

LOVE *came* Down

ADVENT DEVOTIONS 2017

In *Love Came Down* we see how the Heavenly Father spared nothing—not even His own Son—to work out our salvation. Though we had rebelled in our sins and spurned God and His Commandments, He chose us—not for *exclusion*, but *redemption*. The Father's love sought us out in our perilous condition and, in His infinite mercy, bridged the divide to our isolation through Jesus—the one Mediator between God and Man.

“Jesus came to be in our lives, a part of our lives, one of us. He came to be our Savior, and that is not a job someone can do by standing safely at a distance. Instead, He embraced our human nature—He was born, He grew, He lived, worked, and suffered, He died. And then He rose from the dead,” writes author Dr. Kari Vo.

The story of our salvation is a hard-fought victory. What began in a humble manger stall in Bethlehem on Christmas morn reached its zenith when Jesus—child of Mary, Son of God—was crucified, died, and rose from the dead three days later. This is what God did for us; this is what happened when *love came down*.



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LOOK! LOOK!

January 6, 2018

TEXT: (The Lord said) "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? ..." (Isaiah 43:19a)

Have you ever been to the beach or a public swimming pool? Children are everywhere, jumping into the water, diving, doing somersaults. And constantly you hear, "Look at me, Mommy, Daddy! I'm doing something new! Watch me do it!"

We may smile at their urgency, but God, too, says the same thing to us: "Look, listen! I am doing a new thing! Pay attention, it's important!" Because the new thing here is what He is doing for us in Jesus Christ our Savior, and He is doing it in front of all nations.

If you have studied other religions or mythology, think back on what you learned. There are plenty of stories of wandering gods who come to earth for a while and bless or punish before they leave again. But the true God does not come in disguise, for a short time—He comes as a real human being, a baby born to a young mother. He does not stay only for a short while; He spends His life with us. And He does not leave us—He promises to remain with us forever, God-with-us.

Think again. Plenty of worshippers have died for their gods, even as human sacrifices. But where was there ever a god like ours, the God who laid down His own life for those who love Him? More than that, He died even for His enemies! What god does that sort of thing—to make Himself a sacrifice? Only the true God. Only Jesus.

Think once more. Death is the enemy of the human race—an enemy no one can fight or avoid forever. But God has done a new thing—He has raised Jesus Christ from the dead, never to die again. What other god has done anything like that in all the stories and fables? But wait, there's more. What god has ever promised to share everlasting life with everyone who trusts in Him? Only the true God. Only Jesus.

Look, look indeed! God is doing a new thing. God is working our salvation in Jesus in the sight of all nations.

THE PRAYER: Father, thank You for the wonders You have done to save us in Your Son Jesus! Please let people around the world know Him and trust in Him. Amen.

LOVE CAME DOWN

Advent is the story of how Love came down from heaven to earth—how God Himself became a tiny human baby for the sake of a world that didn't recognize Him when He came. This is an astounding story; no other religion has anything like it. And that is no surprise—no human imagination could come up with something so unexpected and yet so wonderful. That God would humble Himself so for our sake—that He would take on human flesh and blood—that He would ultimately lay down His own life on a cross, and then rise again, so that we might share His eternal life—who could make this story up?

And yet, for most of us, the story is so familiar we have trouble hearing it anymore. So let's look at it anew. During the next few weeks, we'll look at the story of how Love came down to earth from a variety of perspectives. Some will be familiar. Some may surprise you. But in all of them we will see God working to prepare the way for Jesus, His Son, to come to us—and to lead us home to Him.

START AT THE START

December 3, 2017

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

“Begin at the beginning,” says the king in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, “and go on till you come to the end; then stop.” The Gospel writer Matthew follows this advice, starting his story with Jesus’ ancestors. This week we’ll look at several of them.

Top of the heap are the two Matthew mentions in the first verse: David and Abraham. David was the shepherd boy God made into a great king of Israel; Abraham was the childless old man God transformed into the ancestor of all Israel. Neither were much to look at in the beginning; what mattered was what God did with them.

And that’s what matters with us, too, isn’t it? We are not much to look at, most of us. But we are the people God has chosen to be His own through faith in Jesus Christ. We are the ones He has given new life to, in Baptism. And He is even now transforming us into the people of God He decided to make us way back before the world began.

There’s another reason David and Abraham belong here, at the head of Jesus’ genealogy. They both received the same promise from God—that God’s own Son would be born as a human baby into their family line.

Both Abraham and David held on to God’s promise with all their might. They understood that this was the best news God could give them—that a Savior was coming who would rescue the whole world from the power of evil and death. They didn’t have much detail about it yet. But they trusted God to keep that promise, and they looked forward to it and taught their families to wait for the promise to be kept.

Now we rejoice because that promise has been fulfilled. Jesus our Savior has come, born as a baby in Bethlehem! Thanks be to God!

THE PRAYER: Dear Father, thank You for keeping Your promise to Abraham and David, and sending Jesus into the world to be our Savior. Amen.

JUST LIKE US

January 5, 2018

TEXT: And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon Him. (Luke 2:40)

Luke ends the story of Jesus’ birth with the verse above. At first glance it isn’t very exciting. Jesus grew like any child grows, and became stronger. He learned to walk, learned to talk, learned to feed Himself, and dress Himself. He played with His parents and made friends with the neighbors. He began to learn His letters and how to count.

But at second glance, this is wonderful! Because this is God Himself, going through the growing up stages that all of us have been through. He didn’t take the easy way. He wasn’t born knowing how to read or how to tie His sandals. He grew and learned like we do, sharing our ordinary lives. (If you have a child handy, blow their minds with this idea: at one point Jesus must have had homework.)

Jesus came to be in our lives, a part of our lives, one of us. He came to be our Savior, and that is not a job someone can do by standing safely at a distance. Instead, He embraced our human nature—He was born, He grew, He lived, worked, and suffered, He died. And then He rose from the dead.

Truly we can never say to God “You don’t understand.” Jesus has joined us to Himself, and He has redeemed us. Through the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith we are now united with Him as His own people, His own family. And He shares His gift of everlasting life with us.

Luke writes, “And the favor (also translated grace) of God was upon Him.” That same grace is upon us, too, who trust in Jesus. Thank you, Lord.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for becoming a human being and taking us to be Your own. You are our Savior, and we rejoice. Amen.

SPEAKING ABOUT JESUS

January 4, 2018

TEXT: And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years . . . She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36a, 37b-38)

I love the character of Anna. She reminds me of so many of my friends—older women who serve God quietly, praying and worshipping, but not making a big deal out of it because that's just their daily life. And yet, when she sees baby Jesus for the first time, look what she does—she begins “to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem”!

You see, Anna knows these people. She talks with them; she prays with them; she sees them when they come to the temple. Together they have talked about God's promise to send a Savior. They are waiting for Jesus.

And on this day, when the baby Jesus first comes to the temple, Anna is overjoyed. She rushes to tell her friends the good news—that God has kept His promise and sent Jerusalem—and the whole world—a Savior.

And by now this good news has spread all over the world, even to you, since you believe in Jesus. Think of what God has done for you—called you out of darkness, forgiven all your sins, rescued you from the power of the devil, promised you eternal life instead of death. All these good things are yours in Jesus our Redeemer.

And you, too, have friends, family, and neighbors who need these same blessings. In this new year, ask the Lord to give you the opportunity and the ability to tell them the good news about Jesus.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, You have blessed me so much in Your love. Please bring (name of friend or relative) to faith in You. Amen.

A FAMILY MESS

December 4, 2017

TEXT: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar . . . (Matthew 1:2-3a)

Genesis 38 tells the story of Judah and Tamar. It is a sordid story—the kind of thing you'd expect to find on a soap opera, not in the family of Christ.

Judah's oldest son got married to a girl named Tamar, but this didn't last long. “Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death” (Genesis 38:7).

Someone had to provide for the widow and give her children to carry on her dead husband's name. So Judah married off Tamar to his second son according to the local custom. But that went wrong too. Her new husband treated her shamefully and broke faith with her—and the Lord killed him also.

Now what? There was one son left. But Judah was terrified he would die, too. So Judah made excuses to keep Tamar waiting—widowed, childless, and alone, with no future to look forward to.

Tamar was no fool. When she realized that Judah was happy to forget her, she tricked Judah himself into fathering twin boys on her. One of these, Perez, became the ancestor of Jesus.

What a mess! And yet you probably know a family as dysfunctional as this one. You may even live in a family that carries this much pain—a family where fear and betrayal and shame and secrets are always in the background, reaching out into the future and creating even more grief.

But Jesus has come to us in the guilt, in the shame, in the messiness of our lives and relationships. He knows them well, because they are the world He was born into. When God became man, He made our world His world, our families His family. And through His birth, suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus reaches out to make us—everyone who believes in Him—His own forever.

THE PRAYER: Thank You, Lord, for loving me and making me a part of Your own family. Amen.

AN UNEQUAL MATCH

December 5, 2017

TEXT: And Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab ... (Matthew 1:5a)

These few words in the genealogy of Jesus hide the story of a remarkable marriage. You may remember Rahab. She was a prostitute in Jericho at the time when the Israelites were about to start conquering the land.

Now Rahab had heard of how God saved Israel from Egypt, and she believed in the Lord. So when Joshua sent spies into her city, she protected them by hiding them on the roof of her house. She sent them away safely, and they in turn protected her and all her family on the day when Jericho fell.

After that, what? We don't know. She fades into obscurity—a prostitute, a Canaanite—and an ancestor of Jesus. Wait, what?

Somehow, some way, Rahab wound up as daughter-in-law to Nahshon, “the prince of the sons of Judah” (1 Chronicles 2:10b). Her husband was Salmon, and the family was very distinguished. I would love to know how a leader of Judah made a match with a woman of her background!

But even that match, unequal as it was, is nothing compared to the match God has made with us. God sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem all of us. The Bible even calls us the people of God, His “bride”—the ones He laid down His own life for, to save us and make us His own.

Now it makes sense for Jesus to have such a remarkable marriage in His ancestry. He, too, has sought us out to make an unequal, wonderful match.

We were once outsiders, nobodies, carrying the burden of shame and sin. But the Lord of heaven and earth looked at us, loved us, and came down to earth to make us His own people. By His death and resurrection He has cleansed us from all the shame and evil that stained us before. In their place, He gives us forgiveness, joy, holiness, everlasting life—and best of all, Himself.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank You for loving us and seeking us out to be Your own. Amen.

HOLDING JESUS

January 3, 2018

TEXT: Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the Law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God ...” (Luke 2:25-28a)

Simeon was probably reaching the end of a long life, but he had one wish left—to see the promised Messiah before he died. And God promised he would. How he must have treasured that promise.

On the right day, the Holy Spirit sent him to the temple, where a poor young family was coming to worship and sacrifice. They didn't look like anyone important. But Simeon recognized the baby—the Messiah, Jesus, his Savior—and took Him up in his arms, praising God.

Simeon was holding God incarnate in his arms. It was enough—the goal, the joy of a lifetime. And Simeon sang out his joy in the words we sing today as the Nunc Dimittis.

There are times I wish that I, too, could hold Jesus in my arms. It is hard sometimes to love a God who is invisible, whose voice we usually don't hear with our ears, whose face we have never seen. Yet the Holy Spirit keeps us faithful and faith-filled in spite of this.

Maybe that is one reason why God gave us the Lord's Supper—so that we can touch, handle, and even taste Him in His gifts. God knows that we are like Simeon. We need to see the Lord's Christ. We need to touch, to taste. And so God gives not just our spirits but our bodies, too, a share in His salvation. All of us, body and soul, was redeemed by Christ when He died for us and rose again. And someday Job's words will come true for us also:

“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.” (Job 19:25-27a)

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, I belong to You, both body and soul. Strengthen my faith and keep me with You forever. Amen.

CHILDREN AND THE LORD

January 2, 2018

TEXT: And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." (Luke 2:22-24)

When Jesus was 40 days old, Mary and Joseph took Him to the temple to present Him to God and to offer a sacrifice as Moses' law commanded. This was the second thing any good Jewish parent did for a firstborn son who would grow up in the love of the Lord. Later on would come teaching about right and wrong, learning the stories of God's salvation, and so on. But Mary and Joseph had a good start raising Jesus already, before He was six weeks old.

You may have had the experience of raising children yourself, or of caring for them as a relative, godparent, or friend of the family. You know that it is not easy. We worry about our children. We do the best we can to prepare them for the difficult, broken world we live in. We pray, we teach them about God, and we love them. And we hope they will remain in the faith.

Sometimes that happens, and we rejoice. But sometimes we suffer heartbreak when the children we love so dearly go far away from the Lord, even renouncing their Baptism. God knows that heartbreak too. As much as we love them, He loves them even more.

This is our comfort. We love our prodigal children, and we know that God has planted seeds of faith in their hearts. Through Baptism, teaching, storytelling, prayer, and example, we have tried to lead them to Christ. Though they may be far from Him now, God is still calling them—calling them home to their Savior Jesus, who lived, died, and rose again, for their sake.

Meanwhile, we grieve. Take comfort in knowing that the God who came into this world "to seek and to save the lost" is still seeking your lost one also. (See Luke 19:10.) Both you and the one you love are dear to Him. Keep praying, waiting, and hoping.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, have mercy on everyone who has wandered away from You, and bring them safely home to You in Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

IF YOU HAVE THE LORD, YOU HAVE EVERYTHING

December 6, 2017

TEXT: ... and Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king. ... (Matthew 1:5b-6a)

Ruth is another person you would not expect to show up in the family tree of Jesus. She was a foreigner; a woman from Moab—a poor immigrant to Bethlehem who worked hard in the fields to support her mother-in-law. Her story is told in the Book of Ruth.

Ruth was a believer in the Lord, the God of Israel. She learned to know Him during her first marriage to an Israelite man who died young. After his death, Ruth clung to the Lord and to what family she had left, and she left her home country to live in Israel. Ruth had almost nothing at that point. But God watched over her and gave her everything—a home, a husband and family, and an honored place among the ancestors of Jesus.

And what of you? I suspect you, like so many people, can think of a time when you felt you had almost nothing. It might have been after a job loss, foreclosure, or divorce—a time when you lost so many of the physical things you depend on. Or it might have been more of an emotional or social situation, where you had what you needed physically, but you lost friends, family, love, reputation, or peace.

Times like these force us to our knees, force us to call out to the Lord, saying, "Lord, save us!" We know we cannot help ourselves. But He can help us, and He will. The God who laid aside glory, honor, and power to become a helpless human baby for our sakes—He will help us quickly. We are never out of His heart and mind.

Jesus loves us deeply, and He has become our Savior. It is for us that He suffered, died, and rose from the dead. He is our life, our hope, and our peace. When we have the Lord, we have everything.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, help us when we are in distress. Teach us to lean on You and find in You everything we need. Amen.

WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN

December 7, 2017

TEXT: And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child ... (Luke 1:6-7a)

The story of Jesus' birth opens with His mother's relatives, Zechariah the priest, and his wife, Elizabeth. Although both of them had lived exemplary lives, they had never been blessed with children, and this was a constant grief and pain for them. They prayed and prayed for years, but nothing happened. And now that they were both old, they saw no chance of a baby.

This kind of heartbreak is very common. Doctors tell us that at least one couple in ten will have trouble when they try to have children. Their sadness is made worse by the many, many people who wrongly assume that God is punishing them, and even ask them outright what they have done to deserve infertility. Elizabeth herself spoke of it as "my reproach among the people" (Luke 1:25b).

When bad things happen to us—infertility, job loss, the death of a loved one, whatever—we, too, may blame ourselves. We may wonder what we did wrong, or we may think that God has cursed us. But that's not right.

God sent Jesus, His own Son, to be our Savior. Through His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, Jesus has taken away all guilt and all shame from us. We are not under God's curse. We are under His blessing. We belong to His family as God's own dear children, because Jesus, who loves us, has made it so.

We may still have many crosses to bear in this world, but none of them is because God hates us or is holding our sin against us. Christ has already borne the curse for us. Now He offers us His own love, joy, and eternal life.

THE PRAYER: Dear Father, You know all our suffering. Have mercy on us and help us to keep trusting You, especially when it's hard. Amen.

THE LAW FULFILLED

January 1, 2018

TEXT: And at the end of eight days, when He was circumcised, He was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. (Luke 2:21)

This is the day some call the "Feast of the Circumcision," and others "the Name of Jesus." It marks the first time Jesus officially came under the authority of the Law of Moses, the set of rules God gave to Israel about how to live. All of these rules, from greatest to least, were designed to teach the people about God's holiness and impress on them the need for them to be holy also.

But anyone who has ever tried to keep the Ten Commandments knows how impossible that is. Read through them! "Do not murder;" okay, that seems like an easy one. But then Jesus comes and explains to us (Matthew 5) that this includes any kind of harm or insult that we throw at someone else, even just in our thoughts. Oops! "Do not bear false witness." Well, I can avoid false testimony in court—mainly because I've never had to testify in my life—but avoid deceiving anyone in any way ever? I'm clearly in trouble.

When I look into the Law I don't see a manual for how to get to heaven; I see a very clear reflection of every flaw, vice, sin, and mess-up I have ever committed. And I can't erase them or make up for them. Who will help me? "Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:25a). Jesus was born into this world to take my place under the Law—a Law too heavy for me to carry, but not for Him.

From birth forward, Jesus did fulfill that Law—and He did it perfectly. How incredible! But that wasn't all. Then He willingly chose to take on Himself the penalty due to lawbreakers—pain, suffering, and death. He paid our debt to the Law. By doing that, He set us free. We owe nothing anymore. And when Jesus rose from the dead, He promised to share His own everlasting life with all of us who trust in Him. That's how much He loves us. Thanks be to God!

THE PRAYER: Thank You, Lord Jesus, for paying my debt and setting me free from the burden of breaking God's Law. Let Your Holy Spirit live in me. Amen.

REMEMBER

December 31, 2017

TEXT: But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. (Luke 2:19)

For many children, the story of their birth is their favorite bedtime story. They want to hear what happened—where they were born, who was present, how their parents cared for them in the earliest days. They may have the story memorized, but they want to hear it once again.

If Jesus felt this way, His mother was well prepared to tell the story. Luke says, “Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” Mary’s next few years would be filled with the mundane challenges of everyday life: feeding a baby, changing diapers, cooking dinner, cleaning house. It was a far cry from angels and miracles in a stable.

But Mary remembered. God’s work in the past helped to strengthen her faith. It reminded her that her baby playing on the floor was in fact the Son of God, the Savior of the world. It reminded her that the boy doing chores that day would have much greater work to do as the Savior of the world. No doubt the memories got her through the bad days—the escape to Egypt, the move back to Nazareth, the eventual death of her husband, probably some time in Jesus’ teens or young adulthood.

Mary remembered what God had done—and we should remember, too. I remember that God came to me when I was a young child in a difficult and dangerous time. Although I was nobody important, God loved me and chose me to be His own. He gave His own Son Jesus to be my Savior, to suffer and to die on the cross for me. And He raised Jesus from the dead to be our Lord who gives everlasting life to everyone who belongs to Him. God made me His through Baptism, and has stayed with me even through the darkest times in my life. I know that He is faithful and will never leave me.

What has God done for you? Remember.

THE PRAYER: Thank You, Lord, for all that You have done for me. Keep me close to You always, trusting in You. Amen.

THE WORD OF GOD

December 8, 2017

TEXT: And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”

And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” (Luke 1:18-20)

I always feel sorry for Zechariah. Being mute for nine months is no mild punishment for a priest! The poor man had to carry out his responsibilities at the temple in Jerusalem without any voice at all—no prayers, no singing, no teaching, not even able to bless the people. And when he got home, he had to explain the whole thing to Elizabeth—without speaking. That must have been interesting. Zechariah refused to believe the angel’s words, and so his own words were taken away.

But after John was born, on the day of his circumcision, God was merciful to Zechariah and restored his speech. This time Zechariah knew what to do! He immediately used his words to glorify God—and not for restoring his speech, not even for giving him the baby they had longed for. No, he praised Him for what hardly anybody realized was happening right that minute—that God was sending Jesus into the world:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old.” (Luke 1:68-70)

God was sending His own Son, His own Word, into the world to be our Savior. Jesus is called the Word of God for good reason—He is the One who makes God known to us, who embodies God among us, acting to save us. How do we know a man’s thoughts? He communicates them to us through words. How do we know God’s thoughts toward us? He has made them known through Jesus, His Word.

Because Jesus is truly man, we can understand Him. Because He is truly God, we know the Father’s heart toward us.

THE PRAYER: O Word of God, thank You for coming to us and making Your home among us. Amen.

HOW?

December 9, 2017

TEXT: And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you . . .” (Luke 1:34-35a)

It was a very unexpected visit. Not only did the angel drop in suddenly, but he came with a message the Bible normally reserves for childless women married for years, like Sarah or Hannah: “You will conceive in your womb and bear a Son” (Luke 1:31a). That wasn’t what Mary expected to hear!

So she questioned it—not disbelieving, but rather wanting to know how this was going to work out, given that she was a virgin. Should she get married suddenly, or what? And the angel respected that and answered her—Yes, we are talking about a miracle here. The Spirit of God will make it happen. And the baby will be holy, the Son of God.

How different this is from Zechariah’s meeting with the same angel! He also asked the question “How?” How could he be sure it would really happen since he and his wife were too old to have children? But his “how” was a how of doubt; he just couldn’t wrap his mind around the idea. And the angel, with complete justice, pointed out that hey, you’re talking to an angel right this minute, and not just any angel—one that stands in the presence of God. Isn’t that enough proof for you? And promptly gave him nine months of silence to think about the error of his ways.

It is hard to go on believing without seeing, day after day after day. And yet God does keep His promises at the proper time. The Lord works His wonders according to His promise, whether we trust like Mary or doubt like Zechariah. Our doubts may lead to trouble for us, but they will never prevent God from keeping His promises of salvation.

How? God says: “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you” (Isaiah 35:4b). He comes as a newborn baby, lying in a manger. He comes as a man, walking to suffering and death in Jerusalem. He comes as the risen Christ who promises to be with us always.

THE PRAYER: Dear Father, thank You for working out salvation for us in spite of our fears and doubts. Help me to trust in You with all my heart. Amen.

GUIDANCE

December 30, 2017

TEXT: But when he (Joseph) heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. (Matthew 2:22)

This is the time of year when we think about change—changes we want to make in our lives and changes that may come to our lives in the new year, whether we like it or not. And we may have decisions to make—choices about work or school, choices that affect our finances or our health. As we struggle to make plans, we often wonder: Is this what I’m supposed to be doing? What does God want for me and my family?

We can see Joseph dealing with these questions too. First, he had to decide what to do about a fiancée who was carrying a child not his own. God cleared that question up by sending him an angel in a dream.

Then census time came, and Joseph and Mary had to decide whether she should travel during her last month of pregnancy. That must have been a tough one! And yet God seems to have left them to decide based on nothing more than their own reasoning and the guidance of the Bible (that passage in Micah 5 about the Messiah being born in Bethlehem may have come to mind).

God sent an angel again to guide Joseph when Jesus’ life was in danger from an evil king. But when it came time to return home from Egypt, Joseph had to figure out where to take his young family. Was it back to Bethlehem or somewhere else? Here again, Joseph relied on human wisdom which God later confirmed in a dream.

It would be nice if God sent us all an angel when we faced difficult decisions. However, most of the time He leaves us to make choices based on careful thought and prayer, under the guidance of the Bible. If you are facing a major decision right now, don’t be afraid! Ask the Lord to guide you, and put your trust in Him. If God the Father was willing to guide His own Son’s caregivers this way, He will also guide you when you ask.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, give me wisdom and guide me to the choices You want me to make. Amen.

AN IMMIGRANT GOD

December 29, 2017

TEXT: And he (Joseph) rose and took the child and His mother by night and departed to Egypt (Matthew 2:14)

Joseph wasted no time. As soon as he awoke from his dream, he got the family packed up and headed out of town, to safety—even though it meant living as refugees in Egypt.

That must have been a hard time for both Mary and Joseph. Imagine living in a strange country where you do not speak the language and have no family or friends to help you. You have a small child depending on you, so you must find a place to stay and work, so you can afford to feed and clothe everyone. No doubt the gifts of the magi helped the young family as they struggled to stay afloat in Egypt.

The toddler Jesus would not have understood His parents' struggle. Most likely He was not even aware of it until He was much older, and they could tell Him about it. But He was the one who made it all worthwhile as they loved Him and watched Him grow in safety. Like any immigrant parents, they were glad to trade their own discomfort for His better, safer life.

And by doing this, they provided a little picture of what God does for you and me. God has adopted us as His children through Baptism. He loves and watches over us as a father protects his child. And that love includes suffering for us. Jesus willingly left heaven for the hardships and suffering of life on earth. He became a human being among people who mostly did not welcome Him, or even listen. He bore suffering for our sake, always looking to our welfare, even when it meant dying for us on a cross! And He rose from the dead and shares that life with us who trust in Him so that we may become citizens of heaven.

THE PRAYER: Lord, thank You for coming to us even when it meant so much suffering, and for making us Your own people. Amen.

AN EXTRA BOOST

December 10, 2017

TEXT: (Gabriel said) "And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1:36-37)

Have you ever taken a little child to wash his hands or get a drink of water from the drinking fountain? If so, you've probably had to boost him up. Toddlers are too small to reach it on their own. But a boost from an adult knee or a lift under the armpits, and they're good to go.

I rather think this is what God was doing with Mary when the angel told her about Elizabeth's pregnancy. Mary was handling the conversation well; she did not reject what the angel told her, and all she asked was how this baby would happen. But God was asking her to believe one of the greatest miracles in human history. And so, even though she didn't ask, He gave her a little boost—He told her about Elizabeth's pregnancy, which was a fact she could go and see for herself, and He also provided her with a safe place to stay while she adjusted to the incredible news of her own pregnancy.

See how kind God is! Mary didn't ask for a sign, like Zechariah did, but God gave her one anyway. Mary didn't ask for protection against her parents' anger or Joseph's grief. But God provided anyway. He gave her that extra boost that made an impossible situation just a bit easier.

When God calls us to serve or to suffer in ways that are too much for us, we can ask Him to give us a boost in our faith as well. The father of a troubled child did this when he said to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24b) Ask the Holy Spirit to help you. Read God's Word, the Bible—that is a time-tested place where people find help in time of trouble. Come to the Lord's Supper. And remember your Savior loves you dearly and has said to you that He will never leave you nor forsake you (see Hebrews 13:5).

THE PRAYER: Lord Holy Spirit, help me when my faith is weak and the challenges are great. Strengthen me in You. Amen.

SERVING OTHERS

December 11, 2017

TEXT: And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:38)

Mary says “Yes” to the angel in a beautiful way: “I am the servant of the Lord.” She surrenders to God’s will for her life—Let God do whatever He wants to do; it’s okay with me.

Our culture today talks a lot about “service” and “servant leadership.” They’ve become popular buzzwords. But for all that, we aren’t really that good about taking on the role of a servant. Perhaps we are too used to thinking in terms of our own rights. To willingly lay our rights aside to obey someone else, even God—well, that doesn’t feel right to a lot of people.

But that’s what God was asking Mary to do. To lay aside her dreams for her marriage, which would now be turned upside down. To lay aside her plans for the next 20 years or so and devote herself to raising a child—one that would definitely have special needs and challenges she couldn’t even begin to predict. To lay aside control over her own body—the most intimate freedom anyone has.

And in a single sentence, Mary did it. Why? For love. For love of the Lord who had made her, sustained her, and was about to redeem her and all people. Mary was overjoyed to have the chance to serve this God she loved so much.

And her Son Jesus echoed that love but a thousand times greater when He, too, laid aside hopes and dreams and control of His own body in order to rescue all of us from the power of sin and death. Paul described how Jesus “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:7-8). Through His death and resurrection, Jesus served all of us in the lowliest and most wonderful way. And now He offers us, too, the chance to serve others just as He has served—in love.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, I am Your servant. Teach me to serve You with joy and to serve others with Your love. Amen.

SUFFERING AT CHRISTMAS

December 28, 2017

TEXT: Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. (Matthew 2:16)

Today is Childermas, the day the church remembers the babies in Bethlehem that Herod murdered. This is the dark side of Christmas, the part that never gets onto Christmas cards and is rarely mentioned during our celebrations. And yet, maybe it should be. Because what happened to those babies points to something that was a part of Jesus’ life on earth from the very beginning, something that we experience also: the power of sin, death, and the devil.

Christmas is supposed to be a time of joy, or so says the world, but we all know that it is also a time of grief for many people. Those mothers and fathers in Bethlehem never forgot their babies’ deaths; every time that season of the year came round again, they would have remembered. We, too, remember: the first Christmas without dad, the fifth since the divorce, the first since the cancer diagnosis. We look around at family gatherings for people who are no longer there. And every time we remember, we hurt again.

The babies of Bethlehem did not escape suffering. Jesus Himself did not escape it. But Jesus redeemed it, both for them and for us. Jesus took His own experience of betrayal, suffering, and death, and turned it into the greatest triumph the world has ever known. By His suffering He freed us from the power of sin, and by His resurrection He broke the power of death over everyone who believes in Him.

Now there is hope for us, and for the people we love. Now we know that death is not the end, and God’s love has triumphed over the worst the devil can do. We still suffer; we still grieve, but because we belong to Jesus, we know that we, too, will share in His victory. Death will not have the last word. Jesus will.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank You for redeeming us and those we love; draw us close to You in faith and trust. Amen.

TROUBLED

December 27, 2017

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

Are you troubled? Is there something, or someone, who is disturbing your peace? Are you in a situation where you just can't stop worrying, no matter what you do?

The people of Jerusalem were in that situation when the magi showed up looking for Jesus. They knew that King Herod was both paranoid and violent. He constantly worried about someone taking away his throne. He even killed his own wife and children for that reason. This was not a man the people of Jerusalem wanted to see upset. Who knew what he would do next?

And so they worried and waited. What else could they do?

Another king, Jesus' ancestor David, had the answer:

For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from Him comes my salvation.
He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.

Trust in Him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before Him;
God is a refuge for us. (Psalm 62:1-2, 8)

You may be living at someone else's mercy—under the power of a family member, boss, neighbor, or politician. And if that person is evil or even just unstable, it is reasonable to be afraid. Yet God invites us to lean on Him when we are troubled. We find our hope in the Prince of Peace, Jesus of Bethlehem. He is our refuge, for He has come to be our Savior. And all the Herods in the world can't take us out of His care.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, keep us close to You in times of trouble, and help us. Amen.

BLESSED

December 12, 2017

TEXT: (Mary said) "... For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name." (Luke 1:48b-49)

"Blessed" is a trendy word these days. People use it on Twitter and Facebook. Today's posts include people feeling "blessed" for a sports win, a college acceptance, and a new car. The word is so overused that people are beginning to use it sarcastically, typing it after describing some minor disaster like failing a test.

But the serious posts show what most people think being "blessed" is—it means having money, getting a job offer, falling in love, or recovering from sickness. Simple. Or is it?

Mary calls herself blessed—more than that, she says that all generations will say that about her. And yet look at her circumstances! Pregnant before marriage; at risk of losing her fiancé; soon to be a teen mother; young and female in a culture that valued men and older people. And as the years passed, she could add to that list: being a refugee in Egypt; hard work and a large family; probably losing her husband early; and seeing her own son put to death.

What could be blessed about that?

Mary says it: "He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name." What made her blessed is what God Himself had done for her—giving her Jesus, the Savior of the world.

And that is what makes us blessed, too, no matter what circumstances we are in. We have Jesus. We have our Savior, God's own Son, who was born for us, who died for us, who rose again for us. He has set us free from the power of evil and given us new life that will last forever. See how much He loves us!

THE PRAYER: Father, thank You for blessing us with Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

A BREATHING SPACE

December 13, 2017

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

Three months of peace. God gave Mary a heavenly gift when He encouraged her to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was also with child. For three months she would not have to deal with the reactions of her family and Joseph. Instead, she would be with two people who believed her story absolutely—two people who rejoiced with her instead of doubting or fearing or even getting angry.

Those three months would allow Mary to get through the worst discomfort of early pregnancy—the morning sickness, the hormone shifts, and the sudden emotional storms. Elizabeth would be able to give her help and good advice. In turn, Mary could do the practical work of cooking, cleaning, and shopping that Elizabeth would be finding difficult as she reached the end of her own pregnancy. The two could help each other in love.

Best of all, those three months would allow Mary to come to terms with the amazing thing God was doing through her. She would have time to think over all the wonderful promises the angel made. She would think back over everything she had learned about God's promised Messiah, and how He would save His people. Mary would gather strength from all this so that when the time came, she could go back and face her parents and Joseph, trusting God to work everything out.

God offers us times of peace and comfort as well. Sometimes they may be short—no more than a few minutes here or there during a work break or a child's nap. But whenever they come, they are a gift from the God who loves us enough to come into the world through the body of a tired pregnant woman who needed peace.

As the Prince of Peace, Jesus knows our needs and provides for them, now and forever. He has earned true peace for us through His death and resurrection. When we are in need, we can ask Him for rest. He will help us.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, give us the peace and rest You see we need so much. Amen.

TRUTH AND LIES

December 26, 2017

TEXT: And he (Herod) sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him." (Matthew 2:8)

How could anyone believe him? That's the question that strikes me every time I read the story of Herod and the wise men. "Let me know where you find Him, so I can go and worship Him, too." Only a fool would think that's what Herod really wanted to do. No king likes a threat to the throne, and Herod's murderous reputation was well-known.

I doubt the magi were taken in. They are called wise men, after all. But they were smart enough to keep their mouths shut and get on the road to Bethlehem, as quickly as they could.

And there they found—not lies, but truth. They found the truth of God, living in a little house with His mother and stepfather; no more than two years old, talking and playing as all children do. Here was no great powerful king concerned about His throne! This king was humble, innocent, and as weak as any toddler is. He told no lies. He probably didn't have enough language yet to say much of anything! But His very presence there in that little house, sitting in His mother's lap or playing with the cooking pots, gave one message loud and clear—God had come to His people to be their Savior, God-with-us—Immanuel. And that's no lie.

THE PRAYER: Dear Father, thank You for sending us Your Son Jesus—our Way, our Truth, and our Life. Amen.

A PLACE FOR JESUS

December 25, 2017

TEXT: And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

New parents spend pretty much every waking moment thinking about the place where the baby is. Is he safe? Who's holding him right now? Could he roll off that bed if I look away for a moment? Is the temperature too hot in this room? And who hasn't had the nightmare about accidentally leaving a baby at the grocery store!

We want babies to be in a safe place—all babies, our own or someone else's. But Jesus had none of that. He didn't even have a room in the inn with the other travelers (who no doubt would have been disturbed by His wails).

What He did have was an attentive mother who loved Him. She put Him in the manger to sleep—safely off the ground where He might take a chill or an animal might step on Him. No doubt she and Joseph spent the night as close as possible to that manger, guarding it with their bodies. That was Jesus' safe place.

When Jesus grew to manhood, He returned the favor—not just for Mary and Joseph, but for the entire human race. The night before His death, Jesus said to those who followed Him, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to Myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:1-3).

Jesus is our safe place. He is the One who laid down His life for us and took it up again, that He might be our Savior and our Refuge forever. He will never let go of us or forsake us, and He promises that everyone who believes in Him will be with Him forever.

That being the case, isn't this a great time to make room for Jesus in your own heart?

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, stay with me and never leave me. Keep me always with You, now and in eternity. Amen.

REAL TRUTH

December 14, 2017

TEXT: In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. (Luke 2:1-3)

Notice how carefully Luke pins down the time of the birth of Jesus. It happened during the days of the census—the first census (Luke clarifies), the one when Quirinius was governor. Luke wants us to know for certain that Jesus' birth is an actual historical event, something that really happened, in a place where you can go and visit if you choose.

Why is Luke so detailed about all this? Who really cares which census it was, or who was governor or even emperor at the time? Can't we just get right to the story?

Luke says no. He says that “it seemed good to me, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:3-4).

Certainty is hard to come by today. We have “fake news” and “alternative facts” on TV and on the internet. People twist one another's words and even alter photographs to show things that didn't really happen. Or, if they did happen, they lie outright, changing the details to suit themselves.

But Luke won't play that game. Jesus' birth really happened, at this time, in this place. Our Christian faith is built on historical events, not on airy philosophies and the ideas of human thinkers, however wise they may be. God has come into the real world, the world of dates and times and facts.

God has come into our world, a world desperately in need of truth. We need a real God, one who speaks and commands and judges and saves. We need a real Savior, one who lays down His own human life to rescue the real, broken people who trust in Him, and then rises to real, everlasting life again forever. We need a real Holy Spirit, one who finds us even in the darkness and brings us into the true, glorious light of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God, that's exactly what we have—a real hope, a real joy, a real baby lying in a manger, the Savior of our world. Amen.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank You for seeking us out in our darkness and confusion. Strengthen us in Your truth. Amen.

REAL PROBLEMS, REAL SAVIOR

December 15, 2017

TEXT: Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18)

I wonder sometimes what those few words are hiding: “she was found to be with child.” The word “found” suggests that somebody realized it without Mary telling them. Perhaps it was her mother; perhaps it was Joseph, her fiancé. We don’t know the details, but it probably wasn’t a pretty scene.

I’m certain this wasn’t what Mary dreamed of when she was a little girl, playing house. In those dreams, everything always goes right, doesn’t it? First comes a beautiful wedding, then a home and children who are always good and never rebel or argue. And of course nobody ever gets sick or dies.

But the real world is messy, as we all know. And God came into our real world—the one that includes yelling and screaming and tears and unwed mothers, broken engagements and what-will-the-neighbors-say. God came into our world, and that’s good for us. Because we desperately need a Savior.

In a way, it’s entirely fitting that our Savior was conceived by a young girl in a precarious relationship, in danger of public shaming or worse. It’s fitting that He was born in substandard housing and laid in an animal’s feed trough. It’s fitting that He spent the first few years of His life as a refugee in Egypt, fleeing a dangerous government. It’s fitting because all these things are still with us today—broken families, poverty, exile, fear. And they aren’t going away soon.

We need a Savior—oh, how we need Him! And so God came to us—came to be one of us, a child raised in the middle of all the human troubles we face. He knows our lives—he has shared them. He has shared our death in all the fullness of suffering. And now He promises to share His own resurrection with us on the day when He makes all things new.

In the meantime, we hold on to Jesus’ promise: “I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

THE PRAYER: Lord, You know what I need. Overcome my problems in Your mercy, and keep me close to You. Amen.

THE RIGHT TIME

December 24, 2017

TEXT: And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. (Luke 2:6)

“The time came.” Every pregnant woman knows the weight of this expression. From the beginning of the pregnancy, we are always waiting, counting—when will the baby be due? When will the morning sickness end? When will we see the baby on ultrasound? And most of all, right at the end, *how many more days am I going to have to carry this heavy baby around!?*

But the time did finally come for Mary to give birth. Humanly speaking, it was the worst time possible—far from home, away from family, sheltering among animals, reduced to using a feedbox for a cradle. No doubt Mary and Joseph would have preferred something better. But God the Father chose this particular time and place for His Son to enter the world. Looking back, we can see why—this is the Savior who came “not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28b).

The time came. But with that, a new time of waiting began. As an adult, Jesus said several times, “My time has not yet come” (John 7, 8:20; Matthew 26:18; John 2:4). And what time is this? The time He would suffer and die to redeem us all, so that we could be freed from sin and become children of God.

It was for this time that Jesus came into the world—to rescue us, to redeem us, to raise us to new and everlasting life through the power of His own resurrection. Paul tells us, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6-8).

That tiny baby has become our Redeemer and Savior. Today is the right time for us to trust in Him.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for Your kindness to us, being born into our world and suffering and dying and rising, all at the right time for us. Keep us with You forever. Amen.

SHEPHERD KING

December 23, 2017

TEXT: “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.” (Matthew 2:6)

When Herod asked the chief priests and scribes where Jesus was to be born, they quoted this passage above which comes originally from Micah 5. They were mainly concerned with the place specified—Bethlehem—but they should have taken notice of another word as well: “shepherd.”

What does it mean to shepherd people? It means to do the kinds of things shepherds does for their animals—to meet their basic needs such as food and water; to protect them from danger; and to help them when they become sick or lost. A good shepherd puts the welfare of the sheep above his own. He will gladly stay up all night if it's necessary to save a sheep's life, or walk for hours over rough ground looking for a lost one. A good shepherd loves his sheep and is willing to sacrifice much for them.

Now this is no good description of Herod, the ruler of Judea at that time. He was more likely to harm his subjects than to help them. The same is true for many rulers throughout human history. But a new king of Israel was coming, one who would be, not an exploiter, but a shepherd. Jesus, that baby laid in an animal's feedbox to sleep, would grow up to be the Good Shepherd for everyone who trusts in Him.

That's a strange kind of ruler. What kind of a king would spend His time with the poor and the sick and the homeless, caring for their needs? What kind of king touches people with skin diseases and eats with the outcasts of society, the people no one else wants? What kind of a king suffers and dies for the good of His people, laying down His own life so that they will live forever and not be destroyed?

This is Jesus, the Shepherd-King of Israel. This is Jesus, my Shepherd and yours.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, watch over me always and keep me close to You. Amen.

JUSTICE AND MERCY

December 16, 2017

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

When I was taking college Greek, my professor pointed out something I did not realize. We usually read this verse to mean that because Joseph was a just man, therefore he was unwilling to put Mary to shame. However, the Greek grammar leaves the relationship of the phrases in question. It could just as easily be translated, “although he was a just man ...”

If we read the text this way, it suggests that Joseph was a man who followed the law of Moses—a just man, a law-abiding man. But in this situation, the law was uncompromising—a betrothed woman who had sex with another man would be treated as an adulterous wife and stoned. Joseph was tenderhearted; he could not face doing that to Mary, or even making her shame public. And so he settled on a quiet divorce. It was the best compromise he could think of between justice and mercy.

This kind of conflict happens so often in our world. Justice pulls us one way, but mercy urges us to go the other. God, too, faced a conflict between justice and mercy when He was dealing with us. Long ago humanity rebelled against God. We chose to go our own way instead of listening to Him. As a result we brought down trouble, grief, hatred, sickness, evil, and death upon our whole human race.

It would be simple justice if God decided to leave us in that mess—hurting, ruined, spiritually dead. But God still loves us, and He had compassion on us. He didn't want to see us destroyed.

So God found a way to satisfy both justice and mercy. He came into the world to be one of us, the man Christ Jesus. He took the penalty for our rebellion upon Himself, all the way to death on a cross—so we wouldn't have to pay that price. He broke the power of sin and evil on that day. And when He rose from the dead three days later, He broke the power of death over everyone who is willing to trust in Him.

THE PRAYER: Father, thank You for having mercy on us, and help me to show Your mercy to others. Amen.

WORRY

December 17, 2017

TEXT: But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 1:20)

The angel told Joseph not to fear taking Mary as his wife. At first glance, that's odd language. What exactly did Joseph have to fear?

Well, there was the matter of the child, who would be Joseph's heir but not his child by blood. Some men would have a problem with that. Then there was the question of Mary's behavior—would she be a faithful wife in the future, or not? He might also have wondered, "What will the neighbors say?" If they were aware that Joseph was not the father, that would definitely make life difficult. If they did not know this, but only realized the baby was coming at least three months early, that would still cause problems—because Jewish couples were expected to control themselves during their engagement period, and an early pregnancy would bring embarrassment.

No doubt all of these things ran through Joseph's thoughts as he lay there trying to sleep. Similar questions run through our own minds. Am I doing the right thing here? What if I make a mistake? Is her health getting worse? Should I talk to him about that problem? What's going to happen next?

God broke through Joseph's worry with His own strength and comfort: "Do not fear . . . for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." In other words, God is in control of this situation. It may not look like it, but that is the truth.

God says the same thing to us today when we worry: "It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; He will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed" (Deuteronomy 31:8). That baby whose very existence caused Joseph to fear—that baby Jesus is the reason we don't have to be afraid. He is Immanuel, "God-with-us," and He will not forsake us. Through His death and resurrection He bound us to Him forever, as the forgiven, precious, watched-over people of God.

THE PRAYER: Dear Savior, watch over us and keep us in Your care forever. Help us not to fear, but to trust in You. Amen.

KEEPING PROMISES

December 22, 2017

TEXT: And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. (Luke 2:4-5)

It must have been difficult for Mary to travel at nine months pregnant. The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem was 70 miles as the crow flies, but there were hills to climb the direct way. Mary and Joseph probably went the longer way, adding 20 miles to the trip.

Walking that far is no easy task. And in spite of all the Christmas cards and nativity scenes, we have no reason to believe Mary had a donkey to ride. I hope she did, though. The trip must have been hard enough!

Really, I have to wonder why Mary made the trip at all. Joseph had to register, but Mary could have stayed home and had her baby in her own home, with the help of relatives and neighbors. That sounds much more comfortable, not to mention safer.

But if she had stayed home, Jesus would not have been born in Bethlehem. And God had promised years ago by the prophet Micah that the Messiah would be born there and nowhere else.

Did Mary go with Joseph because she remembered this? Perhaps. Or she may have just wanted to be with her husband and away from judgmental, prying relatives and neighbors who wondered about the birth too soon after the wedding.

One way or the other, God saw to it that Jesus was indeed born in Bethlehem. God always keeps His promises, even if it takes influencing a Roman emperor to call a census affecting large parts of the world. Even if it means breaking the laws of nature, so a virgin has a baby. Even if it means sending His own Son into this world of suffering and death so that we might be adopted as children of God.

And if God did all this to keep His promises in the past, how much more can we trust Him to keep His promises to us today!

THE PRAYER: Father, thank You for promising eternal life to everyone who trusts in Your Son Jesus. I believe You, Lord, and I rejoice. Amen.

OBEDIENCE

December 21, 2017

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

Obedience is not a fashionable virtue. People are suspicious of it, talking about robots and mind control. We make jokes about it with references to dog obedience school. We make heroes out of rebels and those who “did it my way.”

And yet, none of us likes to be disobeyed. When a child, or even a dog, disobeys us, we understand perfectly well why obedience matters. “Don’t run into the street.” “Look both ways.” “Don’t play with the fire.” “Come here, now!” Obedience makes the world run smoothly. Disobedience ends up in pain and even death.

As human beings, we should know this well. Our first ancestors disobeyed God in the beginning, and we have been paying the price for it ever since. Sin, trouble, war, death, disaster upon disaster—if only we had listened to God! None of this needed to happen.

Thank God, Joseph listened. He woke up, got up, and brought Mary home to be his wife. She in turn obeyed the Lord by bearing and raising Jesus our Savior. And His obedience is the source of our salvation—

though He was in the form of God, (Christ) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11)

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for obeying the Father and becoming our Savior. Let me in turn obey You with faith and love. Amen.

SAVIOR

December 18, 2017

TEXT: (An angel said) “She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21)

Choosing a name for a baby can be hard. There are so many things to consider! Should we honor someone by choosing their name? Does it sound well with the family name? Will there be five other kids in kindergarten with the same name? Will it be too difficult to say or spell?

Joseph and Mary got to avoid all of this. The angel said simply, “Call his name Jesus,” which means “The Lord is salvation.” Then he gave the reason as well: “He will save His people from their sins.”

Sin is one of those words that has been used so often and in so many wrong ways that it’s almost useless now. At bottom it refers to something that is wrong, bad, evil, messed up, twisted, or corrupted—something that just shouldn’t be that way, but it is, nonetheless. What’s more, sin is something that didn’t just happen by itself—somebody, somewhere, deserves the blame.

There is no culture, no country, no city, no family where sin isn’t doing its destructive work. We live neck-deep in the results: broken relationships, hatred and resentment, sadness, trouble, loss and grief. But no matter how we try, we can’t get free of them.

This is why God came into our world—to be born among us, to become our Savior. He is the only one who can free us from the trap of sin. Sin has no power over Him—He is the only human being who has never fallen into that trap. Instead, He reaches in and sets us free as well.

He did this when He lay down His life for us on the cross, paying our debt, letting all of us captives of sin go free. He took our sin with Him into death and left it there where it can never harm us again. And now that He has risen from the dead, He calls us to trust in Him and enjoy real freedom. More than that, He gives us everlasting life.

THE PRAYER: Lord, thank You for saving me from sin. Strengthen me in the freedom that You give, so I can serve You and my neighbors joyfully. Amen.

PROMISES TO KEEP

December 19, 2017

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

"Keep your promise!" Who hasn't heard those words, either from friends in school or from your own children wanting a treat? We put a lot of weight on promises. "We'll see" is an answer that gives us hope, but "I promise" settles the matter.

That's exactly what God did for us. He gave us the hope of a Savior, and then He went one better—He gave us His own promise. And people have been holding on to that promise ever since the days of Isaiah the prophet, who first spoke it to an unbelieving king.

They were right to trust God's promise, because they knew that the Lord is a faithful God. When He says "Yes," He means it. When He promises to bless, He does it. Even when He promises something utterly impossible, He carries it out. The ancient Israelites saw this when He rescued them from slavery in Egypt. The impossible came true.

And here again, with Mary and her baby Jesus, God is keeping His promise and doing the impossible. "A virgin shall conceive"—yes, indeed, in spite of every scientific law and all the weight of human history against it. "And bear a son"—oh yes, though as a woman Mary had no Y chromosome to give a male baby Jesus. Never mind. God took care of it. He had a promise to keep.

And how wonderfully He kept it! As Mary lay gazing at her newborn Son, did she think of the other promises God was going to fulfill? "Call his name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21b). "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34b). "And He shall stand and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord ... And He shall be their peace" (Micah 5:4-5a). "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14). God has kept His promises in the past, and He will keep His promises in the future, to the very end of the world.

THE PRAYER: Lord, thank You for keeping Your promises. Help me to trust in the ones You have yet to fulfill. Amen.

GOD WITH US

December 20, 2017

TEXT: "... and they shall call His name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:23b)

"Would you stay with me, please?" That was what I asked my friend when I was sitting in a cubicle at our nearby hospital, facing emergency surgery. I didn't want to be left all alone. It was too scary.

Children ask this, too. "Can I sleep with you tonight?" they ask, standing by their parents' bedside. "It's too dark, and I don't want to be by myself."

When we're frightened, when we're sad or grieving or troubled, we need other people. We need someone to be with us, maybe just to hold our hands if nothing else. They don't have to say anything—just being there is enough.

God knows this about us. And one of the best promises He gave us was the promise to send His Son, Jesus, who would be called "Immanuel." Literally the name means "With-us God." Jesus is proof that God has not simply set the world going and then wandered away, like some philosophers think. God is with us, actively involved in our lives, calling and saving and forgiving.

When my son was tiny, he would not go down a slide at the playground by himself. He had to have Mommy or Daddy to go with him. Then he had courage. We depend on Jesus, God-with-us, the same way, don't we? We can't face death alone. But Jesus has gone there first ahead of us when He died and rose again. He knows the way. And He says to us, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5b). He goes with us now through our daily lives, and He will go with us then, as we face death. He will bring us all the way through, to the resurrection He has promised us and all believers on the other side. Jesus is God always with us.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, stay with me when I am afraid or grieving. Keep me close to You. Amen.