

Jesus Messiah

An Advent Devotional

St. Paul's United Methodist Church

Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania



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Introduction

Advent is a season of preparation. It's a time to seek a deeper, more meaningful connection to Jesus in anticipation of Christmas. This devotional guide is a tool to help you do that. Let each day's entry stir you to pray, to ask God to draw you closer to Him. Feel free to share the readings with others in your family or friendship circles.

Enjoy the journey... and Merry Christmas!

-pastor david
Advent 2021

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Day 1

Matthew 1:1

“This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

When it comes to God, there's always a plan. When you're dealing with the Alpha and Omega, the "One Who Is, Who Was and Who Is To Come", there are no surprises. Jesus, the Messiah, was part of God's plan from the very beginning. Matthew, of course, in a straight forward way, writing to a primarily Jewish audience, takes his readers on a journey back in time, back through the seeds of prophetic promise all the way to Abraham. Why Abraham? Because for the Jews, that's where the covenant began. That's where the promise of salvation gets its start. Abraham - a man who dared to believe God would be true to His word. It was with Abraham that a special people would be formed - a holy nation, a people set apart to be a light of hope to a broken world. It would be God's promise to Abraham that would set in motion a pathway of salvation that, in turn, would find men and women of faith who would reproduce Abraham's obedience.

That list of faithful responders would include King David, a "man after God's own heart" ... and a thousand years later, a man named Joseph, whose faithful character would position him to raise the Son of God as his own. God always has a plan. Jesus the Messiah was - and is - that plan. It's a plan of salvation and hope, of forgiveness and restoration, of reconciliation and resurrection. And you and I, as followers of Jesus, get to participate in that plan some two thousand plus years later. In Christ, we are now part of the family tree - rooted in the promise to and obedience of Abraham and David, of Ruth and Tamar, of Joseph and Mary. The plan leads us to Jesus, Messiah - born in a feeding trough, executed on a Cross, risen from the dead, one day to come again. Will you engage the promise today?

~Lord, thank You for planning ahead. Amen.

Day 2

Luke 1:35

“The angel answered, ‘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.’”

“The Holy Spirit will come on you.” “The power of the Most High will overshadow you.” “The holy one.” “The Son of God.” In just one verse we see that Jesus has some impressive credentials. These phrases give testimony to the overwhelmingly supernatural nature of Jesus’s birth. God the Almighty would orchestrate this event Himself. By virtue of the One who would overshadow Mary, Jesus would be “the Son of God.” What Luke is communicating at the very beginning of his Gospel - in no uncertain terms - is that Jesus is not only the long-awaited, long-expected Messiah, but that He’s worthy of our worship, worthy of our devotion and praise, and worthy to be confessed as Lord of life. This one verse sets the stage for the entire Gospel as the story of Jesus unfolds a picture of the miraculous intervention of Almighty God into the affairs of humanity. God Himself is doing a new thing. And the angel is inviting Mary - and each of us - to believe that divine message.

Yet, like Mary, the supernatural can be hard to grasp. “How shall this be...?” Mary asks just prior to this verse. We don’t always have the benefit of an angelic messenger to quell our anxiety in seasons that are pregnant with outlandish God-sized opportunities. Yet, we do always have the invitation to believe in a God who can make all things new.

What dimension of faith is God wanting to birth in you today?

~Holy God, my life - with all of its uncertainties and opportunities - is in Your hands. May it be to me according to Your will in Jesus’s name. Amen.

Day 3

Matthew 1:23

“Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel’ which is translated, ‘God with us.’”

The Bible - both Old and New Testaments alike - is the story of God revealing Himself to us. God wants us to know Him. In fact, God invites us to know Him, to trust Him, to love Him, to be loved by Him... and to follow Him. As Matthew tells a portion of that very familiar Christmas story, we see that invitational message play out prophetically. Notice a few things about this verse. First, notice the word “Behold.” In Greek (the original language of the New Testament), this word draws the reader into what’s about to be said. “Pay attention! Look!” An announcement is about to be made that is big. And that announcement, as it’s proclaimed, doesn’t make logical sense. A virgin is pregnant?? Well, it’s not about logic. God is not limited by our cognitive comprehension. Instead, the announcement is connecting this moment in time to a prophecy made through the Hebrew prophet Isaiah hundreds of years prior (Isaiah 7:14).

If God is revealing Himself, it’s going to be in a way that makes it very clear that it’s God. Notice also the name to be given the child, “Immanuel.” In Hebrew, Immanuel is a name that combines two words, Immanu - which means “with us,” and El - which means “God.” Immanuel, therefore, means “God with us” - or more literally, “with us God.” In other words, the Messiah Jesus is the divine revelation of the “with us God.” The “God with us” is Jesus. Jesus is the revelation of God - “the fullness of God” dwelling in Him, as it says in Colossians 1:19. Matthew’s point? “God Himself is coming. He’s making a very special entrance. And He’s coming to be with us, to be among us, to be one of us.” And He’s inviting you to see Him. Will you?

~Lord, thank You for inviting us to know You, to see You. Open our eyes of faith that we can see Jesus. Amen.

Day 4

1 John 3:8

“The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.”

For many, the birth of a baby is a joyful event filled with lots of hope, lots of expectation - along with, of course, the anticipation of many sleepless nights. And indeed, I’m sure Mary and Joseph had their share of excitement around the birth of their baby... God’s Son. But the hope and expectation they had went beyond the scope of “what will he be when he grows up?” or “I wonder if he’ll prefer football or baseball.” Their hope, their expectation was rooted in prophecy. Jesus was destined - indeed from the very beginning of time (Genesis 3:15) - to conquer the Evil One.

It would seem that their baby was born with a proverbial sword in His hand - and the fate of a nation (Israel), a people, and all of human history depending on His ability to use it. In fact, one of adult Jesus’s closest friend, the apostle John, would write, “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” Isn’t it so like God to be so unconcerned - comparatively - with the devil’s power that He would choose to have Jesus become human via the vulnerability of being born a baby, to an innocent teenage girl, in a feeding trough, away from all familiar resources. Truly, the devil had no chance of winning that battle!

God was that secure in knowing how the story would unfold. And, as we are aware, this baby Jesus would grow up and die – and by His death would “destroy the devil’s work” once and for all. Baby Jesus’s first cry as He emerged into this world, therefore, was a battle cry announcing freedom for those who believe. Do you believe?

~Lord, thank You that I, through faith in Christ, have the freedom to choose not to sin. Help me to so choose. Amen.

Day 5

1 Timothy 1:15

“It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.”

Timothy surely was nervous. As the apostle Paul's protégé, he had been assigned to pastor a difficult church - the church in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3) - and to take on the challenges of discipling Christians in a purely pagan city. All of the influences of that prevailing culture were confusing the young believers and many of them tried to compromise their faith with the promises of false teachers and pleasure seekers.

The world of Ephesus was pretty dark and broken, spiritually speaking, yet it was into that dark and broken world that Timothy's congregation was called on to bear witness to the good news of Jesus. In one of his most intimate and personal letters, Paul reminds Timothy of a very important truth - "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." It was indeed possible to transform peoples' lives with the gospel in the midst of their spiritual blindness.

To give emphasis to his point, Paul says - "Timothy, that world of sinners? I am the worst of them." In other words, Paul says, "If Jesus can save me, He can save anyone." What Timothy has been learning - and what we today need to hear - is that there is no darkness so dense that the light of Christ cannot penetrate. There is no sin so bad that Christ cannot redeem. There is no heart so guarded that Christ cannot heal. This was why Jesus Messiah, came into the world after all. It's a "trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance..." Jesus came into the world to save... you. That's the true Christmas story.

~Father, remind me yet again today of your penetrating, saving love. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Day 6

John 1:1-2

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. He was in the beginning with God.”

In writing these words the way he did, the apostle John was very intentionally drawing the reader's attention back to Genesis 1:1 - and to God's original design and plan. "In the beginning, God..." - that's how Genesis 1 starts. That's how the entire biblical story starts. That's how creation itself starts. And according to John, Jesus Messiah was there. In fact, He was not only the agent of creation, but He is God Himself. Unlike the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which place their emphasis on the "human" elements of Jesus's birth, John focuses more on the divine plan that traces itself back to the beginning of time.

For John, Jesus was the "Word" that inaugurated a new day... in the beginning, and now once again. For his Gospel readers and listeners, John was setting the stage for Jesus to be seen, understood and embraced as Lord of Life, deserving of our devotion.

As you prepare for Christmas, do you have that perspective - that Jesus is the Lord of Life, deserving of our praise?

A challenge for today... find, or recall, the lyrics to one of the Christmas carols of faith. In what ways do those words point to Jesus being Lord of Life? Spend a few moments singing that carol as a song of praise and worship.

Day 7

John 1:14

***“And the word became flesh and dwelt among us,
and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only
begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”***

The COVID-19 pandemic has really effected the mental, emotional and spiritual health of many people throughout our nation - in fact, throughout our world. Depression and anxiety are at an all-time high as people come to terms with loss, grief and having had long stretches of being quarantined - or isolated in other ways. Even though the rhythms of life seem to want to return to normal (or a version of normal), the after effects of what we went through continue to wreak havoc within our lives and relationships. We're quicker to react, quicker to get angry, quicker to over-generalize our frustrations, quicker to offend - and then we justify our feelings and vilify anyone who doesn't agree with us. There is a force of evil that has been working diligently to divide and destroy the Body of Christ (the Church) - pitting us against each other.

Yet, today's verse reminds us that Jesus Messiah "became flesh" - He became one of us, subjecting Himself to all of the experiences of being fully human. He knows our need. And He "dwelt among us." The Greek word used for "dwelt" literally means to "tabernacle" or "set up a tent" or "take up residence" among us. Jesus Messiah, in other words, camped out in our midst to let us know that we are not alone... that God has heard our prayers, and He came here in person to let us know a new day was on the horizon.

No matter what emotions have been stirred within you by this pandemic, remind yourself today: Jesus is camping in your neighborhood... so everything's going to be okay.

***~Lord, thank You that I can come into Your presence and
find peace. Amen.***

Day 8

Matthew 4:17

“From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

A question for you to consider - how close does God have to come to you in order for you to believe in Him?

The timeframe of this verse is roughly thirty years after the very first Christmas. Jesus is now fully grown and is beginning His preaching ministry. With His very first “official” sermon, He basically asks His listeners that opening question - putting it, however, in the form of an invitation: “Repent... God’s here!” One of the interesting things about this verse is that the phrase, “has come near,” is in what’s called the “perfect tense.” The perfect tense expresses an event that occurred in the past, but the ramifications of that event continue to impact the present. In this case, what is that “event in the past?” It was Jesus’s birth - the “Incarnation.” Jesus’s birth some thirty years prior was the single event that shows that “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” God’s divine presence, held as a baby in Mary’s arms, was the marker in time telling everyone who would listen that God was here. He had “come near.” And in light of His tangible presence among His people, He invites us to “repent” - another ancient word that basically meant to “re-orient” your life. Many of us who have heard that word in church before associate it with “turning away from sin or a life that pushes God away.” While that’s true, it’s not just about turning away from sin; it’s also about turning back toward God - turning to the God who has come near. Jesus is issuing an invitation to all who would listen to draw near to the One who has come near to them.

How close does God have to come to you in order for you to believe in Him?

~Lord, thank You for showing up - then...and now. Amen.

Day 9

Luke 2:10

“Then the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people...’”

I can imagine the facial expressions of those shepherds, can't you? They were out in the fields, watching over their sheep, probably passing the time around a campfire... when suddenly an angelic being - like no one they'd ever seen before - appears and begins to announce a life-changing message. Of course they would be scared; wouldn't you be? They must have been shaking in their sandals, ultimately falling on their faces in both terror and amazement. "Do not be afraid," the angel said. Certainly, such words would be comforting, right? Yet, in the original Greek, the verb used is actual in the imperative - in other words, it's a command. As we have seen before in Scripture (Joshua 1:8-9, for example), the angel is there with a purpose - namely, to give a mission to those shepherds. There was, therefore, no time to waste, "I bring you good tidings..." In Greek, that phrase is one word, a verb, and it's the word that we might know as "evangelize." To evangelize actually means "to bring good news." The angel was "evangelizing" with the shepherds."

Upon seeking the baby Jesus, those shepherds would go on and "evangelize" others. Later, the adult Jesus would equip His disciples to "evangelize" whole communities. The morning of Jesus's resurrection, Mary Magdalene "evangelizes" the other disciples. Through the years since then, we have been tasked to be the messengers sent to "evangelize" - to tell good news to those within our circles of influence.

The story of Jesus's birth announcement reminds us that we're to go and tell "good tidings of great joy" to others. Don't be afraid! It's time to evangelize!

~Lord, thank You for using me to tell Your message of good news about Jesus. May that news change their lives even as it changed mine. Amen.

Day 10

Matthew 2:16

“When (King) Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had heard from the Magi.”

It seems clear from the New Testament accounts that whenever and wherever Jesus shows up, He causes a reaction. Even as an infant, Jesus's presence upsets the existing power bases causing a reaction of evil the likes of which, in this case, no one wants to imagine. Evil, you see, takes prisoners - hostages - whenever it feels threatened. From the early prophecies to the birth narratives, we learn that Jesus Messiah was born to set people free from sin, to give release to those held in bondage to evil, to give sight to the blind, and announce a new community under God's reign.

King Herod must have been seriously insecure to have ordered the execution of babies. What a significantly depraved human being! Can you hear in your imagination the anguish of those children's parents? In some respects, these children were the very first martyrs - the first to have had their lives taken because of Jesus Christ. Through their deaths, we see yet again glimpses of the human heart corrupted by evil, sin and a distortion of entitlement... and the horrible truth that the innocent often pay the cost for the consequences of the actions of evil people.

But evil has been outwitted by the manger, the cross and the empty tomb! Behind the stories of Easter and Christmas is pain and suffering, indeed. Yet, the pains of labor lead to new birth... and unrelenting hope.

***~Lord, in the shadow of my brokenness, shine Your light.
In the darkness of my evil, radiate Your new life. Amen.***

Day 11

Luke 1:32-33

“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His Father David, and He will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever, His kingdom will never end.”

How long is forever?

The angel’s announcement to Mary about her pending pregnancy is laced with prophetic statements about the eternal nature of not only Jesus Messiah Himself, but also of Messiah’s reign - His “throne.” According to Luke, the Gospel writer, the angel used references that had deeply profound meaning to the Jewish people. For example -

“Son of the Most High” - the term “Most High” in Hebrew is “Elyon.” It’s a very significant “name” for God used in the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament). The angel is telling Mary, a Jewish teenage girl, that her baby will be the child of the God who is sovereign over all. In the New Testament, Jesus would be known as the “Son of God” with the same all-encompassing Lordship.

“the throne of His father David” - while Joseph plays a significant role in the Christmas story as Jesus’s “adoptive father,” Luke uses the term “His father David” to connect Jesus to the prophecies that the Messiah would come through the Davidic lineage and fulfill the covenant God made with David.

“He will reign... forever; His kingdom will never end” - the angel’s announcement spoke of an eternal reign. In other words, Jesus would be the final “king” - the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He would reign for evermore and His kingdom (or rule) would be eternal.

So, there’s a lot of weight in the angel’s message. This baby is nothing less than royalty - both human and divine. He indeed is worthy of our worship.

How long is forever?

~Lord, You alone are worthy. You alone are Lord. I honor You with my heart of worship. Amen.

Day 12

Isaiah 40:3

“A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”

While these words from the Old Testament book of Isaiah were originally meant for the people of Israel hundreds of years prior to Jesus's birth, the Gospel writers re-purposed their prophetic words, even as did John the Baptist, as they announced the start of Jesus's ministry. John the Baptist, cousin to Jesus, and born several months prior, grew up to be that “voice of one calling.” In fact, he did so most famously “in the wilderness” - even dressing the part of an esoteric prophet. Quoting Isaiah's words for a new day connected Jesus to the long-awaited Messiah and sought to legitimize His ministry inauguration.

Notice though the parallel use of “wilderness” and “desert.” According to the prophetic voice, Messiah's arrival comes in the midst of barren times - at least spiritually speaking. The faithful are to “prepare” for the Lord's arrival while in the seasons of void and vacuum, loss and grief, lamentation and despair. It is “in the desert” that God's arrival is expected - an arrival that would most assuredly require a “highway,” not simply a path. God's Messiah will arrive and it will bring hope in a day of barrenness - much like, symbolically, was depicted in the pregnancy of a woman well passed childbearing years (John the Baptist's mother, Elizabeth), and the pregnancy of a young teenage virgin (Mary). Jesus Messiah surely knows how to make an entrance.

Such a prophetic word reminds us today that no matter how severe or desolate our situation, we are to prepare for Jesus's arrival. Wherever Jesus is, new life is about to emerge.

~Lord, thanks for reminding me that You're the “God of the Impossible.” Amen.

Day 13

John 1:11

“He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him.”

Jesus understood rejection. He lived it. From the glances and whispered comments made about His mother while she was pregnant with Him prior to her marriage to Joseph, to the lack of a room for His birth, to the verbal and physical assaults He endured during His preaching ministry... and, ultimately, to His condemnation and crucifixion, Jesus experienced rejection in ways that few can truly understand or appreciate. For John, the Gospel writer, that entire portion of Jesus's story of rejection is summed up and expressed within this one verse, embedded in the prologue of Chapter One. Why? For John, while certainly important, the focus was not to be on rejection, but redemption; not to be on victimization, but victory; not to be on isolation, but invitation. In spite of the fact that such rejection would come from His own people - own relatives, own faith community, own ethnic tribe, own global community, His invitation continued to include them. The very next verse testifies to it: “Yet to all who did receive Him...”

Yes, it is most certainly possible to reject Jesus Messiah. Salvation is a gift, for sure, but a gift that must be received and embraced. His rejection by “His own” was not a surprise to Him. As with Ezekiel and Isaiah and Elijah before Him, God's invitation, indeed God's presence among God's people, was to announce God's plan to do a new thing—whether or not the people responded positively to it.

The Lord has an open invitation to receive Him even today - for you. Will you RSVP?

~Lord, thank You for not letting rejection by others cause You to reject us. Amen.

Day 14

John 1:12-13

“Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

I am fully aware of how blessed, in fact, how privileged, I am. I was raised by hardworking, loyal, loving, Christian parents who taught me about the Lord from a very early age. I was blessed - along with my brothers - to have an excellent education, which positioned me to have wonderful ministry opportunities among great people of faith. I have been exposed to lifechanging stories, heartfelt commitments, and jaw-dropping testimonies of God’s grace and goodness. I have spoken before thousands, been on television and radio, and even published a book. As evidenced by these examples, along with countless others, truly I am incredibly, significantly blessed.

And all of it pales by comparison to being counted as a “child of God.”

“To all who did receive Him,” John wrote, Jesus “gave the right to become children of God.”

There is no gift, no accomplishment, no honor, no accolade that can surpass the expression of grace given in that epithet.

The word translated “right,” here, in Greek actually means “authority.” According to John, when we “receive” Jesus as Lord and Savior, Jesus “gives” us the “authority of children of God” - which places us as “co-heirs” with Jesus to the blessings God bestows on all His household of faith. Our “adoption” is not based on any human choice or action - therefore, it is not merited - but on the frivolously extravagant grace of God.

I am truly blessed. How about you?

~Lord, thank You for adopting me into Your family. Amen.

Day 15

Isaiah 9:2

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in a land of deep darkness a light has dawned.”

One of the symbols of Advent that I really enjoy is the lighting of the candles in the traditional Advent wreath. Each candle represents a particular section of the Christmas story - along with a specific focus to help us devotionally prepare for Christmas. Each Sunday, for four consecutive weeks, another candle is lighted until finally on Christmas Eve or Day, the center candle - or “Christ Candle” - is lighted, symbolizing the light of Christ coming into the world. Often this verse from Isaiah 9:2 is read as that candle is lighted.

The Advent wreath is a reminder to those of us who are Jesus followers that in spite of how “dark” our circumstances may get, Jesus Messiah, the Light of the World, has already come. Therefore, we need not fear. The “Love, Joy, Peace, and Faith” - symbolized by the weekly candles - empower us to reflect Jesus’s light in the world as each of these qualities shines through us. No matter how “deep” the darkness is, nothing can extinguish the light of Christ in us.

I invite you to take a moment sometime today, get a candle and a match or lighter, go to a quiet room either by yourself or with someone else, turn off the lights and light your candle. Notice how the light of a single candle breaks through the darkness of the room. Prayerfully ask God to help you be that kind of light in the coming day.

~Lord, thank You for Your inexhaustible hope. Amen.

Day 16

Luke 4:1-2

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days He was tempted by the devil...”

Jesus had just been baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Luke 3:21-22 shares that while Jesus was praying, the Holy Spirit “descended on Him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” It was then that the Spirit “led Him into the wilderness,” where “He was tempted by the devil.”

Sometimes we forget that Jesus was born with a very special mission. He was destined to be our Savior - destined to die for the sins of humanity. While that prophecy is embedded in the accounts of Jesus’s birth announcements, it’s easy for the “painful” part of His mission to get lost among the “ornaments” of Christmas - the humble manger, the abiding shepherds, the angelic choirs. Yet, in truth, Jesus was born to die - and to die a horrible, humiliating death - all to “give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). So, He needed to prepare. He needed clarity. To get that, the Spirit led Him into the wilderness.

Often, we want to avoid the wilderness times in our lives. They’re painful times - where we feel isolated and confronted with heavy emotions. Yet, the wilderness times are most often the seasons of our greatest growth - especially in our faith. It’s in the wilderness times that God increases our capacities and prepares us for what’s yet to come. As with Jesus, it’s important to remember that the Spirit “leads us” into those wildernesses. We’re never alone. No matter how challenging the “temptation,” the Spirit is with us. He’s with you.

~Lord, thank You for being Immanuel - God with us - in the seasons of our wilderness temptations. Amen.

Day 17

Luke 4:18-19

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

With these two verses, Jesus inaugurates His preaching ministry within the synagogue of His hometown. He’s actually quoting from Isaiah 61- reading the words of an ancient prophecy and applying those words to Himself: “Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Initially, they marveled at His gifted teaching. And then the crowd turned on Him.

That was characteristic of Jesus’s experience wherever He went. The crowds of common folk loved Him; the religious leaders hated him; feared Him. Everywhere Jesus went He caused a reaction. In fulfilling these prophetic words, Jesus Messiah was announcing good news, setting people free from that which oppressed and enslaved them...and the powers that be, both human and supernatural resisted Him. God’s penetrating grace turns on a powerful light in the darkness- and those who have grown accustomed to the dark fight to extinguish that light.

In what ways have you experienced that? How have you seen “the darkness” resisting the light of Christ? How have you resisted the light of Christ? What “good news” does the Holy Spirit want you to hear today that will set you free from what’s been “oppressing” you?

~Lord, gently peel away my blindness that I may see... and become... the disciple you have called me to be. Amen.

Day 18

Luke 1:26-27

“In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.”

“In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel...” One thing that’s made clear many times in Scripture is that God knows timing. God knows how to make an entrance, and God knows when to make that entrance. After decades of waiting for a child, Elizabeth was now pregnant- “in her old age”. Now, six months into her pregnancy, God “sends” the angel Gabriel to Mary with a life-altering invitation.

In this grand gesture of timing, Elizabeth’s baby, the one we will know as John the Baptist, will arrive on the scene six months ahead of his cousin, Mary’s son... Jesus. From birth, John is destined to prepare the way for Jesus- one miracle leading to another. God knows timing.

And God knows your prayers, your needs, your hopes as well. Like Elizabeth, perhaps you’ve been praying about something for decades without any sign of divine answer. Perhaps you’ve gotten to the point of despair...or resignation...in your waiting. Yet, God knows timing.

In Ecclesiastes 3:1-11, we are reminded that timing matters. In the passage’s conclusion, the author tells us that “God has made everything beautiful in its time”. In the grand mosaic of what God is doing, your life matters, your prayers matter, your hopes matter. God’s got you in His timing.

~Lord, thank You; in advance for any answers to my prayers-that Your timing is perfect. Amen.

Day 19

1 John 1:5

“This is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: God is light, in Him there is no darkness at all.”

As a child, setting up the Christmas tree was always a highlight for me. I grew up in the 1960's and 1970's, so for a number of years, our "tree" was one of those silver aluminum tress that you put together by carefully unsleeving the branches (minimizing the shedding of tinsel) and connecting them to their color-coded spots on the trunk. Only later did we get a "normal" looking green artificial tree. Regardless, the process of putting up the trees made Christmas "real" for me. And first on the agenda was always stringing the lights. The tree had to have lights. One year, the lights would be placed randomly. The next year, they would be carefully wrapped around each branch populating the tree with enough lights to guide Santa's sleigh to our destination. Lights always came first- and they set the tone for the rest of the decorating. Flashing, mixed colored lights meant the ornaments would be playful. Solid white lights meant we were pursuing a gentler theme. As an older teenager, one of my favorite times would be after Christmas Eve services, when we'd return home, turn on the Christmas tree lights and turn off all the room lights and allow the "mood" of Christmas to settle us into a gentle slumber.

Whether purposeful or not, the lights on the Christmas tree remind us of the powerful truth that "God is light, in Him there is no darkness at all." They remind us that embedded in the Christmas story, is a hope - in fact the hope-letting us know that all is well. So, whether you decorate your own or enjoy the talents of others, allow the light of God's penetrating love, blot out any darkness you may be feeling right now.

~Lord, thank You for the love that penetrates and the light that embraces us. Amen.

Day 20

Luke 2:13-14

“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angels; praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.’”

Can you imagine that? A choir larger than you’ve ever seen all united in their song of praise? “A great company of the heavenly host.” Those shepherds got a glimpse of heaven that evening. They saw what most of us can only imagine. They heard sounds that, I’m sure, were overwhelming to experience.

And the words that this great company of the heavenly host lifted up said it all: “Glory to God.”

The miraculous pregnancy and birth of John the Baptist? That was God.

The angel encounters with Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph? That was God, too.

The supernaturally induced pregnancy and birth of Jesus? That was definitely God.

The stories of healings, casting out of demons, forgiveness, and authoritative teaching? God.

God was clearly orchestrating an intervention on planet Earth. It had been planned for a very long time. Now, everything was going as planned...in a way that only God would do it.

Praise was the fitting response. And before the shepherds understood, before the people of the world would comprehend what it all would mean, the heavenly host saw it, knew it, anticipated it and were now rejoicing as it unfolded.

Even though we didn’t “see” it happen, we’re living within the evidence of the Christmas story. And our fitting response is praise. Spend a few moments at various times today reciting those word in chorus with the heavenly host: “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on Earth, peace to those on whom His favor rests.”

Day 21

Luke 2:15

“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about’.”

One of the things I like about the shepherds in this part of the Christmas story is how immediate their response is to the good news. The angel downloads the message about Jesus’s birth, a heavenly choir sings, and immediately those shepherds leave what they were doing and go searching for a baby in a manger. Even as an infant, Jesus invites people to “Come and see.” The good news of the Savior evokes a response. By definition, Jesus invites: “Come, follow Me.”

Check out, for example, Matthew 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 10:38, 16:24, 19:21, 19:28

Mark 1:17, 2:14, 8:34, 10:21

Luke 5:27, 9:23, 9:59, 14:27, 18:22

John 1:43, 8:12, 10:27, 12:26, 13:36, 21:19, 21:22

Inevitable, those who “Come and see” Jesus are invited to “Come and follow” Jesus.

New life in the Kingdom of God, you see, starts with the birthing cry of a newborn infant in the hay trough of an animal’s manger...even as it finds its fulfillment in the anguished cry of a man on a cross saying, “It is finished.”

We don’t know much about those shepherds after they “went and saw” the baby Jesus- other than the fact that afterward, they “Spread the word concerning what had been told them” about Jesus (v17). I can only imagine how their lives were changed by their encounter with heaven that night - as heaven came down to greet them.

Today, look for the various ways that Jesus is inviting you or others to “Come and see” Him.

***~Lord, thank You that You reveal Yourself to those who seek You.
Amen.***

Day 22

Colossians 3:16

“Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly...”

When it comes to the Christmas story, hospitality is a big deal. In fact, many children’s Christmas plays over the years have expounded on a single brief verse of Scripture—a half of a verse, really: “...and she gave birth to her first born, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.” For generations, grouchy inn keepers have sharply turned away the holy family on the eve of Jesus’s birth, as third, fourth and fifth graders act out this seemingly pivotal scene: “There’s no room, I tell you! Now go away!” It’s amazing how we have read into that short phrase an entire back story. Perhaps it’s because we genuinely want there to be room for Mary and Joseph - and for baby Jesus. We have the vantage point of knowing the rest of the story. We know what’s yet to come for Jesus. We know the agony of the suffering He will endure. We know what anguish His mother will feel as “her baby” is crucified. Because we know the story, we want there to be room at the inn - even though we know that the humble stable is part of the plan. The Lord of life comes in humility and lives among us within the self-imposed limitations of humanity, so that His message - the good news of God’s kingdom - might “dwell within” us richly.

For life is God’s kingdom—the New Community inaugurated by Jesus—hospitality is a big deal. The message of the gospel wants to take up residence in your life. Is there room?

~Lord, thank You for “dwelling” among us. Let my life always create space for You. Amen.

Day 23

Luke 2:6

“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born...”

Jesus comes to us in the midst of our circumstances.

Mary and Joseph had to make their way to Bethlehem to be counted for the census. It was a decree made by the government - a mandate that required them to travel regardless of how pregnant Mary was. They were away from their home away from the resources they had planned on...but God would provide. They were in Bethlehem. The prophecy had said that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). A census brought them there, but God had navigated the course and the timing perfectly. What may have been perceived as an interruption of their plans actually fell perfectly aligned with God's plans.

We sometimes forget that our circumstances are not a surprise to God. God doesn't wait for us to have a block of time that's clear on our calendars before He comes to us. He comes when the timing is right from His vantage point - right while we're doing whatever it is we're doing in that moment. And no matter when it is that God is interrupting us, the timing will be perfect according to His plans. Whether there was a formal prophecy about your life or not, God's got your life in His perfectly timed plans.

And when Jesus does come to you - something wonderful is about to be born in or through you.

~Lord, thank You that Your timing is perfect. Keep me aware of Your presence in any given moment. Amen.

Day 24

Luke 2:34-35

“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Everybody in Jerusalem probably knew Simeon. He had been a fixture in the Temple for decades. Most people took him for granted. They most likely heard him share many times about God’s promises of a Messiah, of the salvation and “consolation of Israel.” He was a good man, well respected of course. Yet most didn’t know what to do with his words except acknowledge them, agree, and then move along with their business.

But the day Mary and Joseph brought their recently born infant son to the Temple for the Jewish rituals of purification, consecration and redemption, Simeon knew that the time had come. He interrupted their journey with prophecy: Jesus would be controversial. His presence, His teaching, His life would cause a reaction, a conflict that would both tear apart existing political and religious constructs, as well as bring freedom to those who had been oppressed and in bondage. The “thoughts of many hearts” would be revealed. Jesus’s presence would expose the sinfulness of humanity-and the Truth that would heal it.

That’s a lot to lay on a kid! And on the parents of that kid! Yet, Simeon’s prophecy presented a clear picture of what this family would be facing in the years to come. Jesus Messiah would cause a catalytic reaction - a necessary reaction - in order to carry out the divine mission.

What is the truth of Jesus exposing in you that needs to be surrendered to His healing grace?

~Lord, heal the deep parts of me - so that my life, my entire life, may testify to Your goodness. Amen.

Day 25

Acts 4:12

“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humankind by which we must be saved”.

Peter and John were very bold and direct with their words. After being filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they had preached amazing messages about Jesus-and they even healed a man who had been lame. The religious leaders heard about it and summoned the two apostles to appear before them for questioning. Peter, in that meeting, calls out those religious leaders for having crucified Jesus and then declares that the healing was done in the name of Jesus. In fact, Peter and John confidently proclaim that Jesus is the only way for humanity to know salvation, the only name by which humanity must be saved. And Peter and John themselves were evidence of such salvation. Their lives were radically transformed by Jesus - especially by His resurrection.

“There is no other name...by which we must be saved.”

Jesus Himself had told His disciples, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Again, in Romans 10:9, the apostle Paul affirms that “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

It’s what the angel had told Joseph prior to Jesus’s birth: “...you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1.21).

The name- and person-of Jesus is essential to the Christmas story. Christmas is His story. And He is your salvation. Like Peter and John... and Paul... are you able to confess Jesus Christ as your Lord?

~Jesus, there is no other name by which I am saved. I am Yours. Amen.

Day 26

Philippians 2:9-11

“Therefore, God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the father.”

I imagine that the shepherds did it (Luke 2:16-17). Simon Peter did it (Luke 5:8). The synagogue official did it (Matthew 9:18). The apostle Paul did it (Ephesians 3:14). A leper did it (Matthew 8:2). Demons did it (Mark 3:11). The soldiers who came to arrest Jesus did it (John 18:6).

What did they do? They bowed in the presence and authority of Jesus.

From newborn infant to adult preacher to crucified redeemer, the presence - and “name” of Jesus evoked a response. And the fitting response is submissive worship. When the Lord of Life enters the scene, all creation responds.

Because of what Jesus endured on the cross, because of His humble nature and gracious obedience, God “exalted Him to the highest place” of authority and lordship. Whether in the here and now, or on that ultimate day when Christ returns, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow... and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord”.

Whatever you’re facing today, whatever trial or temptation, whatever unknown or actual situation, as a follower of Jesus, it falls under His authority, His power, His jurisdiction, His Lordship, His Sovereignty. There is nothing that is outside of Jesus’s authority. Nothing. No matter what you’re facing, say out loud, “God’s got this. God’s got me.”

~Lord, I bow in the presence and authority of Jesus Christ, the Lord of all. Amen.

Day 27

Luke 2:19

“But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”

She was still recovering from childbirth. Actually, she was still recovering from the prior nine months. It was a lot to take in - the angel's announcement to her, her miraculous pregnancy, Joseph's 180 degree turnaround, the powerfully encouraging visit to her cousin Elizabeth who was also strangely pregnant in her old age, having to give birth in an animal's cave - it was quite a bit to absorb. Then out of the blue, some shepherds came to visit the baby-telling a remarkable story about a choir of angels and a proclamation of "peace to all humankind." Mary kept mulling over the details, committing them to memory. God had a unique plan that He was carrying out - and somehow her baby was at the center of it all. She knew it. She could feel it.

These experiences and their meaning were a treasure - one that she would bury deep within her soul until the proper time. There would come a day when the treasure would need to be brought back to the surface, dusted off and made ready for the world to see. It was a treasure whose value would increase exponentially over time - later to be used as a ransom to set people free from their bondage to sin. It would be a treasure that would be buried-only to be uncovered three days later to inaugurate a brand-new movement, a new community and given freely to those who believe in His name.

It's a treasure that's available to you today- a gift given in love, priceless and precious. Do you want that gift?

~Lord, I do want that gift! Open my heart to receive it - to receive Jesus. Amen.

Day 28

Galatians 4:4-5

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.”

Nothing God does is ever haphazard. From the opening verses of the Old Testament book of Genesis to the closing witness of the New Testament book of Revelation, the Scriptures describe a God who is intentional, purposeful. God knew the perfect time for the birth of Jesus. And God had the perfect plan in how to carry it out.

And the birth of Jesus within that perfect plan ultimately led to the cross. That same Jesus would grow up, gather a band of ordinary men and women, and teach them how to live differently than the world. He then would go on to die-as the single most selfless act of love and grace ever known to humankind- to give His life as a “ransom” for many. He died for the sins of humanity- your sins and mine - so that our relationship as children of God might be secured and assured.

Christmas Day is not really about gifts under a tree, mistletoe or candy canes. It’s not even about turkey dinners and family gatherings. While all of these are fun and meaningful to us, Christmas is really about interrupting our lives with a message of hope and an invitation for us to turn over control of our lives to the One who truly loves us so much that He gave us His son. God’s invitation needs a response. It’s time.

~Jesus, Happy Birthday! Thank You for Your gift! Amen.