

LIGHT OF LIFE

Advent Meditations



“The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light”

INTRODUCTION



Advent means “coming.” In the church calendar, the Season of Advent begins four Sundays prior to Christmas Day. In many ways it is a time of preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth much like Lent is a season of preparation for Holy Week – Christ's Passion and Resurrection.

This devotional is designed as an aid to help you and your family focus on Christ during Advent - a time of year often cluttered with distractions and busyness. Each week focuses on a particular aspect of the story of Jesus in anticipation of His birth: Week One – the prophets who foretold Christ's coming; Week Two – the city of David (Bethlehem) where Christ was born; Week Three – the shepherds who first witnessed the baby Jesus; Week Four – the angels who heralded the Incarnation. The story culminates, of course, with the birth of Christ who is the Light of the world.

Each devotional introduces the daily topic, a painting and quote by Liliias Trotter, related Scripture with several thought/discussion questions, and concludes with a meditation. The daily readings gradually build a comprehensive picture of the Christmas Story, much like a jigsaw puzzle, taking shape with each added piece.

Many churches and families celebrate Advent with a candle lighting ceremony. There are five candles within the Advent wreath, each one lit in succession weekly, culminating in the lighting of the Christ candle on Christmas Eve. The four weekly candles are traditionally deep purple in color to signify the royalty of the Christ child. In some traditions a pink or rose-colored candle is lit on the third week of Advent to signify the joy of the occasion of the shepherd's discovery of the birth of Messiah in Bethlehem. The Christ candle, in the center, is white symbolizing His purity, being born of the virgin, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and being without sin in His life. More important than the color of the candles, however, is the symbolism of the lit candles, anticipating the light that Jesus – *The Light of Life* - brought to the darkened world!

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THE PROPHETS' CANDLE

First Sunday of Advent

The Light of the Hope of the Prophets



The things that are impossible with men are possible with God.” Yes, face it out to the end. Cast away every shadow of hope on the human side as a positive hindrance to the Divine; heap the difficulties together recklessly, and pile on as many more as you can find: you cannot get beyond that blessed climax of impossibility. Let faith swing out on Him. He is the God of the impossible. (The Glory of the Impossible)

Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-7

- What does the prophet Isaiah say about “light” in 9:1?
- How is this “Light” described in Isaiah 9:6-7?

Meditation on Scripture

Advent season – a time of anticipation... a time of preparation... As we light the first candle, we see the first flicker of hope – light in a dark world. At first, the prophets – even the angels – were mystified by the exact nature of that “hope”.

Progressive Revelation was God’s chosen means of making His purpose clear. The special gift of a Messiah, a Redeemer, was revealed bit by bit – each added element of information, a clue in the “mystery” which we now know to be Jesus Christ. Early “clues” were deliberately vague, but each clue shed greater light in a world darkened by sin. Over centuries, clue upon clue, light upon light – a pattern emerged until the world was ablaze with light – the birth of Christ! Light of Life.

During this week, while we focus on the Prophet’s Candle, we will first consider the context in which this “gift” was promised: The Plan; Paradise Lost. Then we shall look for the clues: The Promise – the light of hope of the prophets.

O most Mighty! O most Mighty!
Far beyond the seraph's thought,
Art thou then so mean and lowly,
As unheeded prophets taught?
O the magnitude of meekness!
Worth from worth immortal sprung;
O the strength of infant weakness,
If eternal is so young!
-Christopher Smart

First Monday of Advent

The Plan

“God saw all that He had made, and it was very good.”
Genesis 1:31



The morning star is so perfectly marvellous these days. It hangs in the dawn like a great globe of silver fire. Of all the images of Christ it seems the one that is almost more than an image – it is so utterly like Him in its pure glory. And it sets one’s heart crying for the promise “I will give him the morning star” – the revelation of Himself to the watching ones. (January 1899)

Scripture: Genesis 1:26-31

- In what way did God set man apart from all of Creation?
- What instructions did God give man concerning His creation?
- What was God’s assessment of what He made?

Meditation on Scripture

Genesis starts at the very beginning of the history of man: the crown of God’s creation. The Plan – God’s intention – was Paradise: Man governing the created order; all relating in harmony with each other. “It was very good.” *Perfection.*

Today with our natural resources tainted, if not depleted, it is difficult to visualize planet Earth in its perfect, undefiled state. It must have been breath-taking: fish, birds, all the creatures of the earth, living in harmony with each other in an unspoiled Paradise. Although we have no conscious memory of such perfection, man carries in his heart even to this day, a longing, a homesickness for “Paradise” – a God-given sense of what it could have been – what it was – when man lived in accord with God’s intentions for him.

First Tuesday of Advent

Paradise Lost

"The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil."
Genesis 3:22



This is the true inward vision, the faith of seeing, as distinct from the faith of deductive proof. It is an illumination that abides from the beginning, not merely flashes of light that visit you from time to time when you have reached a certain stage. For this light is not to be sought within the recesses of your being but outside yourself and away in another, even in Him who God has sent to be the Light of the World. (The Way of the Sevenfold Secret)

Scripture: Genesis 3:1-24

- What did God tell Adam and Eve they could not do?
- What was the immediate result of their disobedience?
- How did Adam and Eve respond to God's inquisition?
- What consequences did Adam and Eve suffer for their disobedience?
- Why do we include this story in our Advent readings?

Meditation on Scripture

"The gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart." (*Telling the Truth*, Fredrick Buechner) Darkness. Paradise Lost. Creature fallen... and the rest of creation follows – Eve, Adam – right on down to each of us, today. "All have sinned." (Romans 3:23) Or, as the *Book of Common Prayer* reads: "There is no health in us."

With the crime, come the consequences: pain, toil, banishment, alienation, death. The gospel is bad news before it is good news. For without darkness, there is no need for light, there is no need for salvation. It was into this sin-darkened world that the first dim light flickered – the light of the hope of the prophets.

First Wednesday of Advent

The Promise

“Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.”

Genesis 22:18b



Our meeting place with God and our beholding His glory, lies not in our going up to Him, but in His coming down to us in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord. “God who commended the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ,” the divine radiance for our souls. (The Way of the Sevenfold Secret)

Scripture: Genesis 3:15; Genesis 22:15-18

The first hint of a redemptive plan is indicated in Genesis 3:15. To Abraham, additional light is given.

- What promises are made to Abraham concerning his offspring?

Meditation on Scripture

The first faint flicker of light – the first clue – was directed to Satan in the presence of Adam and Eve: “I will put enmity between you and the woman...” Though Satan will “strike the heel” of their offspring, their offspring will crush his head. The death blow goes to Satan. The final victory to man. But how?

Later, another clue shed further light. After testing Abraham with the sacrifice of his son for his obedience, God promised to bless all nation through his offspring. God reaffirmed that promise to the Patriarchs Isaac and Jacob, keeping the light of hope alive in their hearts.

But how? When? Through the following centuries, God would reveal more of His Plan through the prophets, keeping the light of hope alive in the hearts of the descendants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

First Thursday of Advent

The Plan Unfolds

“The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a king who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the Land.’”

Jeremiah 23:5



The sun must come to us, that is clear, for we cannot go to it. It sends forth its rays, we know not how. They are of one nature with the sun and come down to earth, and bring the sun as it were to our doors, but with its light and warmth softened till we can bear the radiance and rejoice in it. (The Way of the Sevenfold Secret)

Scripture: Jeremiah 23:5-6

- What “clues” does Jeremiah reveal about David’s descendant?
- What will He be called?
- What do we learn about the King’s rule from Isaiah?
- How will people respond to His rule?

Meditation on Scripture

Many years after God’s promise to the Patriarchs, He revealed more “clues” through His prophet Jeremiah: “I will raise up to David a righteous Branch a King who will rule wisely.” Isaiah proceeded to elaborate on the nature of His reign, describing a creation at peace within the scope of His rule.

Imagine the outsiders’ response to this added light: that all nations would rally to Israel’s king!

First Friday of Advent

Details Revealed

“The Lord himself will give you a sign.”
Isaiah 7:14



For if the Sun of Righteousness has risen upon our hearts there is an ocean of grace and love and power lying all around us, an ocean to which all earthly light is but a drop, and it is ready to transfigure us, as the sunshine transfigured the dandelion, and on the same condition – that we stand full face to God. (Focussed)

Scripture: Micah 5:2; Isaiah 7:10-14

- What clues does Micah reveal concerning the Messiah's birthplace?
- Why was this a surprising birthplace?
- According to the prophet Isaiah, what sign will be given to distinguish the promised King?

Mediation on Scripture

As the “fullness of time” draws nearer, the Old Testament prophets reveal clues yet more specific in nature. Micah states the place of birth – Bethlehem small among the clans of Judah. What a surprising birthplace for one who would be ruler over Israel!

Isaiah provides a yet more astonishing sign – the baby would be born of a *virgin*! Did they really hear the prophet? What did they think? And could they even begin to fathom the significance of the name chosen for this royal son? Immanuel: God with us. By now the sky of Old Testament history was literally studded with stars of prophecy, lighting the horizon for that great coming day!

First Saturday of Advent

Prepare for His Coming

“Make straight the way for the Lord.”
John 1:23b



“Until the daystar arises in your hearts” – that has been lit up these last days with a sense of God’s unfolding: the inner revelation of the coming Jesus that must come before the outward. Such an absolutely new thing as when this morning star flashes up from behind the dark ridge of distant mountains – poised for an instant like a flame kindled on the crest and then soaring slowly upward. (21 January 1899)

Scripture: Malachi 3:1; Luke 1:11-17; Luke 1:57-76; John 1:6-9

- By what means would God prepare His people for Christ’s coming? (Malachi 3:1)
- Who was the messenger who would prepare the way for Christ?
- What would be the thrust of his preparation?
- What further information about John and his mission is given in John 1:6-7?

Meditation on Scripture

As God anticipated man’s clouded vision, He not only offered prophetic clues to clarify His intention, but He promised a messenger” to prepare the way for the Lord, the long-awaited Messiah.

An angel prepared the prospective father, Zechariah not only of his future son but of his message: to give the people a knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

So at last, when John finally fulfilled his mission as a witness to The Light, the stage was set. For those who had hearts to believe and eyes to see: “the true Light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.” Make straight the way for the Lord. For us who have the additional light of hindsight, the message of Advent is the same. The true Light is Coming. Repent and prepare your hearts. Make straight the way for the Lord.

THE BETHLEHEM CANDLE

Second Sunday of Advent

The Light bearing witness to the Savior who was born in Bethlehem.



The first impression of Palestine was of the strangely small scale of everything. But before nightfall one came to realize that this is an intrinsic part – that God wants to show us that nothing is great or small to Him who inhabited eternity in its dimensions of space as well as of time. It is a pivot land – and pivots are apt to be small things in the eyes of those who do not understand their meaning. (26 March 1924)

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7

- For what reason did Joseph leave Nazareth to go to Bethlehem?
- What is the significance of Joseph's lineage: "house and line of David"?
- Describe the birth of Jesus.

Meditation on Scripture

This week the action narrows down to a place – Bethlehem; to a habitat – a stable outside an inn; to a crib – a hay-filled manger; to a baby – the long-awaited Christ. In preparation for the great Event, the principle characters – Mary and Joseph – are given a special light.

As we focus on the light shining on Bethlehem, we will consider the simplicity of the setting God selected to bestow His incomparable gift – a baby: God incarnate.

We will consider His choice of humble cast – the supportive characters of young Mary, Joseph the Carpenter – and the long-awaited King: in the form of a helpless baby!

And, as we consider His gift to us, we will reconsider our efforts of this week, giving to others – card writing, present buying and wrapping, and the sheer energy expended – as a direct response to God’s gift to us.

*But the Bethlehem star may lead me
To the sight of Him who freed me
From the self that I have been.
Make me meek, Lord: Thou wert lowly;
Now beginning, and always:
Now begin, on Christmas Day.
-Gerald Manley Hopkins*

Second Monday of Advent

The Annunciation

“For nothing is impossible with God”
Luke 1:37



Once more, after twenty-two years, Christmas Day in Tolga – and again Christmas-like in its deepest sense with just a touch of the fondouk [inn] to make it beautiful. Common brick walls, earth floor, unglazed windows – such a tiny touch – but fitting in with the wonderful sense of being “weak with Him” which is the key note to the beginnings here. “Wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” – that is how the world’s redemption dawned! (25 December 1923)

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

- Who was the messenger who brought Mary the birth announcement?
- What was Mary’s initial response to the angel?
- What details did the angel offer concerning the child Mary was to deliver?
- How did the angel answer Mary’s question: “How will this be since I am a virgin?”
- What was Mary’s final response to the news of the angel?

Meditation on Scripture

Is it possible for us to imagine the improbabilities of this dramatic narrative? An angel visitation at start, was not a common occurrence. But consider the news the angel brought: Mary, a virgin, will be with child! As if this phenomenon was not staggering enough – consider the description of the child – the baby would be a son, a king destined to rule over the house of Jacob, a never-ending kingdom. In view of all that Mary was processing, the angel’s P.S. – “Your elderly cousin Elizabeth also is pregnant” may have hardly fazed her.

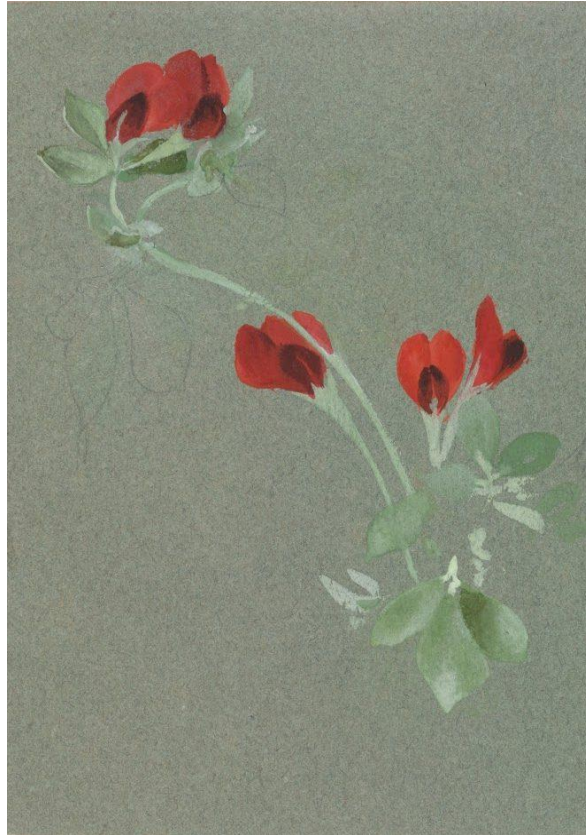
The bottom line of the angel's announcement is stated in Luke 1:37: "*For nothing is impossible with God.*" Is that not the bottom line of the Advent message as well? *Nothing* is impossible with God. Imagine: from Bethlehem, little among the clans of Judah – inconsequential among the nations of the world – the Light has shined – to bring people of all nations out of the darkness into His marvelous Light."

Let our heart response be as Mary's: "I am the Lord's servant." So be it.

Second Tuesday of Advent

The Visitation

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"
Luke 1:42



Such a day of small things still, but on God's terms, and that is enough. Size as well as time and space count nothing with Him. (1 January 1902)

Scripture: Luke 1:39-45; 1:56

- What did Mary do after the angel left her?
- What was Elizabeth's inner response to Mary's greeting?
- What was Elizabeth's outward response to Mary?

Meditation on Scripture

What a wonderfully natural response to the news of her pregnancy: Mary rushes off to Elizabeth who was in her sixth of pregnancy. Try to imagine the three months these two pregnant women spent together leading up to the birth of Elizabeth's baby John. They must have compared notes of their pregnancies, the older woman instructing and encouraging the younger. They must have prepared the layettes for their babies, talking together as they sewed, going over again and again the details of their respective

experiences: Zechariah's encounter with an angel in the temple; the same Gabriel's announcement to Mary!

Imagine their excitement as the days grew closer and closer to Elizabeth's delivery. Mary must have been feeling the first stirrings of life as Elizabeth felt the first contractions of labor.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months the Scriptures say – until Elizabeth delivered, no doubt – and then she returned home. Mary's anticipation of her coming birth must have been heightened by the feel of a newborn in her arms. Her spirit must have been strengthened and her course of action determined by the many hours of sharing with Elizabeth.

She returned home to face the challenges of an embarrassed Joseph and a skeptical small town. But she returned home with a heart full of joy – and great expectations!

Second Wednesday of Advent

Mary's Song

"My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."
Luke 1:46



"Faith is the link which joins our uttermost weakness to God's almighty strength." I came on that the other day, and it is so true. Faith that comes from the depths has a spring in it, like the water pressed down into a low narrow channel, that can rise into a fountain. (12 September 1898)

Scripture: Luke 1:46-55

- Why did Mary praise God?
- To whom does God' mercy extend?
- Contrast God's treatment of the humble with the haughty.
- How has God "helped" His servant Israel?

Meditation on Scripture

We can only speculate the thoughts of Mary after the angel's departure. Did she worry "what people might think"? Did she ever doubt her perception of an angel visitation? Did she puzzle, Why *me*? Why was I singled out from all women for this singular honor?

We do know Elizabeth's testimony, however, of how her baby leapt in her womb for joy at the sound of Mary's greeting the mother of the Lord. Surely any reservations, fears, or

doubts were erased upon hearing Elizabeth's declaration "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished.

Mary's response to Elizabeth's greeting is one of the loveliest "songs" recorded in Scripture:

"My soul praises the Lord
And my spirit rejoices in
God my Savior."

Second Thursday of Advent

Joseph's Story

"When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him."
Matthew 1:24a



My room . . . at sunrise produces a camera obscura of inverted cupolas that ring the changes from rose through orange to straw color against the background of the sky. It likewise has the privilege of plastered walls – the plaster made from the crushed crystals with which the walls are built. These crystals have a word for us too, those crystals, for each of them sprang out of some atom of a growing point round which clustered crystallized this endless beauty of form. If we may but be a crystallizing point from which God can work, it matters nothing, how insignificant that starting point.

(8 November 1927)

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

- What was the relationship between Mary and Joseph at the point of this narrative?
- What was Joseph's initial response when he discovered Mary was "with child"?
- What changed his course of action?
- What information did the angel reveal to Joseph?
- After the angel visitation, what did Joseph do?

Meditation on Scripture

Joseph's role surely was the most awkward in the unfolding drama. To begin with, his bafflement must have been overwhelming. His normally sane, sincere betrothed was declaring herself *pregnant* – but not with his child. Many a story has been contrived throughout the generations to explain an unexpected pregnancy. But Mary's story – conceived by the Holy Spirit – was, paradoxically, inconceivable!

The angel clarified Joseph's unique position for sure, but there was still the skeptical friends and family. Could he really expect them to "believe" their explanations?!

Auden effectively conveys in poetry Joseph's Plight through the interjected voice of the Chorus:

*Joseph, you have heard
What Mary says occurred:
Yes, it may be so.
Is it likely? No.*

*Mary may be pure,
But Joseph, are you sure?
How is one to tell?
Suppose, for instance... Well...*

*Maybe, maybe not.
But, Joseph, you know what
Your world, of course, will say
About you anyway.*

The Narrator concludes the struggles of Joseph with these words of counsel:

*To choose what is difficult all one's days
As if it were easy, that is faith. Joseph, praise.*

Second Friday of Advent

Word Became Flesh

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”
John 1:14a



I feel so that the desire that only grows the stronger as it remains unmet – to get down and down alongside the people and live a life on more “apostolic” lines – must be of God. If so it must find its way too. If we could anyhow – anywhere – live more as Jesus lived His last years! (5 January 1904)

Scripture: Luke 2:6-7; John 1:1-4;14

- Who is the “Word”?
- What do we learn about Jesus through this passage in John?
- Remembering that Elizabeth gave birth to John before Mary delivered Jesus, what did John mean when he said, “He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me”?

Meditation on Scripture

“... the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.”

The Incarnation – God become flesh – is impossible to comprehend with our finite minds. John clearly states that Christ, “The Word” was present at creation, fully participated with God in creating all things - indeed, *was* God. John the Baptist likewise attested to Christ’s pre-existence in his testimony concerning Him: “He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.”

Light and Life – “shining in darkness”! Still, as John poignantly relates, “The darkness has not understood it.” In truth, the Incarnation is impossible to fully comprehend – even for the believer.

*Welcome, all wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span!
Summer in winter, day in night!
Heaven in earth, and God in man!
Great little One! whose all-embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth...*
Richard Crashaw

Second Saturday of Advent

Christ's Humility: Our Example

"Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor."
II Corinthians 8:9



The same lesson is re-iterated all round by God: the simple A.B.C. lesson that where inadequacy and inefficiency on the human side are His conditions for working. "He sealeth up the hand of every man, that all men may know His work." (27 February 1904)

Scripture: Philippians 2:5-11.

- Whose attitude are we to emulate?
- In what ways was Christ's humility manifest? What did the Incarnation require of Him?
- What was the ultimate end of Christ's humiliation?

Meditation on Scripture

Ironically, it is often easier to accept the "humiliation" of Christ than the Scriptural injunction: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." What did Christ's Incarnation require of Him? Giving up His prerogative as God... taking on the nature of a servant... obedience unto death!

How do *I* respond when *my* rights are at stake? How do I react when the menial or lesser tasks are assigned to me? And what about the issue of obedience. Am I willing to comply with God's law and His will in life much less death?

Set to the haunting tune of a French Carol, Frank Houghton captures the essence of Christ's humiliation:

*Thou who wast rich beyond all splendor, all for love's sake becamest poor;
Thrones for a manger didst surrender, sapphire paved courts for stable floor.
Thou who wast rich beyond all splendor, all for love's sake becamest poor.*

*Thou who art God beyond all raising, all for love's sake becamest Man;
Stooping so low, but sinners raising heav'nward by Thine eternal plan.
Thou who art God beyond all praising, all for love's sake becamest Man.*

*Thou who art love beyond all telling, Savior and King, we worship Thee.
Emmanuel, within us dwelling make us what Thou wouldst have us be.
Thou who art love beyond all telling, Savior and King, we worship Thee.*

THE SHEPHERDS' CANDLE

Third Sunday of Advent

**The Light of Joy that unexpectedly brightened
the hearts of a Humble Band of Shepherds**



Once for all, here and now, this light will break on you if you lift up your eyes and behold Jesus Christ with the spiritual vision of the soul. (The Way of the Sevenfold Secret)

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

- What were the shepherds doing when the angels came with their announcement?
- What significance might this have for us?
- Why do you think God chose to announce the birth to the shepherds?
- What was the shepherds' immediate response to the angels' announcement?
- What was their response to seeing Jesus?
- How would you compare your “spiritual awakening” to the shepherds?
- How has your encounter with Christ affected your life?
- What should be our heart's response to the Good news?

Meditation on Scripture

Up until now, everything has been in the future tense: anticipation; promises by the prophets; preparation by angels of the principle characters – Mary, Joseph, Zechariah. Now the “future” becomes present tense in the form of an announcement: “*Today*, in the city of David, a Savior has been born to you.”

This week we explore the richness of God's choice to announce His Coming to a “humble band of shepherds.” He who called Himself both “shepherd” and “lamb” came to the unsuspecting shepherds who were, quite simply, doing their task – “watching their sheep by night.” All of history is concentrated in this moment: even to the very dating of time: B.C. and A.D.

Our focus is likewise on the shepherds' response to the good news the angels proclaimed: "go to Bethlehem; *see* for themselves." Their response to the Christ-child was to return home, glorifying and praising God. What should be *our* heart's response to the Good news?

Third Monday of Advent

Birth Announcement

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”
Luke 2:11



God Most High who created us and you, knows that it is in our hearts to seek a Leader. He knows that this Leader must be a man like ourselves, who has trodden the path by which He would lead us: but it is also in the counsels of God, that this Leader, to lead us aright must be more than man, even as the sheep, who have like ourselves the inclination to follow, are not safe when they are following other sheep, but only when they are following the shepherd. (The Way of the Sevenfold Secret)

Scripture: Luke 2:8-10

- What were the shepherds doing when the angel appeared to them?
- What was the shepherds' reaction to the angels? Why?
- How did the angel respond to their terror?

Meditation on Scripture

A baby – The Baby – was born in a simple manger stable in an obscure part of town. He was alone but for the mother, and Joseph – and lowly barn animals. Who should receive the birth announcement? Kings? Governors? Religious leaders? People of high rank with “contacts” who could spread the word around?

It shouldn’t be a surprise that the same God who placed His promised Redeemer in the womb of a peasant girl and prepared a straw-filled manger for His bed, would choose humble shepherds to first hear the good news.

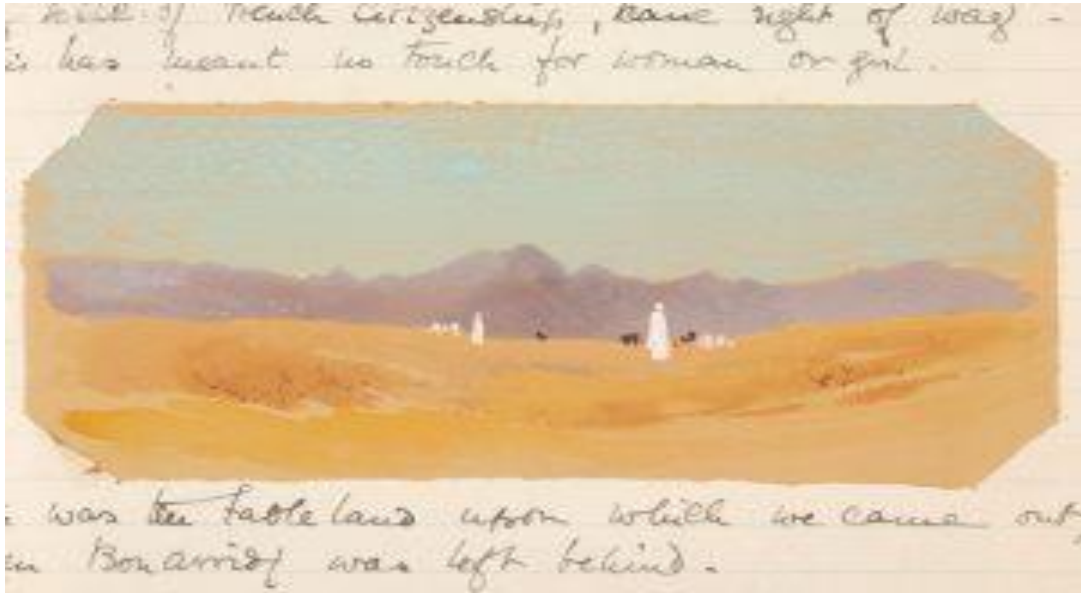
And what an announcement! As if heaven could not contain its ecstasy, and an angel of the Lord broke into the stillness of the night, shining with God’s glory. Reassuring the terrified shepherds, the angel declared the long-awaited message: “As Savior has been born to you.” And as if the heavens could not contain their joy, a great company of angels joined the angelic messenger and literally filled the fields with their song of praise!

Little is known about the shepherds but one thing stands out about God’s choice: He chose men simply doing their jobs. The application is profound. To those of us who seek a “vocation” - a calling – it is likely to manifest itself to us when we least expect it: when we are fully engaged in doing what we are supposed to be doing in the here and now. And it does make sense. God is most likely to assign His special ministrations to those people already proving faithful in their given task, in the small, uneventful circumstances of each day.

Third Tuesday of Advent

Christ the Shepherd

"I am the good shepherd."
John 10:14a



There was a pretty sight in the marketplace this morning – a procession of shepherds in from the desert led off by ten or twelve little lads carrying the lambs in their arms. And the Lord with His Shepherd Heart will not set the souls down in a road too hard for them to follow – even if we under shepherds make mistakes. How the Good Shepherd follows the trail in all His endless patience. Even the torn wool on the briars helps Him on His way! (4 March 1917)

Scripture: John 10:14-18

- What are the characteristics of a “good shepherd”?
- In what ways does Christ compare Himself to a “good shepherd”?
- What does Christ mean when He said, “I lay down my life – only to take it up again”?

Meditation on Scripture

We jump ahead in the Advent narrative to Jesus’ own words concerning His identity: “I am the good shepherd” – and to His mission: “I lay down my life for the sheep.”

Once again, a cryptic message was delivered in startlingly clear metaphor. The shepherd’s relationship to his flock was common knowledge: he fed them, tended them,

knew them by name – and if one of the many strayed, he sought it even to the risk of his own life.

Yet as so often was the case in God’s progressive revelation, there was an additional unexpected message. A message easily missed, but for those with ears to hear, a message so distinct and disturbing in its uniqueness, one could not dispel it from the mind: “I lay down my life – *only to take it up again!*”

What wonderful assurance and comfort Christ’s words must have brought to those people acquainted with the testimony of Christ’s ancestor, David – the shepherd and psalmist.

A Psalm of David

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

Third Wednesday of Advent

Paradox: Shepherd and Sheep

“For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Revelation 7:17



I must put down a dear little story told me by a friend this morning. Her small niece, aged somewhere between three and four, was heard telling the parable of the lost sheep to a cousin a year or two older. The finale was, “So the Shepherd put back the lamb into the fold, and then He mended up the hole where it had got out.” All of sanctification as well as well as salvation lay in the wisdom of those child-lips! (28 May 1926)

Scripture: Isaiah 53:7-11

- In what ways is Christ like a “lamb”?
- What event is anticipated in verses 8 and 9?
- Why was it the “Lord’s will” for Christ to suffer in such a way?
- Look at verse 11. Explain the following phrases with your additional understanding from the New Testament fulfillment of prophecy:
 - “suffering of his soul”
 - “He will see the light of life and be satisfied”
 - “my righteous servant will justify many and he will bear their iniquities”

Meditation on Scripture

“... the Lamb... will be their shepherd...” (Revelation 7:17) Paradoxically, the Prophet Isaiah compared The Redeemer – the Good Shepherd – to a lamb brought to slaughter. A lamb sacrificed for the transgression of the people was a common practice of the Jewish community. But here again, amidst the familiar images, Isaiah slips in the foreign puzzling cryptic comment: He refers to life after death – resurrection: “Though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering he will see his offspring and prolong his days. He will see the light of life...”

Could the Old Testament believers begin to decipher Isaiah’s message? And what about the New Testament followers of Christ? Could they associate the “Good Shepherd” with the “slaughtered lamb”?

For the earnest seeker, the conundrum was clarified by John’s paradoxical testimony upon seeing Christ: “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

Indeed, the sweet cradle of Christ was rocked in the shadow of a Cross.

Third Thursday of Advent

Shepherds' Faith Response

"Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened."
Luke 2:15b



Christ never promised His disciples an easy life. The road He trod for us was a rough road: how then can it be a smooth one to those who follow Him? He makes appeal, not to our love of ease, and of the good things of the world, but on the contrary, He makes appeal to our courage, and to our faithfulness unto death.

(The Way of the Sevenfold Secret)

Scripture: Luke 2:15-16

- What was the shepherds' immediate response to the news of the angels?
- What do you think your response would have been?

Meditation on Scripture

The shepherds' spontaneous response to the angels' astonishing message was "Let's go to Bethlehem and *see* this thing that has happened." What if they had postponed the journey? After all there were the sheep, you know – arrangements to be made... details to work out... But no, their faith response was immediate and trusting.

Their confidence, of course, was in their *certainly* of the message – "the Lord has told us." – and in the *content* of the message – "today a Savior has been born to you..." Hence, there was no time to waste; everything else was of secondary importance.

*We are shepherds: come and listen to our story
Of heaven's choir and the King of Glory.
Come, run with us, and don't waste time
We're on our way to confirm a sign.*

*You may not believe us: that's your choice,
But we saw the angels, and we heard a voice.
"Do not be afraid," the angel said,
For we were quaking and full of dread.*

*"The news I bring is great and for all men.
A savior, Christ the Lord, is born in Bethlehem.
"This will be a sign for you," the angel said,
"The babe is wrapped and lying in a manger bed."*

*You may not believe us: That's your choice,
But the sky was filled with angels, and we heard their voice.
"Glory in the highest to God," sang voice wild,
"And on earth, peace to men on whom the Lord has smiled."*

*You may not believe: that's your choice,
But we saw the angels, and we heard their voice.
-Darcy Weir*

Bottom line, theirs was a *faith* response. They had not yet *seen* with their own eyes. Faith, however, was rewarded by sight. And so it is even now. We must first respond to Christ by faith. *Then* we shall know Him

Third Friday of Advent

Shepherds' Life Response

"They returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen."
Luke 2:20a



Now we turn from all these enemies, the stranger, the thief, the hireling and the wolf, who endanger those who follow afar off, and look at the Good Shepherd and the sheep who stay in His care. They are "His own," not by force, but because He has paid the price of His life for them, and none shall pluck them out of His Hand.

(The Way of the Sevenfold Secret)

Scripture: Luke 2:17-20

- What was the shepherds' response upon seeing the child?
- What was their response to this experience upon return home?
- What was the essence of their testimony concerning the Child?

Meditation on Scripture

Once again, we observe the shepherds' spontaneous response. Having seen Him they 1) "spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child" and 2) they "returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen." In two words, their life response was to *witness* and to *worship*.

It is the most natural thing in the world to rave about any product, person, or experience that has especially satisfied or thrilled us. Indeed it is, likewise, the most natural thing to

fall down and worship that which transcends the common, ordinary and earthbound.
Why the do we balk at both? Witness. Worship.

One bit of stark reality filters through the glory of the Biblical narrative: “The shepherds returned...” Imagine, going back again to the hillside, dark lonely nights, the baaing and straying of simple lowly sheep. Yes, they returned from the magnificent to the mundane – but with a difference. *They* were changed. Long after the shimmer of angel wings had vanished and the touch of soft, warm baby skin was but a memory – the shimmer and warmth remained, but in their hearts demanding a response: get up and spread the word; bow down and worship.

*The shepherds sing;
and shall I silent be:
My God, no hymn for Thee?
-George Herbert*

Third Saturday of Advent

Our Response: Go and Do Likewise

*“Love the Lord your God
with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”
Matthew 22:37*



Therefore, my brother, for this first step of the way in which He calls you to walk with Him, put your hands by faith into His hands, and, though you cannot see Him, let Him look into your eyes and read your heart, and transfer to Him the true surrender that you have learned in the path of the Brotherhood, and that without a fear or a misgiving, for He can make no mistake. A new and wonderful longing will arise in your heart to know and do His will. And not only will your own faith and love be established by going forth with Him, but it is by witnessing to Him that you will be able to draw others to seek His salvation. (The Way of the Sevenfold Secret)

Scripture: Matthew 22:37-40; 1 John 4:7-11

- What is the first and greatest commandment? What is the second commandment?
- What does Christ mean when He said: “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”?
- How did God show His love to us?
What should our response be to God’s love?

Meditation on Scripture

Christ Himself enlarged upon the shepherds' example with His teaching: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Christ called for nothing less than a total life response: heart, soul, mind. Second then, only to our love for God, comes the adjunction "to love your neighbor as yourself."

The Apostle John, in a pastoral letter, speaks to the basis for our life response: "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we ought also to love one another." Our *life* response should be first to love God, *because* He first loved us, and then to love others *as we have been loved*.

Let our response be like that of the shepherds – a life response: spontaneous, wholehearted and immediate. Let us, likewise, witness and worship as we *return* from our quiet moments with Jesus to continue our assignment in the world.

*What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a Shepherd,
I would bring Him a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man,
I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him,
Give my heart.
-Christina Rossetti*

THE ANGELS' CANDLE

Fourth Sunday of Advent

The light of the angels who heralded the Good News of Light to a darkened world.



God is the God of joy, and we must drink in the spirit of His joy. . . He didn't promise us ease and comfort – but He did promise joy which we may have in the midst of any weight or heaviness that may be ours to bear. (17 July 1928)

Scripture: Luke 2:13-14

Try to imagine the scene that the shepherds witnessed on the isolated hillside.

- What do you think the shepherds must have thought at the first sight and sound of the angelic host?
- Identify the role of angels in each of the following accounts:
 - Zechariah (Luke 1:11-19)
 - Mary (Luke 1:26-38)
 - Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25)
 - Shepherds (Luke 2:13-14)
- What qualities characterize angels?
- Do they serve any other function than messengers?

Meditation on Scripture

As early as Abraham, angels anticipated a descendant “through whom all nations would be blessed...” The Scripture this week focuses on the role of angels in anticipating both Advents - the First and Second Coming of Christ to earth - as well as the culmination of earthly history in a new order, a new Creation.

Recorded angelic activity reached an unprecedented flurry immediately preceding the birth of Christ as they prepared the “key” characters – Zechariah, Mary, Joseph – for their

roles in the life of the coming Messiah. What “birth announcement” could compare with the angel’s appearance to the shepherds followed by the glorious company of angels praising God and saying “Glory to God!”? It is no wonder that music plays such a prominent place in the history of celebrating the birth of Jesus!

As tension builds as action accelerates in the crowded days before Christmas, let us remain attuned to the many touches and glimpses of grace this season. May we not miss the protecting, proclaiming, praising angels who shimmer about us mortals so often preoccupied and unaware of God’s matchless grace.

*What sweeter music can we bring
Than a carol for to sing
The birth of this our Heavenly King?
Awake the voice! Awake the string!
Heart, ear, and eye, and everything
Awake! The while the active finger
Runs division with the singer.*
Robert Herrick

Fourth Monday of Advent

Angels Prepare

“The angel said, ‘Do not be afraid.’”
Luke 1:30



How the angels must watch the first day when that light reaches a new spot on this earth that God so loves – and the great wall of darkness is pushed back one tiny bit – and oh, the joy of being allowed to go with His message that first day. How can His people hold back from that joy while one corner remains unvisited by the Dayspring! (March 1895)

Scripture: Exodus 14:19; Judges 2:1; Luke 1:11; 1:28; Matthew 1:20

- What is the message of the angel in each of the above passages?
- How does each contribute to the preparation of the coming Messiah?

Meditation on Scripture

Of all the symbols of Christmas, angels are among the most appealing! Bejeweled, beribboned, bannered – the very word “angel” conjures images of heavenly beings with shimmering glittering wings, gauzy flowing robes of jewel-toned colors edged in gold; messages heralded with instrument and song. So compelling is our vision of angels that it is easy to overlook their very real, very significant role in history.

Specific accounts of angelic involvement in preparing men and women for God’s redemptive plan – as well as expediting that plan – are recorded hundreds of years before Christ’s birth! An “angel of the Lord” traveled before the Israelite army as they made their exodus out of Egypt; he served as a barricade between the armies of Egypt

and Israel by night. Later in Canaan, under Joshua's leadership, the angel rebuked the wayward Children of Israel, bringing them to the point of repentance as he reminded them of God's covenant promise and protection.

As the long-awaited Plan drew nigh, angels prepared the hearts of the leading characters for their role in the unfolding drama. An angel prepared Zechariah that his aged wife Elizabeth would bear a son to "make ready a people" for the Lord." The angel Gabriel prepared a young Mary that she would give birth to Jesus, "Son of the Most High." An angel reassured a frightened Joseph that his betrothed was indeed a virgin, impregnated by Divine intention and supernatural means.

However miraculous, however spectacular the angels' preparatory role in this great on-going drama spanning centuries never did they act as independents, taking it upon themselves to meddle in the affairs of fickle, faithless and fearful mankind. Always they acted as agents of the Divine and Holy God, carrying out His orders to implement the details of God's grand purposes.

Fourth Tuesday of Advent

Angels Praise

"Glory to God in the highest"
Luke 2:14



I have been finding a great blessedness in these last few months in definitely obeying the command "Let them sing aloud upon their God!" – I remembered Pearsall Smith half a lifetime ago, saying in a meeting – at the first Oxford Conference or thereabout – that he wondered how many present had ever obeyed it. But the seed thought has never got vitalized til now. (5 February 1919)

Scripture: Luke 2:13-14

- What was the context of the appearance of the heavenly host?
- What was the purpose of their appearance?
- What was their message?

Meditation on Scripture

Who can imagine the impact on the shepherds, already stunned by the angel announcement of a baby savior's birth, when a great company of angels suddenly appear on the scene? In what must have been one of the purest expressions of praise, they of one accord declared:

"Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace to men
on whom his favor rests."

Through the ages man has tried to capture some sense of that glory through individual expressions of praise. Artists have applied pen and paint to represent angels bearing all manner of instruments to accompany the heavenly hymns of praise. Fra Angelico was immortalized for his angel musicians clothed in gold-embroidered robes, playing celestial instruments: brilliant brass, booming drums, slender flutes, golden harps. Composers have created in music their concept of what that moment must have sounded like: Handel follows a recitative in the *Messiah* with a burst of joyous chorus accompanied by brass instruments “Glory to God” while Vivaldi, inspired by angel-praise, built an entire Cantata – *Gloria* - on this theme. Children draped in angel robes lend their sweet voices to lining songs of praise. Poets and saints labor to catch in words the essence of praise. “Glory to God!”

And yet, for all the inspiration evoked from this grand and glorious moment in history - when heaven broke through to earth - Scripture could not be clearer in the *purpose* of praise: to bring honor to our living Savior. Scripture, likewise, takes praise a step further, beyond our verbal or artistic offerings or, for that matter, even our most costly sacrifices – to a matter of a *life* response: praising God with our entire beings... praising God in our daily walk of obedience to Him. “To obey is better than sacrifice.” (I Samuel 15:22)

Let us continue to try to capture the moment in song, art, and words. But let us go further and proclaim our praise in the manner which truly pleases God: bringing glory to Him through our lives.

Fourth Wednesday of Advent

Angels Minister

“Are not all angels ministering spirits?”

Psalm 91:11



There lies before us a beautiful possible life – one that shall have a passion for giving that shall be poured forth to God – spent out for man. . . (Parables of the Cross)

Scripture: Psalm 91:11; Hebrews 1:14

- What do these verses tell us about the work of angels?
- Who determines the actions of angels?
- How are angels involved in our lives today?
- What difference does it or should it make in my life?
- Have you ever been touched by an angel? Explain.

Meditation on Scripture

What a wonderfully comforting thought: that ministering spirits surround me at the ready to respond to God's command concerning me! It makes me wonder: was that "close call" a crucial co-incidence or the result of direct angelic intervention? The time a sizzle of saliva alerted us to our toddler son who was pulling a live wire to his mouth... the time an out-of-control car skidded over slick ice, inexplicably stopping just before the on-coming train sped in front of my helpless husband... the nighttime walk through piles of

freshly raked autumn leaves along the street curb, when I stopped abruptly – *after* which I saw the open man hole into which I would have taken my next step.

Many tell such stories which thrill the believer, repel the skeptic, but which make us wonder: “Could it have been an angel?” Books are written to testify to such ministering spirits. More importantly, *the* Book teaches us of this reassuring reality: “He will command His angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways...”

Fourth Thursday of Advent

Angels Proclaim

*“They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky,
with power and great glory.
And He will send His angels with a loud trumpet call. . .”
Matthew 24:31*



There is a wonderful sense of expansion – endless expansion – about our love for those who are gone, as if it had escaped earthly fettering. The pain of the parting is just the rending of the sheath, as it were, to let the flower have its way. And their love for us will have grown in the same way, only in fuller measure, into something pure and fathomless and boundless and inexhaustible because it is “in God.” (26 May 1918)

Scripture: I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 24:29-31

- According to I Thessalonians 4, what is the role of angels in the return – or second advent – of Jesus?
- What additional information is provided by Matthew concerning the role of angels in the return of Jesus?

Meditation on Scripture

Even as the angels proclaimed the Advent of Christ to earth, an angel will likewise announce the *second* advent – Christ’s return to earth to claim His own: “For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, and with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”

What must the angels think about uncomprehending human beings - they who were present for the Big Events, when the Divine chose to stoop to earth and involve Himself directly with stubborn and hard-hearted mankind? What must it take to get through to the human heart? Was not trumpet fanfare and angel choirs announcing His coming to earth enough? Next time, however, in the undated future, Christ will come – accompanied by angels - and gather His own for the grandest home-coming of all: “And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

What a homecoming that will be! Reunited with our loved ones who have gone before us; introduced to the legends of our faith – all this will pale in the Presence of Christ: “And we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever!” Amen.

Fourth Friday of Advent

Angels Unaware

“Some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”
Hebrews 13:2b



It is such a happy summer with the dear bunches of the natives about the place. And there is a spirit of love all about – either I get asked out to supper at one end of the house or the other, or a plate of stew is brought to us, or a hunk of watermelon in its wonderful crimson & green – or a sugar cake or two – or my bathtowels get carried off for a private washing & come back fragrant with a scented jessamine wreath folded in – all little precious tokens – & with them the glad light of the happy spirit of help & fellowship among each other. (25 August 1921)

Scripture: Genesis 18:1-19; Hebrews 13:1-2

- What was the role of angels in each of these accounts?
- Can you think of any times in your life when an angel may have “spread his glittering wings over you”?
- How does the thought of an angel unaware affect your life?

Meditation on Scripture

The Genesis account of Abraham entertaining three strangers – angels unaware – is etched in the Jewish collective memory for both the *promise* – “Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations will be blessed by him” – and for the *means* – the offspring of his barren wife Sarah.

As the Hebrew people passed on this miraculous account from generation to generation, they likewise related the appearance of angel-visitors thus raising the bar for the practice of hospitality, compellingly articulated by the author of book of Hebrews: “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Frederick Buechner wrote: “Sleight-of-hand magic is based on the demonstrable fact that as a rule people see only what they expect to see. Angels are powerful spirits whom God sends into the world to wish us well. Since we don’t expect to see them, we don’t. An angel spread his glittering wings over us, and we say things like ‘It was one of those days that made you feel good just to be alive’ or ‘I had a hunch everything was going to turn out all right’ or ‘I don’t know where I ever found the courage.’”

We never know as we go about our daily rounds when an angel – actual or symbolic – will spread his “glimmering wings” over us, gracing our lives with its unexpected presence. Let us keep our hearts and homes open to the unexpected “angel” – be it a family member, a neighbor, a child - a stranger. Who knows: it may be an angel unaware!

CHRISTMAS EVE

...He became poor for your sake so that His poverty might make you rich."

II Corinthians 8:9b



Incarnation

Once upon a time there lived a king who had power over all nations and peoples. His courts were of richest splendor; his tables were heavy with finest food. Music and laughter and gaiety floated from inside the castle and it was always light. Clouds wrapped it in ethereal majesty. Travelers always stopped and looked at the castle for a long while, wishing they might know the kings who had built the marvelous structure. But none were able to reach it.

In the cold of winter, the king's tailor entered the royal chambers with his latest sketches for the king's wardrobe. The little man was proud of his accomplishments. He had selected the finest materials and woven them into the most beautiful garments that eyes had ever seen. They glittered like gold.

But the king was not pleased. He ordered his tailor out, vowing to make his own clothes. No one but the king knew what he wanted. The door to the throne room was shut and locked. Weeks passed, and from inside came the clacking of the loom. The royal court waited with anticipation to see what the king would make for himself. They knew they were bound to be blinded by the glory of it. Finally, the awaited day arrived. The doors opened and the king appeared.

Everyone, especially the tailor, gasped in surprise and horror. His Majesty was dressed in the simplest, cheapest, most unkingly garments imaginable. He had the choice of the world's finest materials, but he had chosen to wear the clothes of a beggar.

"I am going into the valley," he said quietly.

- Michael Davies

“Do you remember the generosity of Jesus Christ, the Lord of us all? He was rich beyond all telling, yet He became poor for your sakes so that His poverty might make you rich.”
II Corinthians 8:9

SCRIPTURE: John 1:1-14

CHRISTMAS DAY

"Today. . . a Savior has been born."

Luke 2:11



The Incarnation – God became man! Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity was and is God Incarnate. It is difficult to grasp the importance of this biblical truth. The Son became a man and so He knows first our condition. He struggled in this life, with all of the same difficulties that you and I have to face. Within the first two years of His life alone battled just to live – surviving the un-sterile birthing room of a stable, escaping the homicidal rampage of a jealous puppet king (Herod), and withstanding the dangers of His family's exodus through the wilderness into Egypt.

Jesus's identification with us did not end there. He knew love and laughter. He knew pain and sorrow. He knew the cold kiss of betrayal and the lashing tongue of mockery. He knew temptation. He knew friendship and leadership. He knew servanthood and compassion. In all things He was just like us save one – He never, ever sinned. Thus, He could become our perfect, holy sacrifice.

At Christmas we give gifts as we remember the greatest gift the world has ever known – Jesus Christ. When we remember we must remind ourselves that Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, who came to live among us, also died purposefully so that He might return and dwell within us, by His Holy Spirit.

This day in your homes you are more than likely exchanging gifts and sharing a meal together with family or friends. Some of you are singing carols around the table or sharing stories of thanksgiving while others are outside teaching their child how to ride the new bike or tossing the new football perhaps. In the midst of all this, let us remember that Jesus Christ came to earth to be with us. If He were here with us in the flesh, He would most certainly delight in these moments. Still in a very real sense He is with us: Emmanuel ("God with us"). By His Spirit that dwells within us and unites us to Christ He is still here touching our lives, dispensing His grace for salvation, and making us holy and blameless for life in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Today, of all days, seek Christ. Find Him in His Word. Search Him out through prayer. Go after Him in the fellowship of the Spirit you share with family and friends. Be like the shepherds who left their flocks in the hills to find the babe in a manger. Seek Him out, knowing He has already found you! Merry Christmas!!!

-Chad Reynolds

SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:20