuel, the Lion of Judah, the Alpha and the Omega. But in Exodus, to God’s servant Moses, Jesus was the Passover Lamb. Praise God, he still saves us through the power of his blood, willingly shed for us on the cross! Hallelujah!

- Mrs. Nancy Cardwell Webster

## **Zechariah 11:12-13**

*12 Then I said to them, "If it seems good to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver. 13 Then the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter" — the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord, to the potter.*

-----

This chapter of Zechariah describes a prophetic act through which the prophet declares judgment over the chosen people of Israel. They leaders do not care for those in their charge, the people have despised God, and God has rejected them. Can you imagine things getting so bad that God said to them, "What is to die, let it die. What is to be destroyed, let it be destroyed. And let those who are left devour the flesh of one another" (v. 9). Oh, that we would never hear God speak those words to our nation or our world!

Stop and think about this for a moment. You see, we have much more in common with the people of Israel than we would like to admit. By nature, we all are guilty of not caring for those we could help. At times we all have done things that would indicate that we despise God. And, I suspect that I'm not the only one who has exasperated God to the point that He might want to give up on me. As Jeremiah says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)

Thankfully, Jeremiah also tells us that "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23).

While I'm sure Zechariah didn't realize that his action of throwing the thirty pieces of silver into the house of the Lord meant anything other than a small part of his prophetic message to his audience, we can see that God had His bigger message in mind. With this detail He points to the story of Jesus being betrayed, murdered, and resurrected, and He lets us know that the situation of judgment being portrayed by Zechariah doesn't have to be our situation.

Jesus came to us, became one of us, and lived among us to show us the way God wants us to live. He died on the cross to remove our sin, which keeps us from living His way. He rose from the dead to defeat the power of sin and death once for all. He sent His Spirit to live in us, to equip us to live that better life that was made possible by Jesus' work.

I don't know about you, but I don't want to live the kind of life Zechariah was portraying. It's so much better to walk in God's love, mercy, and faithfulness.

- Rev. Dale S. Cain

## **Isaiah 52:13-53:12**

*5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.*

-----

“Van said it would be like this.” That’s a common saying at our house. Whenever the weather is just what the meteorologist said it would be, one of us will say, “[insert the name of whatever meteorologist we saw] said it would be like this.”

Take a moment to read Isaiah 52:13-53:12, commonly known as the Suffering Servant passage. Scholars still debate about exactly who Isaiah’s original audience thought he was referring to; in fact, I had to write college paper on exactly that topic. (Not that I’m a scholar!) Of course, we know who Isaiah was inspired to write this about, even if they (and even he) didn’t.

Compare Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection with what Isaiah said here. Hundreds of years before Christ, Isaiah said it would be like this, and it was.

Tomorrow you’ll read Psalm 22 (you can go ahead and read it now if you’d like). In it, David uses phrases like “All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. ‘He trusts in the Lord,’ they say, ‘let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him’” (v. 7-8); “They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment” (v. 18); and most poignantly, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (v. 1). A thousand years before Christ, David said it would be like this, and it was.

Finally, consider Revelation 13:8, which refers to Jesus as “the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.” From the very beginning of the world, God knew it would be like this, and it was.

It’s so amazing. God knew that if He created the world, it would cost the life of His Son — and He did it anyway! He inspired His prophets to tell us over and over that it would be this way. And, beginning with Advent and going through Easter, it was.

And so it will be, when God finishes doing what He’s already told us He will do.

- Rev. Dale S. Cain

**Psalm 22:1-31**

***19 But you, O Lord, do not be far off!  
O you my help, come quickly to my aid!***

-----

Psalm is not typically the Scripture that we head to when we think of Christmas. This particular Psalm is written by David either when he was in exile from King Saul or when his son Absalom tried to wrest the kingdom from David. The imagery here is of one in despair who feels as if God has abandoned him. Yet like many Old Testament prophecies, this Psalm finds its fruition in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

God has a plan! Sometimes when we feel as if the night cannot get any darker, when we cannot tell where our help will come from, we forget this amazing truth. The birth of the baby in the manger was God's plan conceived from the beginning of time to redeem humankind. And that plan does not stop with the birth or death of that baby but reaches down to touch us today if we let it.

This Psalm not only reminds us that God has a plan but it also reminds us that we have a great high priest in the person of Jesus Christ. A high priest who can sympathize with us in our temptations and our weakness. He suffered for man's redemption and he understands human suffering — our suffering. His own creation turned against Him and yet He did not turn away from us.

So when you read Psalm 22, take heart. God is with us and for us. He has not forgotten or forsaken us. When the night feels dark, He is there. When you feel surrounded, He is there. May we, like King David, choose praise over despair. May we worship the baby who became the lamb as we trust in His plan.

- Mrs. Eliza Sanders



**Psalm 16:9-10**

***9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;  
my flesh also dwells secure.***

***10 For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,  
or let your holy one see corruption.***

-----

One thousand years before Jesus died on the cross, David predicted Jesus' resurrection. He also, by divine inspiration, said that the Lord would not desert Jesus' soul and the "holy one" would not be allowed to undergo corruption.

David expresses joy in believing that not even death will separate him from fellowship with the Lord. He will survive death and enjoy unending pleasure in the Lord's presence.

One thousand years after David's prediction, the resurrection gave Jesus' believers hope that one can overcome sin and experience eternal life. His resurrection transformed his followers from fear and doubt to faith.

Today, just like David and the early followers of Jesus, with trust and confidence in God's faithfulness, we too can feel anchored in our relationship with Him. We also can feel secure that our eternal life is assured.

Because Jesus lives, every believer will live also!!!!

- Mrs. Beth Canada

## Isaiah 9:6-7

*6 For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
and his name shall be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
7 Of the increase of his government and of peace  
there will be no end,  
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,  
to establish it and to uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time forth and forevermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

-----

The call of the prophet is difficult even in the best of circumstances. It is not an easy task to speak truth to the prevailing powers of the day. The task becomes increasingly more difficult when those powers are unresponsive or even worse, hostile, to the word of the prophet. Such was the task to which Isaiah was called. King Ahaz had forsworn Isaiah's counsel to trust God when Ahaz allies himself with the dreaded Assyrians. Ahaz's vassalage was made worse when he adopted Assyrian pagan practices and reconfigured the Temple to accommodate pagan sacrifices. Judah and Israel has some truly awful kings, but Ahaz could be considered the worst because it was he who had burned his own son as an offering to Moloch. The magnitude of Isaiah's pain and sorrow seems incalculable as he must witness these abominations. I would have been tempted to retire from active prophet duty with the small comfort of knowing that I at least had tried. Thankfully, Isaiah does not resign himself to the darkness of despair but keeps seeking the heart of God who in turn honors Isaiah's fortitude with a promise.

Yes, the darkness was pervasive but it was not absolute. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined" Isaiah declares in 9:2. Here in a culture that thinks so little of children that the king has offered his child as a sacrifice, God uses a child to bring undiminishing light. How Isaiah's heart must have beamed with hope and delight as God promised that the government would rest on this child. I think we see the hope of this child in the titles by which he will be called, thanks in no small part to Handel's "Messiah," but I suspect Isaiah was refreshed more by the promise that followed these titles.

Ahaz had been so weak that it caused him to seek aid from those more powerful than himself. The contrast God foretells is stark, for the promised child will be so influential that "of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end." Israel would no longer be the sickly nation others used and abused, but would be the chief influencer in world affairs. Likewise, the promise of achieving this through peace and not war, also seen in 9:5, had to be invigorating to a people and prophet weary of almost continuous warfare. Isaiah may have been content with this, but the promised blessings of God abound as God asserts that Israel will no longer suffer under the capricious whims of ever changing kings. The promised child would sit "on the throne of David and over his king to establish and uphold it..from

(continued next page)

this time forth and forevermore.” We often trace Israel’s kings based on their lack of faith and pagan practices. The promised child would bring unbridled continuity as he would rule “with justice and with righteousness.” One might think this is what thrilled Isaiah so because it would mean he could retire. He would no longer be required to implore the king and people of God to seek justice, to treat all equitably, to bring to the center of community life those on the margins, for righteousness would reign. I don’t think this is what thrilled him though. I believe what thrilled him was the simple fact that the people of God would finally be wholly committed to the pursuit and exercise of God’s priorities in the world. The people of God would at last worship their God with pure hearts free of conflicting allegiances. The prophet is always consumed with this passion to unite the ways of the people with the heart of God, and now that would occur. More pointedly, this cementing together of humanity’s pursuits with God’s priorities would be accomplished not through human hands, but by the zeal, the passion of God. The same overwhelming passion that created the universe would once again be manifested as the curse of the Fall was reversed.

I picture Isaiah writing this revelation from God and then dropping his quill, leaning back in his chair, and resting in the sheer amazement of God’s love and power. It is easy for me to picture this because it’s what I’m feeling currently as I read these remarkable promises of God again. Here we sit in times just as tumultuous, if not more so, than those Isaiah inhabited. Existential threats to human existence abound and still I can read these lines from Isaiah and rest. I can rest in the certainty that I do not have to wait for the promised child, for he has already arrived. I must simply rest in the assurance of his return and know that strengthened by the same zeal which Isaiah foretold I can make it through today’s tumults. I must rest in the power of all those titles the promised child that Isaiah mentioned, for by them he will sustain and keep me. I must rest in the warmth of the light that darkness has never overcome. I must rest assured that the future is not more darkness, but greater light. I must rest. I must rest like that promised child in Bethlehem’s manger.

- Rev. Marc Sanders

14. Saturday, December 14

### **Genesis 49:10**

***10 “The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from his descendants, until the coming of the one to whom it belongs, the one whom all nations will honor.”***

-----

This verse is the blessing that was given to Judah by his father, Jacob. Normally the leadership role was passed to the oldest son. Due to the sinful behaviors of Reuben, Simeon and Levi, the leadership role was passed to the fourth oldest son in line, Judah. The leadership role would pass from generation to generation and would not depart from Judah “until the coming of the one to whom it belongs”. The one to whom it belongs is the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

This verse is permanent and universal. Once Jesus came, He took the scepter. He is the one to whom it belongs. The scepter was no longer passed on. He is the King of Kings. This shows that Jesus’ reign is permanent. Jesus is the one whom all nations will honor. When Jesus came, He not only was the ruler of Israel, He was and is the ruler of all. His reign is universal.

During this Advent season, we can not only view Jesus as a baby in the manger, but also see Him as the Lion of the tribe of Judah. The King who will one day return to reign on earth forever. This is the reason He was born.

- Mrs. Kim Cain

## **Daniel 7:13-14**

***13 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.***

-----

In this passage, we are told of one of several dreams experienced by Daniel. Here, Daniel sees God the Father (the Ancient of Days) and comes into God's presence. Daniel's vision takes us beyond our Christmas stories of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem to the time when He has full power and authority as God's son to fulfil the role of Messiah. That is quite extraordinary when one thinks about it.

Imagine what the people of Israel must have thought at that time. They were hoping for a Savior to deliver them from their current struggles, much less those yet to come that they could not foresee. I cannot walk in their shoes of course but can only wish that this passage provided some hope and reassurance that God's kingdom will eventually arrive and will endure forever.

During this Advent season, may we not only enjoy our current blessings, but also keep in mind the best is yet to come. Although we may have to endure problems and hardships in the short-term, the rewards will be beyond our imagination.

- Mr. Bob Webster

## **Matthew 1:18-20,24-25**

*24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*

-----

Imagine choosing someone else to raise your child. What characteristics would you look for? What type of person would you want to be responsible for your child? Would you want someone who was financially well off or perhaps someone with connections who could help your child get ahead in life? Would you want them to be kind and compassionate? What would be the defining characteristic you would look for?

Thankfully, the majority of us have not faced such a decision but God did when He chose earthly parents for His Son. There is not much information given to us about Joseph but these short verses give us a glimpse into the earthly Father of Jesus.

Joseph was a man who did what was right. When presented with the news that his betrothed was with child — a child who was not his, Joseph did not seek to publicly shame Mary or to have her stoned, which was allowed by the law. Instead Joseph made plans to privately break the engagement. Joseph was most likely heart broken but he did not seek revenge. He continued to show love and care for Mary, even when it appeared she had not treated him with the same. He still put her interests above his own. Can that be said of us? Are we the type of individual that when faced with hard decisions seeks the right answer for everyone or do we seek our own welfare?

Of course we know that God intervened, yet Joseph still had a choice to make. He did not have to accept this course. He could still divorce Mary and walk away from this messy situation. Again, Joseph proved to be a man of character as he readily accepted this news and chose to be a part of God's plan. The passage ends by telling us that Joseph named his son Jesus. Do not miss the significance of this. Joseph named his son "God Saves". We may ask in song if Mary knew but here I think Joseph did. He understood that God's plan was bigger than him, bigger than Mary and he agreed to be part of that plan. Do we mirror this commitment to God's plan?

- Mrs. Eliza Sanders

## **Matthew 1:18-25**

*18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

*20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

*22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*

*24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

-----

I can only begin to imagine the myriad of feelings Joseph must have felt on learning his betrothed, Mary, was expecting a child. Disappointment? Anger? Grief? Fear? Regardless of how he must have felt, Scripture tells us Joseph was a just man and unwilling to shame Mary, so he decided to divorce her quietly. As Joseph considered these things, God intervened in a powerful way!

An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, telling him, "Do not fear to take Mary as your wife." What a great command — DO NOT FEAR! What a wonderful assurance that God provided! The angel further explained that which is conceived in Mary is from the Holy Spirit and He is to be named Jesus. Jesus — the one who will save His people from their sins. The best example of grace ever!

Again, I wonder what Joseph must have felt following the angel's appearance to him in the dream. Happiness? Joy? Hope? Comfort? We know from Scripture that Joseph followed the command of the angel not to be afraid and did not divorce Mary. Joseph was obedient to God as he followed the angel's command.

As Christians, we are mandated through Scripture to live a bold life without fear as we live in obedience to the Father. As we do this, it reflects the love of Jesus Christ and His grace to the people around us and demonstrates the peace He provides.

Love in Christ!

- Mrs. Lynnette Warren

## Matthew 2:1-6,9-12

*1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*

*3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:*

*6 "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel...."*

*9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

-----

Like many of you, Dale and I have been looking at the sky this year. It started on April 8 with the total solar eclipse. We then were able to see two instances of northern lights from our front yard. We drove on country roads searching for the comet C/2023 A3, but we were unable to locate it. We do not have the technology and telescopes to get the wonderful pictures that some people took. We were in Maryland and used our special glasses for the eclipse; we used our phone on night mode for the northern lights; and we used the directional guide on our car to make sure that we were heading west for the comet. We also depended on the news media to let us know the day, time and direction to look.

I find it amazing to think that the Magi in this passage looked at the sky with no special aids like we have today and journeyed to Jerusalem with nothing but faith and this magnificent star to guide them.

I marvel at the faith of the Magi. They had the faith to make the trip; the faith that this was the star of the King of the Jews; the faith to travel further to Bethlehem; and the faith that the child was indeed the King of the Jews and to worship Him. Then listening to a dream, they returned home by a different route, thus saving Jesus from Herod.

May we have the faith and the wisdom of the Magi to keep our eyes focused on Jesus and to not let the world distract us.

- Mrs. Kim Cain



## **Matthew 2:3-4,7-8,16-18**

***3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.***

-----

I don't know whether you have ever noticed that there are two main characters in the birth narrative of the second chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. There is Herod and there is Jesus. All the rest — wise men, Mary, Joseph and the angels — are very much in the background. In fact Herod is mentioned no fewer than ten times and Jesus (or the child) nine times in only 23 verses.

It is to Herod that the wise men go, to enquire about the birth of the future King of the Jews. It is Herod who summons the chief priests and scribes for advice concerning this birth. It is Herod who asks the Wise Men to return and confirm the birth, after their visit to Bethlehem. It is Herod who later decides to kill all the Bethlehem children under two years of age when the Wise Men did not return. And it is after the death of Herod, that Joseph decides to take Jesus and his mother Mary, back to his homeland and settle in Nazareth.

But who was Herod , and why did he get such a bad press in the Christmas story?

Herod was the client king of Rome – who ruled Palestine between 40 BC and 4 BC. He was succeeded by his son , Herod Antipas, who ruled when Jesus was crucified.

Herod was commonly called the Great for several reasons.

1. He was a great peacemaker in Palestine.
2. He was a great builder of an amphitheater and a harbor which brought prosperity to the region.
3. He was great in regards to his generosity. In times of financial difficulty, he melted down his own gold plates on order to buy corn for his starving people.

Yet, despite his great generosity, he does not get a good press in the Christmas Story.

Unfortunately, he was a very insecure person, and as a consequence, became insanely suspicious of other people who he felt might threaten him. For instance, shortly after being appointed, he completely annihilated the entire Sanhedrin, and later some 300 court officials.

His suspicions caused one of his wives and her mother, his eldest son and two other sons to be killed. And then there is the twist to the story that Herod had planned, to ensure that he was mourned at the time of his death, that a number of people should be killed so the sound of tears would fill the city.

It is amazing that Herod could have felt so threatened by a helpless infant! And yet he did, and he is not alone. Throughout the centuries people have felt threatened by the helpless child, and his followers.

Herod did not succeed in killing Jesus for he was taken to Egypt for protection. Herod's son did not succeed either, for Jesus rose victorious on Easter Day.

King Herod died in 4 BC, Jesus lives forever.

- Rev. Terry Ranson (submitted by Mr. John Moore)

## Luke 1—Zechariah

*18 And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."*

-----

This advent lesson is about Zechariah found in Luke 1. Just who is Zechariah? He was a descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother, and a priest of the order of Abijah. The Abijah were descendants of Eleazar, the son of Aaron. Eleazar was the head of the eighth course of priests in the Temple during the time of David.

He was married to Elizabeth who is also a descendent of Aaron. According to Luke 1:6, both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly and according to Luke 1:7, they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive. They were both very old.

What was Zechariah's job as a priest? What made him special? I wonder if, as a descendant of Aaron, he was selected for priesthood based on his heritage or if he chose it as a career because he was called by God as our minister's are called today. Also, was he paid, and did he have special training, etc.? What was it like to be a priest for both him and his wife?

Think about your lives. What did you do for a living? What made your job special and what training did you need? I think Zechariah had a life journey with duties, responsibilities, and needs like us. He didn't necessarily have to work 8 to 5 so to speak but he had to be there when scheduled and had specific tasks and duties to perform. He faced some of the same issues you and I face regarding housing, food, bills, family, etc.

The scripture describes some of his work duties and responsibilities in Luke 1. We are told that priests were divided into divisions and that each division served in the temple. Also, we are told once when the Abijah were serving, Zechariah was chosen to serve as priest before God. This meant he had special duties to perform, and they were to be performed in the presence of God in the temple. Think about what it means to perform duties in the presence of God? How do you think Zechariah felt for such a great responsibility. As such, when it came time for Zechariah to perform his duties he went into the temple to burn incense and a significant event occurred that would change his life: an angel of the Lord appeared to him! What a surprise!

Have you ever had a great surprise? Something so totally unexpected that it just startled you or perhaps even frightened you? How did you react? When you got back your senses then what did you do?

Let's look further at Zechariah. How many times do you think Zechariah had performed these priestly duties? Think about how many times you have performed the same duties in your different roles in life-roles such as a parent, child, employee or an employer, neighbor, friend, etc. Think about how there are routines that are in each of these roles and how some of these routines we do almost without thinking.

As stated previously, Zechariah was going about the duties of the priest and something significant, important and special happened. An angel appeared to him. How did he react? The scripture says he was very much startled and gripped with fear. I expect he had to collect himself and a first thought might be why an angel had appeared to him.

(continued next page)

What happens next? The angel spoke to him! The angel told him not to be afraid. Perhaps this was easier said than done. What did the angel tell him? He is Gabriel and sent from God. Gabriel told him God knows him and proceeded to give him much news.

From this conversation Zechariah knew the angel knew a lot about him and his wife. He told Zechariah he was married to Elizabeth! He told him he knew about their prayers and that the prayers had been heard. He gave this couple a promise that they would have a son, and his name was to be John. He told him some specifics that would apply to them as parents and to John as well. Read Luke 1:13-17. Then Zechariah asked the question (see Luke 1:18): "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." For the answer, read Luke 1:19-20. Zechariah doubted! Why did he doubt it? What happened because he doubted?

What is the lesson for us from this scripture? Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful servants and faithful in their prayers. They lived righteous lives and observed God's commands. God heard their prayers and blessed them in a powerful way. From this lesson we know that God hears our prayers and answers them.

- Mr. Jim Etheridge

## Luke 1 — Gabriel

*19 The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.”*

-----

The Lord sent his angel Gabriel to earth several times before the birth of Jesus so we would not be completely clueless as the greatest love story of all time unfolded. True, hindsight is 20:20, but Gabriel did tell us — and more than once.

In Luke 1:5-25 Gabriel appeared to a Jewish priest descended from Moses’s brother, Aaron. Gabriel told old Zech, who was understandably gripped with fear, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous — to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

But alas, Zechariah and his wife were very old and well past usual child-bearing years. Understandably, he had his doubts. I love Gabriel’s firm and logical reply: “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.” (Imagine Mr. T’s voice speaking this sentence, in a no nonsense manner.)

Gabriel punished Zech’s unbelief by striking him dumb until Elizabeth gave birth to little John—just as God planned.

In Luke 1:26-38 during the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent Gabriel to Nazareth to have a chat with Mary, a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph. According to scholars, they were both descendants of David. Luke traces Jesus’ lineage back to King David through the Line of Nathan (Mary’s ancestor), while the gospel of Matthew traces it through Solomon, the line of Joseph, his legal father on earth.)

Mary was greatly troubled when Gabriel appeared before her—perhaps in her living room. He said, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of this father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

Shocked about how this could possibly happen to a virgin like herself, Gabriel explained further: “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.” Then he adds firmly, logically, simply, and faithfully: “For no word from God will ever fail.”

Although a bit incredulous I’m sure, Mary understood and accepted her role in the Father’s mighty plan. “I am the Lord’s servant,” she answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then Gabriel flew on home again. Message delivered.

(continued next page)

After a sweet passage in Luke 1 where the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped with joy when Mary came to visit (cousins are indeed, our first best friends), Mary is inspired to compose and sing a beautiful song on the spot. Stop and read it now in Luke 1:26-56, and imagine how amazing some day in heaven when we can ask Mary to sing it for us and hear the melody to the first gospel song that has been lost to the ages!

Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months. Perhaps things were getting uncomfortable at home, with the neighbors gossiping about an unmarried, young, mysteriously pregnant woman.

On the eighth day after John the Baptist's birth at his circumcision, the family asked Zechariah what the child would be named. He still couldn't speak, so he wrote, "His name is John," and immediately "his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God," Luke reports. Folks were awe struck and word got around. The consensus was that the Lord's hand was on this little baby, John. Zechariah prophesized on the spot eloquently, praising the Lord God of Israel for coming to his people and redeeming them. To his son, Zechariah repeated the message of Gabriel: "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel."

And somewhere in heaven the angel Gabriel smiled and said, "I told you so." Because to him, Jesus was Gabriel's clear message.

- Mrs. Nancy Cardwell Webster

22. Sunday, December 22

## **Luke 1 — Elizabeth**

*1 “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”*

-----

I love the way that God weaves Elizabeth's story into His story — all to his glory! She is such an important woman in the story of Advent. God entrusted Elizabeth to be the mother of John the Baptist. Older Elizabeth would also be a comforter to her relative Mary after she learned of the call that God had placed on Mary's life.

Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah were both descendants of Aaron. They were both upright in the sight in the sight of God — observing all of the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. They had no child because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years. But — they were faithful to God's commandments unwavering in their faith. In her years of waiting, wondering, serving and worshipping in faith, Elizabeth may have wondered if God ever saw her or noticed her.

God would fulfill His purpose for Elizabeth! The angel Gabriel spoke to Zechariah as he was serving in the tabernacle announcing that he and Elizabeth would miraculously be blessed with a son — even now when Elizabeth was past child bearing age. God had a vital role for her to play!

Elizabeth's faithfulness was essential to God's plan. She would give birth to John — “the herald of Christ”. She was his mother, nurturer and educator. John would make ready a path for the Lord and make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Elizabeth is a worthy model for our walk of faith. Our age is no barrier to being used by the Almighty God. All powerful God remains faithful and true and Jesus desires us to keep the faith — to put Him first holding onto the truth until He returns.

“I am coming soon” (Revelation 3:11).

- Mrs. Susan Cowles Hudson

## Luke 1 — Mary

*30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High..." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."*

-----

### **Mary's Sacrificial Obedience**

As we enter this season of Advent, a time of waiting and preparation for the coming of Christ, we are invited to reflect on the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her sacrificial obedience to God's will. Mary's response to the angel's message stands as one of the most powerful examples of faith and surrender in all of Scripture.

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary with an unimaginable announcement Mary was likely overwhelmed. She was a young, unmarried woman living in a time and place where such news would have been met with scandal, rejection and immense personal cost. Yet, despite the many uncertainties and challenges that lay ahead, Mary's response was one of quiet, yet courageous surrender.

This simple yet profound declaration reveals Mary's sacrificial obedience. She was not asked to step into a glamorous or easy role, but rather one that would cost her emotionally, socially, and personally. The "yes" she gave to God wasn't a comfortable or easy choice. It meant embracing God's plan at great personal risk. It meant walking a difficult path of uncertainty and, eventually, suffering. Her "yes" was not about personal obedience; it was about her willingness to participate in God's great redemptive plan for the world.

This Advent, as we prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ, we are invited to reflect on Mary's sacrificial obedience. Just as Mary was called to participate in God's plan, we are also called to surrender our lives in obedience to God's will. The Advent season is a time to reflect on what it means to wait for God, to trust in his promises, and to obey His leading even when it is difficult.

Like Mary, we are invited to say, "Let it be to me according to your word." This may mean saying "yes" to God's will in areas of our lives that are uncomfortable, challenging, or uncertain. It may require us to let go of our plans, dreams, and comforts in order to embrace God's greater purposes. Just as Mary's "yes" led to the birth of the Savior, our obedience can bear fruit in ways we cannot even imagine.

### Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for the example of Mary's obedience. Help us to trust in Your plan, even when we do not fully understand it. Give us the courage to say "yes" to Your will, no matter the cost, and the humility to serve You faithfully. During this Advent season, may our hearts be open to Your leading, and may we be willing to participate in the great work You are doing in the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

- Mrs. Cynthia Willets

## Luke 2

*1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.*

-----

### **Unaware Utility: Caesar Augustus' Role in God's Grand Plan**

In Luke 2, we are told that the Roman Emperor himself, Caesar Augustus, ordered that a census would be taken of the entire empire. "In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world." Caesar undoubtedly issued this order for his own political purposes, but as we reflect on this passage, we see that God can and does use anyone, even the most powerful, secular figures, to do His will and fulfill His purposes.

### Reflection

It is doubtful that Caesar Augustus had any knowledge of the prophecies about the birthplace of the coming Messiah. He would not have known that Micah 5 foretold that "a ruler over Israel" would come from the small town of Bethlehem. Indeed, who would have otherwise expected that the Messiah would hail from such an insignificant town? Without Augustus' order, though, Joseph and Mary would not have undertaken that difficult journey, especially in Mary's condition. So without Caesar Augustus' unknowing participation in God's grand plan, there would have been no reason for them to be in Bethlehem for Jesus' birth, as foretold by the ancient prophecy.

This scripture should cause us to consider the possibility of God's moving in our own lives, even though we may be unaware. Do we ever find ourselves feeling powerless or insignificant, or do we wonder how our lives fit into God's plan? Maybe, just like Caesar Augustus, we are unaware participants in God's divine plan, a plan much larger than we can imagine.

### Application

**Trust in God's Sovereignty.** Think about the ways that God may be at work behind the scenes in our life. Even when things seem out of control, we can trust that God has a plan. He is in control, and His plan will be accomplished and His will be done.

**Be open to divine interruptions.** How difficult it must have been for Joseph and Mary to have to journey to Bethlehem. God's plan for us may seem inconvenient or difficult, but sometimes difficulty leads to growth.

**Recognize the big picture.** It may be difficult to see beyond our immediate circumstances. As hard as it may be, we need to make every effort to step back and consider how our lives fit into God's broader plan for His kingdom. As Pastor Marc has preached, each of our stories matter, and if we make ourselves available (and sometimes even if we don't), God will use our lives for His own glory.

### Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your perfect plan. We know that it may unfold in ways that we cannot see or understand. Help us to trust in You and Your plan for our lives, and to be open to the ways You are working in our lives. May we find peace in knowing that even those who seem far removed from You can be instruments of Your will. Grant us the faith to see Your hand at work, and the courage and

(continued next page)



strength to follow wherever You lead. In Jesus' name, Amen.

As we move through this Advent season, we should remember that God is writing His story through every moment, even those that we don't understand. Just as Emperor Caesar Augustus played a part in fulfilling the scripture regarding our Savior's birthplace, we, too, are part of God's perfect plan.

- Mr. Gene Willets

**Luke 2:14**

**14 *“Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”***

-----

I have so many questions. The first question is how long had the angels been practicing their parts? We see all of this play out before us each year in nativity plays and live depictions. We remember fondly Linus using this text to answer Charlie Brown’s question about the true meaning of Christmas. Have you ever pondered that some of these players did not have this just sprung on them? Have you considered that this angel who proclaimed the good news to the shepherds had been practicing it for millenia? We read that the shepherds were afraid, but did the angel have such fear? After all, this is one of the most important messages ever declared. The angel surely did not want to botch this announcement.

And what about the angelic choir? Was the chorus they graced the shepherds with one that they sang normally in praise to the Almighty or was this a special arrangement that made its world premiere in a pasture outside of Bethlehem? If it was a special arrangement, how long had they been aware of their audience? Did they feel slighted that they were simply singing for shepherds or did they believe that the message was so important it did not matter the audience?

Now, you may be asking yourself a question at this point, why is he asking so many questions. Well, first off I hopefully have challenged you to look at the Christmas narrative through a different lens. It is such a familiar tale that sometimes we only see what we’ve always seen and having a new perspective refreshes the narrative for us. Secondly, I pray that seeing the narrative afresh helps us to regain the magnitude of this first Christmas gift. These are not simply words on a page, but God reconciling humanity and the created order with the Creator.

More pointedly though I hope my questions conjure within you courage. The greatest threat to Christianity is neither the perceived threats of the irreligious nor non-Judeo-Christian faiths. The greatest threat to Christianity is for disciples of Bethlehem’s babe doing to this story what some of us will do with our Christmas decorations later this afternoon or week — put them in a box until next year. We will never know this side of glory whether the proclaiming angel was nervous as they shared the good news to the shepherd or not. What we do know is that the angel told the shepherds to fear not, shared the glad tidings, AND told the shepherds how to find Jesus themselves. May we resolve this Christmas Day to go and do likewise. Finally, may our resolution be so firm that we will sing the Almighty’s praises regardless of how insignificant or obscure the audience or location might be, just as the angelic choir did. For then, Beloved, every day will be like Christmas as the miracle of the Christ child is marveled and received by someone new each day such that our common greeting to one and all will become “Happy Christmas!”

- Rev. Marc Sanders



# ADVENT

*THE BIRTH of CHRIST*



**GROVE PARK**  
BAPTIST CHURCH

108 Trail One, Burlington, NC 27215

(336) 227-2910

[www.groveparkchurch.com](http://www.groveparkchurch.com)