

ACCOMPLISHED AMONG US

December 2, 2018

TEXT: Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us (Luke 1:1)

Luke is a very methodical man. He does his research, and he talks to eyewitnesses. And he pins down dates and places and people in great detail. As far as Luke is concerned, there is no such thing as being too careful where the story of Jesus is concerned. He writes it as clearly as he can, “so that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4).

Luke is telling the story of “the things that have been accomplished among us” (Luke 1:1). Accomplished by whom? By God, of course. God is the One who accomplished everything Luke wrote about—from the births of John and Jesus, through Jesus’ Baptism, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection. What started with a tiny baby in His mother’s arms ended with the salvation of the whole world, accomplished through God’s own self-sacrifice.

And yet what God accomplished did not end there. Luke himself went on to write a sequel to his first book, the book of Acts. Acts tells about what the Holy Spirit accomplished in the early church, from its beginning at Pentecost to a quiet period when Paul was under house arrest but able to preach and teach freely anyway. The second book, but not the story, ends there. There is still more to be accomplished.

Where? In your life and in mine, and in the lives of every Christian. Whether it’s through great, dramatic events, or quiet, invisible ones, God is still active, accomplishing His plan for our salvation and re-creation every day. All of us who trust in Jesus are part of the ongoing story—joyful participants in “the things that are being accomplished” among God’s people.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank You for the things You are accomplishing in my life, even when I’m unaware of them. Use me in Your service. In Jesus’ Name I ask. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What is one thing you count as a personal accomplishment?

Describe one thing God has accomplished in your life.

What do you think is a work of God that is “in progress” in your life right now?

ENEMIES

December 3, 2018

TEXT: I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel. (Genesis 3:15)

Can being enemies ever be a good thing?

Normally my answer would be “No.” We learn even as children that it’s not good to be enemies with other people. Our parents tell us, “Say you’re sorry,” and “Be nice and make up with each other. Don’t be enemies.”

But in the case of humanity and the devil, enmity isn’t a bad thing—in fact, it’s a gift.

Hear what God says to the devil right after Adam and Eve disobeyed God. He says, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring.” Up to this point human beings and the devil haven’t been relating to each other as enemies—and that’s the problem. When the devil was tempting her, Eve listened to the devil as if he were a friend. Adam and Eve took the devil’s suggestion as if he had their best interests at heart—which of course he didn’t. Sounds like a little enmity is just what’s needed in this situation!

And so God gives it to them. But the enmity didn’t come out of nowhere. God says, “I will put enmity . . . between your offspring and her offspring.” Who is He talking about? Why, about Jesus, the promised Savior who would be the descendant of Eve and overcome all the offspring of the devil—that is, all evil powers that harm humanity.

Because Jesus is God Himself, He knew the devil for what He was—a rebel, a liar, and a murderer. And so Jesus took human flesh in defense of humanity, the people He chose to love as His own. As true man, He overcame our enemy through His own death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. He broke the power of evil over everyone who trusts in Him. And now He shares that same victory over our enemy with everyone who loves Him. Thank You, Lord!

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank You for saving us from our enemy and making us to be Your friends—better than that, Your own family. We love You, Lord. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Who was your worst enemy when you were a child? Why couldn’t you get along?

Do you have enemies now, as an adult? If so, how do you deal with them?

What particular evils or temptations would you like to be “better enemies” with?

WHO CARES?

December 4, 2018

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

The book of Matthew starts with an odd choice of subject matter—42 generations of Jesus’ genealogy, all the way back to Abraham. Some people find this fascinating. Other people are probably yawning and saying under their breath, “Who cares?”

Apparently, God cares. God cares enough to give us a list of names, most of which you can look up in the Old Testament. Not that that’s always an honor! Their ranks include patriarchs and kings, prostitutes and foreigners, adulterers and murderers, and even a man (Manasseh) who offered his own son as a human sacrifice. *Ewww!*

And then there are the people whose lives have fallen off the radar into total obscurity, like most of the names toward the very end. Their lives didn’t get recorded. No longer royalty, Jesus’ family was disappearing into the ranks of ordinary people—craftsmen, shopkeepers and farmers, seemingly of no importance to anybody but themselves.

But they were important to God. God kept track of their lives, if nobody else did. God had plans for them. He cared intensely about all of Jesus’ ancestors, good and bad alike. And God cares about us as well.

We will never make it into the Bible by name. We may never have our lives chronicled anywhere (except possibly Facebook or Instagram). And yet God sent His Son Jesus for us, to rescue us and make us part of His own family, children of God.

You matter. And if you trust in Jesus, your name has been written in the only place that really matters: Jesus’ book of life (Revelation 3:5).

THE PRAYER: Father, thank You for writing our names in the book of life. Let Your Holy Spirit live in us so that everyone can see we belong to Your family. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Has your name ever appeared in the newspaper or other media? When and why?

Why do you think God allowed evil people to be a part of Jesus’ family tree?

Think of a Christian you know who bears a strong family resemblance to Jesus in his or her life and actions. Why do you think so? Describe this person.

A LONG TIME COMING

December 5, 2018

TEXT: Abraham was the father of Isaac ... (Matthew 1:2a)

“Abraham was the father of Isaac ...” If there’s one verse in the New Testament Abraham would have loved to read ahead of time, it’s probably this one. God reached out to a childless man in the ancient Middle East and promised, “I will make of you a great nation” (Genesis 12:2-3). God kept that promise when Isaac was born—25 years later.

What a long time to wait in faith! But it was worth it, as Abraham and Sarah knew when they cradled their newborn son in their arms.

But the other part of the promise took even longer. “You will be a blessing,” God said, “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). God was speaking of Jesus, Abraham’s descendant, who would give Himself for the life of the world. God’s people would wait roughly 2,000 years for that promise to be kept. But it was worth it—as every forgiven, beloved child of God knows.

Are you waiting right now? Perhaps it is something where you can reasonably hope to see the outcome in the near future—graduation from school, a wedding, a birth, the start of a new job or retirement. Or it may be something that won’t happen until Jesus returns and raises us all from the dead—like final, complete healing of our bodies; reconciliation with a loved one; or peace on earth. Whatever it is, we can wait in hope, trusting that it will be worth it—that the Lord, who makes so many great promises, will keep every one of them.

THE PRAYER: Lord, as I wait, keep me trusting in You. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What are you waiting for right now? Name anything you like.

What’s the hardest part of waiting for you, and why?

Which of God’s many promises is closest to your heart right now?

A STRANGE TURN OF PHRASE

December 6, 2018

TEXT: ... And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah ... (Matthew 1:6b)

“By the wife of Uriah.” Why not just call her by name—Bathsheba? Why use a description instead? For that matter, why not just write “David was the father of Solomon” and end the statement there, as with most of the other steps in this genealogy? Why even bring up the matter at all?

As it stands, the text forces us to remember that David committed a great sin—he committed adultery with another man’s wife, and then had that man murdered to cover up his own crime. The great King David made himself an adulterer and a murderer. What a story to find in the middle of Jesus’ genealogy!

And yet, what better place to find it could there be? David’s story reminds us that among Jesus’ ancestors were some of the worst sinners imaginable—people guilty of murder, adultery, prostitution, sacrilege, and child sacrifice, among others. Jesus carried their DNA. Their bodies furnished the basis for His. The sinless Savior of the world had an ancestry teeming with sinful people.

How can this be? When God called Jesus Immanuel, which means “God-with-us,” He meant it. Jesus is truly with us in the most intimate, personal ways. He does not stand aloof from us in our sins. He comes to us, even in the darkest, most shameful depths. He shines His light into our lives. He cleanses us with His own blood, shed on the cross. He lifts us out of the mud and makes us God’s own people, washed clean and pure by His mercy. This is what Jesus was born to do.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, draw me close to You and cleanse me from all my sin. Thank You for loving me so much. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Do you have a notorious or embarrassing ancestor? If so, tell about him or her (but don’t identify the person if he or she lived recently enough that it would cause trouble).

What does it mean to you personally when you hear Jesus called “God-with-us,” Immanuel?

Is there one sin that is especially troubling to you at this time? If so, take time to ask Jesus to be with you and bring His cleansing forgiveness to you now.

ON HIS SHOULDER

December 7, 2018

TEXT: For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His Name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

This is a really odd image. Isaiah starts out by painting a picture of a newborn baby boy, and then abruptly says, “the government shall be upon His shoulder . . .” In my mind’s eye, I see a little baby hoisting a great big heavy load on that tiny little shoulder of His—how exactly does that work?

But it does work, because that baby is more than just a baby—it’s God Himself, the Mighty God who carries all things. And what government is Isaiah talking about?—why, the government of everything, of course. The universe. Our world. My life. Yours. He governs all of it.

All of it is on His shoulder—because a cross was once on that shoulder, a cross He carried for our sakes all the way to Calvary. He carried that heavy load because He loved us—the burden of all of our sins and evil and wickedness, everything we ever did or will do. No one else could carry that load. It would squash them flat.

But Jesus carried it, because you are His. He loves you, He delights in you, and He has made you His own. And today He carries the government of all things—the management of everything in your life—because He loves you. You are never out of His hands.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for carrying the government of every detail of my life. Help me to trust in You, especially when I am afraid or sad. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What is the heaviest load you have ever carried physically?

Are you carrying a heavy load emotionally or spiritually right now? If you are willing, describe it.

Write or say a prayer asking Jesus to help you with a heavy load in your life right now.

GIVE ME A MIRACLE

December 8, 2018

TEXT: Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His Name Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

Have you ever heard somebody say, “If God would just do a miracle, right here and now in front of me, I’d believe in Him”? Whenever I hear this, I roll my eyes. What kind of miracle exactly were they thinking of—the earth opening up and swallowing someone? The heavens torn open and the glory of God being revealed? A voice from the sky booming, “I’M HERE. ARE YOU SATISFIED YET?”

I think that most people asking for a demo miracle underestimate how scary that would be. If I got one of the miracles above, I’d run away so fast you’d smell something burning.

But then there’s the miracle God promised king Ahaz. It was a time when war threatened, and Ahaz didn’t trust God to protect the country. God offered to do a miracle—any miracle—for him to confirm it, and Ahaz wouldn’t even choose one! So God chose for him: “The virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His Name ‘Immanuel’” (Isaiah 7:14).

Who could be scared of a baby? Babies are about as weak and harmless as they come. They certainly don’t belong in a war. But this baby—ah, *this* baby would be God’s miraculous answer to the greatest war the human race has ever faced—Satan’s attempt to destroy us all, body and soul. This tiny baby Jesus would be our fighter, our champion, who would fight the devil and all his power and actually win!—releasing all the people the devil had held in bondage to sin for so many years.

God promised this gentle miracle and kept His promise—to Ahaz, to you, and to me. We don’t need to be afraid. This baby, Jesus, has come to save us.

THE PRAYER: Thank You, Father, for sending us this gentle miracle, Your dear Son Jesus. Help us welcome Him with faith and trust. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

If God offered you a miracle of your choice, what would you ask for?

Are babies scary to you? Why or why not—or under what circumstances?

Why do you think God sent Jesus as a tiny baby instead of a great warrior descending from heaven?

BEING PUNISHED?

December 9, 2018

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

The Bible says that Zechariah and Elizabeth were “righteous” and “blameless” in God’s eyes—a compliment the Bible gives to almost nobody. They were clearly believers, and their lives brought glory to God. But they had no child.

In that culture, not having children was a terrible thing. Most people assumed that God had cursed you—that He was punishing you for something. Having no child meant there would be nobody to support you in your old age, nobody to take care of you, nobody to carry on the family name. Doubtless there were rude people then, just as there are now, who asked the couple, “What did you do to deserve this?”

If you are suffering right now, you may be wondering the same thing. What did I do to deserve this? Is God punishing me? Should I do something so that God will be happy with me again and my problem will go away?

To all of these questions this story offers a decisive answer—no. God was planning to bless Elizabeth and Zechariah, not to curse them. If the blessing came at an odd time and in an odd way, well, that’s God for you!

And to all of your questions, too, God gives a decisive answer—His Son Jesus Christ. No, you are not being punished—your Savior Jesus has taken all your wrongdoing upon Himself, and set you free of it. It doesn’t matter what you have done or not done—Jesus has removed your sins “as far as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12). Your suffering is real, yes—but Christ shares it with you, carries it with you, as He promises us, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you ... I am with you always, to the end of the age” (John 14:18; Matthew 28:20). And when Christ returns for us, we will live where there is no more “mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore,” where “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 21:4).

THE PRAYER: Father, help me to trust strongly in Your Son Jesus, who has taken away all my sins. Thank You for making me Your own. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What kinds of questions were you raised to believe are rude and should never be asked?

Have you ever felt judged by someone who seemed to be holding you responsible for your own misfortune? When?

What answers from God are you waiting for right now?

AFRAID

December 10, 2018

TEXT: And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. . . .” (Luke 1:11-15a)

When Zechariah saw the angel standing in the temple, he had the same response so many people do when they see an angel: he was scared. That’s just not something you expect, when you are doing your daily work—even if that work is to burn incense in the temple of the Lord. And now suddenly a glorious messenger of God was standing there, and who knew what he was going to do or say? No wonder Zechariah was terrified.

But the angel put him at peace as quickly as possible. “Don’t be afraid,” he said. The angel brought good news—Zechariah and his wife would have a son! This was not a time to be afraid, but to rejoice and be happy. God gave them a wonderful promise, and it would be fulfilled very, very soon.

I don’t know about you, but sometimes I am scared also. Not by seeing angels, but there’ll be something—a Bible verse, a chance thought, or simply the glory of creation on a beautiful winter morning—and suddenly I am reminded of how very small I am, and how great God is. The God who made everything—from the great spiral galaxies to the delicate frost on my windshield—who am I to speak to Him?

More than that, God’s perfect holiness forces me to realize my own brokenness. He is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. And me? Well, let’s just say I’ve got issues. I am a sinner. And so I am afraid.

But against our fear, God, in effect, says to us, “Don’t be afraid. I will give you a Son, My own Son, Jesus. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at His birth, for He is born to be your Savior. He will bring you into My family, and you will never need to be afraid again. Instead of being My enemies, you will be My own dear children, because you trust in Jesus.”

THE PRAYER: Dear Father, thank You for giving us peace with You through Your Son Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What is the most awe-inspiring thing you’ve ever seen?

When you are afraid of something, how do you handle that fear? What kind of things do you do?

The Bible tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (see Psalm 111:10). What do you think is the difference between good, healthy fear and unhealthy fear of God?

MISSING THE OBVIOUS

December 11, 2018

TEXT: And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” (Luke 1:18-20)

I love the interaction between Zechariah and the angel. The angel announces good news—the best!—to Zechariah, and Zechariah comes back with a politer version of “Sez who?” “How can I be sure this is true?” he says. “What guarantee will you give me?”

Give Gabriel credit. He restrains himself, and he doesn’t say, “Man, you’re talking to an angel *right now*. Isn’t that a little out of the ordinary? Doesn’t that mean something to you?”

For being foolish and stubborn enough to disbelieve an angel, Zechariah gets nine months of silence. He won’t be able to talk again until he has something worthwhile to say. And when he does finally speak, he praises God who kept His promise, regardless of Zechariah’s unbelief.

It’s easy for me to laugh at Zechariah. But I miss the obvious, too. “Where is God right now?” I ask, my mind fixed on my sister’s illness or my friend’s troubles. “What is God doing all this time?”

Advent reminds us: God is here. God has come in that tiny baby of Bethlehem, Mary’s newborn Son. God is working in Him to rescue us. The great miracle of Christmas is that God really has come into our sorry world, down into the middle of grief and pain and sadness, to live among us and to save us all. He has not forgotten us, however we may be suffering right now. “I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you,” He says. “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (John 14:18; Matthew 28:20).

THE PRAYER: Lord, so often I forget what You have done for me, and I am troubled and worried. Help me to see and remember Your salvation, and to trust in You with all my heart. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Did you ever fail to see something obvious, even though you were looking for it all over the house? Tell the story.

Name three of the blessings God has given to you. These can be anything major or minor, obvious or obscure.

What do you do when troubling events in your life threaten to take your focus off God’s salvation for you?

“HE LOOKED ON ME”

December 12, 2018

TEXT: After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.” (Luke 1:24-25)

Did you ever feel overlooked—like nobody saw you, or cared? That can be a miserable feeling. It’s hard to be the only one not invited to a party—the only one not in a group conversation—the only one among your friends who is not dating, or not married. And it’s really hard to be like Elizabeth—to feel like the only one *not* having a baby when there are pregnant women everywhere, and young children playing up and down the street.

It’s bad enough to feel invisible to your friends and neighbors, but it’s even harder when you feel invisible to God. Elizabeth knew that children are a gift from God. Why, then, was He not giving her that gift? Had she done something wrong? Or was God simply overlooking her—did she not matter in His eyes? That hurts. After all, none of us *deserves* to be noticed by God, but we still pine for His attention. We long for His notice—even for His love. And when we feel ignored, it hurts.

It was many long years before Elizabeth had the joy of seeing, in her own body, that God had not forgotten her. “He looked on me,” she said. The proof was the baby growing inside her, though she was an old woman by that time. But you and I don’t need to wait so long. God has looked on us, too. The proof is the baby growing inside of Mary—God’s own dear Son Jesus, who came to be your Savior.

In Jesus, you can see that God has remembered you. He has looked on you with love—He has even made you His own child. You are not forgotten. You are beloved.

THE PRAYER: Thank You, Father, for seeing me even when I feel invisible. Help me to trust in Your love which never leaves me. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When do you feel most invisible?

Would you rather feel overlooked or highly visible? Why?

How has God’s notice of you made a difference in your life?

THE RIGHT PERSON?

December 13, 2018

TEXT: In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. (Luke 1:26-29)

Every so often I pick up the phone, only to hear an unfamiliar voice saying things that make no sense in my situation. "Sorry, wrong number," I say, and hang up. Mary couldn't "hang up" on Gabriel, but she seems to have been thinking much the same thing: "Favored one? The Lord is with me? Is he talking to the right girl? What sort of greeting is this?"

But Gabriel went on to confirm he had it right. "You have found favor with God," he said. Mary was on the receiving end of God's favor, God's grace—and so, yes, she was the right girl, and she would conceive Jesus and give birth to the Savior of the world.

God calls to us too, and sometimes we're tempted to hang up on Him. "What's this you're calling me?" we think. "Child of God, beloved one, saint, precious and bought with a price—are You talking to the wrong person here?" We certainly don't feel like all of that. Our sins are staring us right in the face!

But all those names—that's what God sees when He looks at us. And like Mary, we too have found favor with God. By Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we really are those things now—beloved, holy children of God. It's not a wrong number when God calls us His own. Like Mary, we are now "the right people."

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank You for loving me and making me Your own. Thank You that when You call me "beloved" and "child," You really do mean me, the one You have saved. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What is the funniest or strangest wrong number call you have received?

On what occasions do you feel the most like "the wrong person"—awkward, uncomfortable, out of place?

Which of the many names God uses to describe you has the most meaning for you today?

IMPOSSIBLES

December 14, 2018

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

And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the Child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1:34-37)

“Nothing will be impossible with God.” This is true, we know it is true, God can do anything. He has all power

And yet it seems sometimes like a cruel mocking of our hopes, because we know God could do so many things—cure K’s cancer, bring C to faith, free J from panic attacks—and yet He doesn’t do it. “Nothing will be impossible with God”—well, yes, except for the things He chooses not to do. Those are impossible, all right. Those are impossible to us, and as far as God goes, they might as well be impossible, because He has chosen not to intervene. God may be with us, all right, but not with the will to do the impossible things we so deeply want.

And yet Mary didn’t get what she hoped for, wanted, expected either. “You will conceive and give birth to a Son”—she was still looking forward to her wedding celebration; this news might have been welcome a couple years down the line, but it was premature as far as her planning went. Husbands first, babies later—right? Not a baby in a way that meant there might be no husband, either! If God is doing the impossible here, He is doing His own impossible thing, not Mary’s dream.

And when God does impossible things in our own lives, it’s the same, isn’t it? He does His own impossible thing, not the impossible thing we want Him to do—or not usually. He gives a baby to a woman after she has grown old, Elizabeth. He makes a virgin bear a son. Not what we expected. Not what we wanted. And yet it is what we needed, isn’t it?

A Savior is what we needed—God’s own Son from heaven. This is the impossible thing we needed without wanting it, without even knowing it. And this is the impossible thing God chooses to do, because He loves us, beyond anything we can possibly plan out for ourselves. He gives us this, because we need it more than anything.

We still pray for our own *impossibles*, and we should. Oh, God, please ... But the greatest impossible is given to us already—Jesus our Savior.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, often I don’t understand You, but I know that You love me. Thank You for giving me what I need most. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What is the oddest gift you’ve ever received?

What impossible thing are you asking God for at this time?

How do you handle it when God gives you something different than what you’re asking for?

A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

December 15, 2018

TEXT: In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:39-43)

Luke tells us that Mary went “with haste” to visit Elizabeth; she was in a hurry to get there. And no wonder, because Mary knew that Elizabeth and Zechariah were the two people in the world guaranteed to believe in the miracle that was happening to her. They would understand that Mary’s coming baby was God’s miracle; they had their own miracle baby on the way. They would gladly take her in and care for her while she experienced those first few months of pregnancy herself—days of joy and anxiety, tiredness and morning sickness.

Elizabeth’s house would be a home away from home—a place where Mary could relax and be comfortable. We all need that kind of a place, don’t we? We need a place we can go where we don’t have to worry about judgement or condemnation or shame. We need a refuge: a place where we can feel safe and loved.

God’s good news for us is that we have exactly that—a home away from home, a place—no, even better, a Person!—who welcomes us and cares for us as His own children. “God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble,” says the psalmist (Psalm 46:1). God made Himself our refuge when He entered this world as our Savior, Jesus Christ. He lay down His own life to rescue us from evil, and rose from the dead as the One with power over everything, including all our fears. And to all of us who are ashamed, frightened, fearing judgment, He says, “Come to Me. Whoever comes to Me I will never cast out ... This is the will of Him who sent Me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given Me, but raise them up on the last day” (see John 6:37-39).

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord Jesus, You have called me to You. Let me stay with You forever, trusting You with all my heart. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What is your favorite place to be? Why?

Who is someone in your life who makes you feel truly at home? How?

Think of someone you know who needs a “home away from home” from you. What could you do to show care and welcome to him or her?

FACING THE MUSIC

December 16, 2018

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

I've always been curious about Mary's homecoming. That's probably the point where she had to talk with her parents, and with Joseph, about her pregnancy. Would they believe her? What if they didn't? At only three months along, Mary probably had a few more weeks before she began "showing," but she didn't have the luxury of putting off these conversations. Decisions needed to be made; plans had to be worked out. I'm sure she approached these conversations with a lot of prayer!

We have these kinds of moments too, don't we? Times when something scary's coming up, and we've got no real choice but to go through with it. Childbirth; a cancer diagnosis; a relationship ending; the death of someone we love. Whatever it is, we can't avoid it, or not for long. We can only go through it.

And of course there's no guarantee that things will turn out the way we want them to. The Bible doesn't tell us what Mary's parents said; we know that Joseph assumed the worst, at least until the angel spoke to him later in a dream. How painful that conversation must have been for everybody involved!

Sometimes I think that God could have spared her the pain. But then, this is the same God who didn't spare His own Son pain and humiliation—the humiliation of infancy, the pain of the cross. There is an old proverb about beginning as you mean to go on; God is at least consistent.

But He's consistent in another way, too. Mary calls Him "He who is mighty" who "has done great things for me, and holy is His Name. And His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation" (Luke 1:49-50). We may go through hard, painful times, but we never do it without God right there with us, holding us, having mercy on us. The One who was born into poverty, who suffered rejection and humiliation and pain, the One who hung on the cross—He is with us as we suffer, and He holds us in His own nail-marked hands. He will not let us go.

THE PRAYER: Lord, thank You that You are with me, even during my hardest times. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When were you in a bad situation where there was nothing you could do but go through it?

What is your attitude toward God like during those times?

Whom do you know who is going through a similar time right now? How can you care for that person?

THEY MEANT WELL

December 17, 2018

TEXT: Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. (Luke 1:57-62)

“They meant well.” Aren’t those ominous words? You know right away that someone has messed up. We only say people “meant well” when it’s clear they’ve made a mistake.

When Elizabeth had her baby, her relatives and neighbors were so happy. It’s pretty clear that they loved Elizabeth and Zechariah, and they rejoiced when God finally (*finally!*) gave them a son. So they came to the circumcision ceremony, prepared to celebrate.

And that’s what they did. Everything was going great until they got to the baby’s name. “Zechariah Jr., right?” You can practically hear the relatives saying it. And in the middle of this, Elizabeth’s answer drops like a stone: “Yeah, actually, it’s John.”

What? “That isn’t a family name,” they protest. And then they go over Elizabeth’s head to ask her husband, as if they expected him to overrule her—as if they thought Elizabeth had shut him out of the decision in the first place!

Meaning well isn’t enough. We need someone who not only means well, but *does* well—someone who loves us and finds a way to put that love into effective, loving action. And that’s exactly what God sent to us: our Savior Jesus. His love shines out in everything He does for us—whether that is teaching us, rebuking us, comforting us, or showing kindness to us. Truly, He is the one who “has done all things well” (Mark 7:37).

With Jesus, there are no blunders—no mistakes—no “I didn’t mean it that way” and “You’re too sensitive” and “Can’t we just forget about that time?” We know that Jesus is nothing but goodness and love and health and holiness; if there is a problem between us, it’s obvious who needs to correct course. And yet He never holds those problems against us—never rejects us out of hurt feelings—never refuses to be reconciled with us, to accept us, to bring us home. Our friends and relatives love us. Our Savior laid down His own life for us—and then rose again to share His everlasting life with us forever. How wonderful He is!

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You that You always forgive and take me back again when I have failed to do well—or even to mean well. Thank You for saving me. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When was the last time you got your feelings hurt by someone who meant well?

When was it you who meant well, but didn’t manage to carry it out well?

When you have to deal with people who mean well but hurt you anyway, how do you find the strength to treat them with the love of Jesus?

A DONE DEAL

December 18, 2018

TEXT: And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David.” (Luke 1:67-69)

Take a close look at what Zechariah says to his newborn baby John. Speaking by the Holy Spirit, he says, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people ...” Wait a minute. *Has* visited, *has* redeemed? Why are we in the past tense here?

I can only think of one reason: Zechariah is using the past tense because it’s already a done deal. Jesus has visited His people—at this very moment His mother Mary is three months pregnant with Him—and all the rest of it is going to follow just as surely as the sun comes up in the morning. Has God visited His people? Then He has redeemed them, too. Has He raised up a strong Savior (that’s what “horn of salvation” means) in the house of David? Oh yes, even if that baby won’t reach the cross for another 30-some years. It’s a done deal. Jesus our Savior is with us now and always. As the writer of Hebrews says, “He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25).

Sometimes when we look at our lives we see only the unfinished business—the trouble we deal with daily, the sins still tripping us up. The finish line, when we are with Jesus forever, seems so far away. But that’s not how it is in God’s eyes. As Paul explains, “For those whom [God] foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified” (Romans 8:29-30). Paul knows it, too. Our salvation—and even our sanctification—is not some far-off, way-in-the-future thing. In Jesus, it’s a done deal.

THE PRAYER: Lord, help me to trust in You with my whole heart, because I know that my salvation is complete in You. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

In your daily life, what kinds of guarantees do you count on? Which make you feel the most secure, and why?

When you were a child, who was the most trustworthy person you knew? What kinds of promises did you have from that person?

What is your favorite promise from God, and why?

CRISIS

December 19, 2018

TEXT: Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:18-19)

I think it's interesting that God put off talking to Joseph until Joseph had already made up his mind what to do. How easy to have an angel swoop in at the moment of truth, when Joseph realized Mary was pregnant—to step between the two of them and say, “Joe, bud, you’ve got it all wrong, no need to worry.” But God didn’t do that. Apparently, Joseph went home from whatever disastrous meeting told him the truth, thought it over (probably for hours, the way you do when you’re upset and unhappy) and finally, finally lay down to sleep. At which point, God sent the angel to tell him the good news.

Why not tell him earlier? I don’t know—perhaps because it gives us a really clear look at what kind of man Joseph was? Crisis tends to do that. From Joseph’s reaction and final decision, I think it’s fair to say that he is a man who gets upset, but doesn’t immediately blast everyone around him with his feelings. Instead, he can think things over, and he is able to show compassion, even for people who do him wrong. Those are pretty good traits in a man and a husband. Those are great characteristics for a man who will become the foster-father of Jesus Himself.

Crisis tends to bring out the truth in us as well. Who has not been surprised by the things we find coming out of our mouths under extreme stress? Hopefully they are good, kind things, but not always. Hopefully our decisions are good, fair and compassionate—but not always.

We are not always wise, kind, compassionate people. All the greater our need is for a wise, kind, compassionate Savior—our Lord Jesus. Though we definitely did Him wrong, leaving Him for a set of idols ranging from money to power to honor and prestige, He has not left us. He has not decided to divorce us, even quietly. Instead, He has called us to Himself through Baptism and His Holy Spirit, making us His own dearly loved people. When we stray, He brings us back. We will be His own forever.

THE PRAYER: Thank You, Lord, that You call us back to Yourself, again and again, because You love us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When did you get bad news and have to make a decision? Was it easy or hard to do so?

When was a time when you were at someone else’s mercy—and they showed compassion to you?

If you’re willing to talk about it, in what area of your life are you most in need of God’s patient compassion right now?

FEARING THE FUTURE

December 20, 2018

TEXT: But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son, and you shall call His Name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall call His Name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:20-23)

What if? What if I lose my job and I can’t make the house payment? What if my husband gets cancer? What if I fail the test? All you have to say is “What if?” and my mind is off and running, constructing elaborate nightmares of all the bad things that might happen, could happen, if only ...

Joseph probably went through some of this after the angel told him to take Mary home as his wife. What if I do marry her—will people blame me for the too-early pregnancy? Will the gossip in the village hurt my wife, my family, our business? Will the baby even love me, since I’m not His real dad? And how in the world could I possibly help raise the Son of God?

But to all of this, the angel says simply, “Fear not.” Don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife. God’s hand is in this situation. God knows the answer to all your questions, and He is in control. When you need to know something, He will let you know. In the meantime, just trust Him. It will be okay.

God says that to us, too, when we are afraid of the future. “I am with you always,” He says (Matthew 28:20). “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10). “Even to your old age I am He, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save” (Isaiah 46:4). When we are afraid, we can turn to Jesus, our Immanuel, God-with-us. He will never fail us.

THE PRAYER: Lord, when I fear the future, draw me close to You and help me to trust in You. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When you were little, what did you imagine your life would be like someday?

How is your life different than what you imagined as a child? Is it better or worse, and why?

When you look to the future, what concerns you? How do you keep your faith strong in God?

OBEDIENCE

December 21, 2018

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

Joseph did exactly what he was told to do: when he woke up, he took Mary home as his wife, and when the baby was born, he named Him Jesus. Simple. Or as my son would say with a laugh, “Simple-not-simple.”

Because obedience usually isn’t that simple, is it? We may know exactly what to do, but actually doing it—ah, that’s another matter. Something comes in between our knowledge and our actions—something that tends to skew the result, so there are times it doesn’t even faintly resemble what God told us to do. We call that “sin.”

I’m glad Joseph managed to get obedience right this time. I, too, get it right sometimes—but not always. And that’s a problem.

But it’s a problem Joseph’s foster-son was coming into the world to deal with—as the angel said, “He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). He came to do exactly what His Name promised, for Jesus means “the Lord is salvation.” He is the One

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

Jesus’ obedience has become our life. Thank God for our wonderful Savior!

THE PRAYER: Father, thank You for sending Your Son Jesus to be our salvation. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Does your name have a meaning you know? If so, what?

When do you find obedience easiest? When is it hardest for you, and why?

People tend to look down on obedience as a virtue. How is Jesus’ obedience different from the way most people think of obedience?

AN ORDINARY WORLD

December 22, 2018

TEXT: In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with Child. (Luke 2:1-5)

Luke starts the story of Jesus' birth by dating it to a tax registration—the one when Quirinius was governor, he says. Of all the things to use to date the birth of the Son of God! Luke could have picked something more exciting, more interesting—perhaps the death of a famous person, or the date of a battle, or the invention or discovery of some important object. But he doesn't do this. Luke goes for the old, eternal standby—because as the proverb tells us, two things are guaranteed in life: death and taxes.

In some moods this strikes me as funny. Could Luke have possibly picked something more boring? And yet it's wholly appropriate, isn't it? Because Jesus was coming into a humdrum, everyday world—a world filled with ordinary, boring, and occasionally painful things like taxes. His life would be filled with ordinary meals, ordinary activities like waking, sleeping, walking, talking to friends, and so on. His public ministry didn't even start until He was about 30 years old. Before that, what? Probably the weekly round of work, worship, and caring for a family—ordinary things. So ordinary that Luke doesn't even bother to write them down.

But it's appropriate that our Savior should have had this sort of life for so long. Because these were the kind of people He was coming to save—people like us, with work to do and taxes to pay and dinner to cook. Few of us are rich or famous. Our lives are not all excitement, all the time. But our need for a Savior who loves us and understands us is truly *all the time*. We will never not need Jesus, not for a single moment. And because of God's love for us, we have Him—more sure and certain than anything—even death or taxes.

THE PRAYER: Father, thank You for sending Your Son to us in our ordinary world, to be our Savior. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What is the most boring part of your day?

Many fictional so-called “gospels” make up exciting stories about miracles in Jesus' childhood. Why do you think they do this?

What does it mean to you that God is with you in the middle of taxes, paperwork, or cooking dinner?

DON'T YOU KNOW ME?

December 23, 2018

TEXT: And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger ... (Luke 2:6-7)

If you have children, do you remember the first time you were completely responsible for them, with no doctors or nurses or grandparents around? I remember walking up the steps to our house with my newborn son in my arms thinking, “Where are the grown-ups? Who’s going to take care of this baby?” It didn’t seem right that somebody—God?—had trusted me to keep safe a tiny scrap of a human being not three days old. Didn’t God know me? Caring for a dog was about as far as I’d gone before!

But for Mary and Joseph, it must have been worse. This was God’s own Son. How could two sinful people raise the holy Son of God? No doubt they felt totally inadequate. After all, didn’t God know them? How could He trust His Son to them?

However they felt, they had to go forward. Joseph made his new family as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, and no doubt he arranged food and looked for better housing. Mary unpacked the baby things and wrapped Jesus up warmly, and then found Him a safe place to sleep in a manger. With the help of God, Jesus’ new parents got on with the job, trusting God to mend whatever mistakes they made.

That’s what we have to do too, isn’t it? Perhaps you are facing some challenge right now that makes you, too, look around, wondering where the grownups are who ought to be dealing with your situation. You know your own weaknesses all too well. But to you Jesus says the same thing He said to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.” And with Paul we can answer, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Our Savior Jesus died and rose for us. He will not leave us alone in any of our challenges.

THE PRAYER: Father, when I don’t know what to do, give me Your Holy Spirit to guide me and direct me. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

How do you feel about caring for newborn babies? Pets? Sick people? Is this comfortable for you, or not?

Have you ever felt like a “real adult” ought to be handling your responsibilities instead of you? If you’re willing, tell the story.

When has God helped you face a challenging situation?

ACCORDING TO PLAN?

December 24, 2018

TEXT: And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7)

How distressed Joseph must have been! He could get no decent place for his wife to lie down, even though she was plainly about to give birth. There was no room in the inn. Whatever relatives they might have had in Bethlehem could not give them a bed. By this point, Mary no doubt wanted nothing but a place to lie down—any place, so long as it was horizontal; but her husband wanted better for his wife and her baby.

I wonder what Joseph thought of God’s planning at that moment. It surely didn’t resemble the kind of planning Joseph wanted! Was he angry? Frightened? Worried? We don’t know.

But in God’s eyes, everything was going according to plan. Jesus was about to be born in the city of David, in Bethlehem, as God had promised so many years ago: “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for Me One who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days” (Micah 5:2).

God came into our world as a human baby between the thighs of a woman in temporary housing. We don’t even know if Joseph managed to find a midwife to help. Instead of a cedar cradle, Jesus had a manger to sleep in. Instead of silk and cloth of gold, Jesus was wrapped in homely swaddling clothes. This is the birth God planned for Himself as He set in motion His great plan—the plan to redeem us all from the power of death and the devil.

Like Joseph, we too are often distressed when our plans aren’t working out—especially when we see our loved ones suffer as a result. But we can take comfort in knowing that God cares for them as He cares for us, and He is working out His plans to save us all—through Jesus, our Savior.

THE PRAYER: Lord, when my plans go wrong, help me to rest in You, trusting that You will see us through. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What plans are you making right now?

Tell about a time when your best-laid plans all went awry.

What glimpses have you had of God’s plan for your own life over the years?

STARTLING

December 25, 2018

TEXT: And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. (Luke 2:8-9)

It was probably a quiet night. Not much excitement unless something startled the sheep. The biggest problem was likely to be staying awake.

And then the glorious wake-up call, with an angel surrounded by the glory of God, and the shepherds are on their feet, blinking, shaking.

Something to startle the sheep? Oh, yes indeed. Something to startle God's sheep, to wake them up and bring them to their feet, rubbing their eyes. A newborn baby, lying in a manger. A Savior. God Himself, come down to earth, come to save us.

Because it is startling, isn't it? People going about their everyday lives, working or sleeping, sitting, walking, eating—and then God. God in the middle of us all, sleeping and crying and nursing. God in a manger, the center of a humble family in a little village in a conquered country. God-with-us, Immanuel.

But sheep don't stay startled. Soon enough they calm down and go back to their grazing. And we, God's sheep, also calm down and go back to our everyday lives. But not alone, this time. Now we have Jesus. The God who was born for us, who lived and served and suffered and died for us, the Lord who rose from the dead for us—He has become our Shepherd. He keeps us in His care forever.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for coming to live and to die and to rise again as our Good Shepherd who loves us. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What do you know about sheep, and how do you know it?

How do you most resemble a sheep?

What does Jesus do for you as your Shepherd?

UNTO YOU

December 26, 2018

TEXT: And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:10-12)

Have you ever been left out of anything? Remember back in your school days—the classmates who would gather together, whispering and laughing, but when you came close, suddenly the conversation ended. Or maybe there was a party you didn’t get invited to. Even now you may be facing adult versions of this—and it hurts. It hurts a lot.

The shepherds would have known about that. Their status was low, and religious people often looked down on them. Taking care of sheep made it difficult to get to worship or Bible study!

It’s possible that even the shepherds themselves came to agree with those who looked down on them. It’s hard to keep thinking you are worth something when others treat you poorly.

But suddenly here comes an angel, a messenger of God, and he says to them, “I bring *you* good news ... for *all* the people ... unto *you* is born a Savior.”

Unto you! Unto you, poor shepherd, smelly and ignored and uneducated as you are. Unto you, disabled or shut-in or aging or living with chronic pain. Unto you, you with the bad reputation, whether you earned it or not. Unto you, you with the outwardly wonderful life, but inside you still feel lonely and troubled and wonder if anyone would want you if they knew the full truth about you.

And unto me, even me, too.

Jesus is born to us as our Savior. What does that mean? It means that God wants you—wants you so much that He is willing to come into this world as a tiny baby lying in a manger. It means that God wants you personally, you yourself, just as you are—because this baby will grow up to suffer and die for you, you yourself. It means that God wants you forever, because this baby Jesus will one day rise from the dead, and for what? To share that everlasting life with you, you whom He loves, so that you can be His forever.

Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior. Praise God!

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You that You want me. I want and love You too. Keep me with You. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What groups tend to be looked down on and excluded in our world today?

What experiences have you had with being an outsider, unwanted and alone?

How do you know when someone wants you? What does it mean to you to know that God really wants you, now and forever?

BROTHERLY

December 27, 2018

TEXT: And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!” (Luke 2:13-14)

Just imagine, all those angels, spread out across the sky, praising God. That’s some kind of celebration! Clearly something wonderful is happening, and they just have to get in on it—not just one angel, not two, but a multitude of them.

And what are they praising God for? Some angelic reason? They’re celebrating “good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11).

Think about that for a moment. These angels are celebrating a uniquely *human* joy—that God Himself has come into the *human* race, been born among us as a baby, has come to save the children of Adam and Eve. The primary beneficiaries of this great miracle aren’t angels, but human. The angels are celebrating *on our behalf*—praising the God we share for coming to redeem the fallen human race.

Now I call that brotherly of them. It’s the kind of joy a sister or brother shows when a good thing happens to someone else in the family. If we have a good relationship with our siblings, their happiness is our happiness; their joy is our joy. And the angels treat us in just this way.

But it’s not surprising when you think of whom they are imitating. God Himself loved us enough to be born among us as a human being, our brother and Savior, Jesus. Through His death and resurrection, He brought us back into the family of God as dearly loved children. We are not lost and estranged from God’s family anymore—we are home again. And now we too can celebrate “with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, evermore praising God and singing!”

THE PRAYER: Thank You, Father, for the angels You created and the kind concern they have for us. Help us to echo Your love by loving one another in Jesus. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Do you have brothers and sisters? If so, how many? Are they older or younger than you?

When have you rejoiced over the good news of a brother, sister, or someone else you feel close to?

Now that Jesus has been born into the human race, God is your relative. What comes to your mind when you consider that fact?

BACK TO THE SHEEP

December 28, 2018

TEXT: And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:20)

What did the shepherds do after they saw the baby Jesus and His parents? Luke tells us that “they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this Child” (Luke 2:17). That is, they talked to people—Mary and Joseph, the neighbors, people in the street, who knows? But then they went home. There were sheep waiting.

Sometimes God kindly gives us those wonderful moments too, doesn't He? Perhaps it's at the Baptism of a baby in your family, or maybe it's a special moment at communion. Maybe it's just a second when you're washing dishes or changing the oil in the car and then suddenly your heart thinks of Jesus and His love. Those moments are precious. We're right to be grateful for them.

But the sheep are still waiting. And so we pick ourselves up, pull our thoughts back to the work that lies in front of us, and dig in. That's the way it goes.

Except for one thing. Luke says that “And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen” (verse 20). We can do that, too. We can go about our ordinary lives, not forgetting the great things that God has done, but praising God for them. We can do it silently, in our hearts, or we can do it when we talk to other people—to friends, family, or coworkers.

We may be back in our ordinary lives, but the great things God has done for us—Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—are still with us. Jesus' love and work for us undergird everything we do. How great it is that we can praise Him for those things, even when we're minding the sheep!

THE PRAYER: Lord, help me to love and glorify You during all the ordinary moments of my life. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What do you think the shepherds felt like when they got home to their sheep?

If you are willing, describe one extraordinary moment or experience you have had with God.

How do you stay mindful of God's presence and love in your ordinary life?

OFF TO A GOOD START

December 29, 2018

TEXT: And at the end of eight days, when He was circumcised, He was called Jesus, the Name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” (Luke 2:21-24)

It was a strange feeling, the day after I gave birth to our son, when the nurse brought in the official paperwork. “This is for his birth certificate,” she said. “Fill it out. He will also get a Social Security number that will be sent to you very soon.” It felt odd to know that my brand-new baby already had a legal identity of his own as a citizen—had paperwork—was already under the law of the United States.

Jesus’ family went through something similar with Him, though even more important. On the eighth day He was circumcised, His official entry into the people of God living under the laws of Moses. Then, when He was 40 days old, came the trip to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfill the rules of Leviticus 12 and Exodus 13. Jesus would be presented to the Lord as every firstborn boy had to be, because God counted them to be specially His after He saved the firstborn of Israel during the exodus from Egypt. Then Jesus would be “redeemed,” bought back from the Lord (Numbers 18), so He could go home and grow up in His family like any child.

For the next 30-some years of His life, Jesus would go on living under the law of Moses, keeping its commandments perfectly. That was absolutely necessary if He was going to make Himself an offering for our sin on the cross. Even as a baby, Jesus was already getting ready for the cross. Does that surprise you?

Even as a baby, Jesus had His own legal identity already—“Savior of the world.” From the very beginning He would do whatever it took to save us, the people God loves. And because He loves us, He had no time to waste. He got started right away. See how much He loves you!

THE PRAYER: Father, thank You for giving us Your Son to be our Savior and sin offering. Keep us close to Him. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

If you have children, do you remember doing their first legal paperwork? How did that experience feel?

What similarities and differences do you see between citizenship in your country and citizenship in the kingdom of God?

You are a citizen of God’s kingdom. What do you see as the best part about your citizenship?

ONE WISH

December 30, 2018

TEXT: Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. (Luke 2:25-26)

Simeon loved the Lord, and he knew that the Messiah was coming. Simeon was probably very old, though we don't know this for sure. But he had one wish, and God knew about it: he wanted to see God's Messiah come before he died. And the Holy Spirit promised him he would.

How exciting that must have been! Simeon would see Jesus, God in the flesh, guaranteed. He must have looked forward to it every day, wondering, "Is today the day I'll see Him?" And every night as he went to bed, he knew he'd wake up in the morning, because God hadn't kept His promise yet; and God always keeps His promises. Jesus would come before his death. Simeon hung on to that.

And then came the glorious day when he went to the temple at the impulse of the Holy Spirit and saw a poor young couple with a newborn in their arms. That was the One! He took up Jesus in his arms and praised God. Simeon's life wish was fulfilled. Now he could die, go home to the Lord, in peace.

This is true for us, too, isn't it? We too have seen God's Christ—not with the eyes of the body, but with the eyes of faith. God's Holy Spirit has revealed Him to us. We have seen Him in the Bible. We have eaten and drunk His body and blood at Communion. For us too, it is "Jesus before death." We don't have to wait. We have Him now.

Jesus promised His disciples, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). We will not go through death alone. The One who has already been through death and back again, this One, Jesus, will be our guide. We will not stay in death, either; Jesus, our risen Savior, promises to raise us from the dead as well.

Christ before death; that's the right order. And that is the way God has given Jesus to us as well.

THE PRAYER: Father, thank You that You have given us Your Son now, in this life, so we don't need to be afraid of death. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What is on your "bucket list" of things to do before your death?

Are you afraid of dying? Why or why not?

How do you find strength and comfort when you think about death? Be as specific as you can.

HOLDING JESUS IN YOUR ARMS

December 31, 2018

TEXT: And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the Law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God ... (Luke 2:27-28a)

Have you ever thought how strange it would be to hold the baby Jesus in your arms, like Simeon did? As you cradled that tiny, swaddled-up baby, you would be holding the Creator of heaven and earth—your Savior—the One who will one day judge all people. You would be holding the very One who holds you safely in His nail-marked hands (John 10:28). How strange is that?

But that is the paradox of the incarnation. God came to earth as a helpless, tiny baby, so that He could grow up to help us all who are caught under the power of evil. Jesus needed His mother to feed Him, so that some day He would be the bread of life that feeds us. Jesus' parents clothed and sheltered Him, so that one day He would give all of us the clean, holy robes of His righteousness to wear, and shelter all of us in His presence (Revelation 7:13-15).

And now that you trust in Jesus, He invites you to carry Him once again—every day of your life, as you live and serve in the world that does not know Him. As a believer, you are a Christ-bearer; Jesus Himself dwells in you. He never leaves you alone. You carry Him into the world as you share the Gospel with others. You carry Him as others watch your life, seeing how a Christian acts and chooses and speaks. And He carries you—through hard times and good times, through temptation and danger and even death itself—to Himself, in heaven.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for carrying me as Your own. Help me to carry You to others who will also believe in You. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Are you comfortable holding tiny babies? Why or why not?

What is the most valuable thing you have ever held (besides a baby)? How did you feel about holding it, whatever it was?

What does it mean to you that Christ carries you? What images come to mind?

A SWORD

January 1, 2019

TEXT: And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” (Luke 2:34-35)

“A sword will pierce through your own soul also.” Isn’t that the truth. Thirty-some years later, Mary would watch as her dear Son Jesus hung on a cross, mocked and hated by those who passed by. I’m fairly sure Mary would have preferred a literal sword through her heart instead of the grief of watching Jesus die.

But on that day she stood listening to Simeon, did she have any idea of what was to come? Maybe so. As an observant Jewish woman, she would have heard the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. Passages like Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 wouldn’t be comfortable to hear. “A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”? “You lay Me in the dust of death”? Mary must have shivered sometimes, holding her baby and thinking of the future.

Mary didn’t want to see Jesus die. But Jesus—God come in human flesh—didn’t want to see Mary die. Or any of us, truly. He made us. He loves us. He wants us to live—now and forever.

And so Jesus accepted—not a sword through the soul, but a spear in the side (John 19:34). He went willingly to death on our behalf, to buy us back from death. We were “the joy set before Him” that made all the suffering worthwhile (Hebrews 12:2). And then He rose from the dead, never to die again. No more swords through the soul, no more spears through the heart. Just life, joy, and love—forever.

THE PRAYER: Lord, when it feels like there is a sword through my soul, comfort and strengthen me in You. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Do you worry about the future? Specifically, what about?

Have you ever suffered willingly to spare someone else pain? Talk about it, if you are willing.

Jesus choose suffering so you could be saved from destruction. Write or say a prayer thanking Him for His love.

HEART'S DESIRE

January 2, 2019

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

Luke goes out of his way to tell us about Anna's life. He gives us her parentage, the fact that she was once married, and says that she is at least 84 years old (the text could also mean she had been widowed for 84 years, which would make her well over 100!). Anna basically lives at the temple; she is there at all hours, and while she may go "home" briefly to wash or change clothes, the temple is where you'll find her night and day, worshipping God. It is the place of her heart's desire—the presence of God.

There are many old saints like this—people whose deepest delight is in the Lord. They are always in church unless illness or disability prevents them. They know their Bibles better than you think you ever will! And they are the people you want to pray for you, because you can just sense that connection they have with God. Sound like someone you know?

But Anna had one thing left to hope for in her long life, and that was "the redemption of Jerusalem"—the coming of the Messiah, the birth of Jesus. She knew God's promises, and talked about them with other people who also loved the Lord. And then Jesus' parents brought Him in to be presented before the Lord.

What a day! Her heart's desire came true—to see and touch the Messiah, to know that Jesus was born to save His people. What a joy! Right away she began talking to people, telling them the good news. "There He is," she must have said. "Go and see." It was the crowning day of her life.

You, too, have a deepest heart's desire. What is it? Think for a little while. What would be the crowning moment of your life, if it happened? How does it relate to Jesus, who saved you?

THE PRAYER: Lord, You know my deepest desires. Turn them to You, so that I may be satisfied. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Name at least one of your deepest heart's desires. Why is it so important to you?

What are you doing as you wait and hope for it to come true? What could you be doing, with God's help?

How does Jesus relate to your heart's desire?

WHEN THINGS GO BADLY WRONG

January 3, 2019

TEXT: Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.” (Matthew 2:1-2)

I wonder sometimes about the wise men. How long did it take before they realized their innocent question had caused a major upset?

They were not fools. Probably the wise men served as part of a king’s court somewhere, trusted advisors. They knew how rulers think. Once they knew that the baby they were seeking was neither Herod’s son nor grandson, well... oops! Kings don’t like rivals, even newborn ones. And their innocent question had started the whole mess.

This happens to us, too, doesn’t it? With the best of intentions we say or do something, only to find out later that we’ve made a mess of things. We didn’t mean to, but that doesn’t change the fact that we’re in the middle of terrible trouble. How we wish we could turn back time!

We can’t, of course. But we can cry out to God, who has mercy on us and redeems even our terrible messes. Not even a murderous king was able to stop God’s plan to send a Savior. Nothing you or I could do will stop God from loving us, wanting us, and making us His own children through Jesus Christ our Lord. These things don’t depend on us, but on God’s gracious love. He will see us through every mess, until the day when He takes us to Himself.

THE PRAYER: Lord, You know the messes I’ve created, and the trouble I have now. Forgive me, watch over me and those I love, and keep us in Your care. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What is a memorable physical mess you’ve been involved with? Tell the story, especially if it’s funny!

What kinds of feelings do you have when you mess up? How do you deal with those feelings?

If you feel like it, share the story of one time you were in a mess and God saw you through it.

WALKING ON EGGSHELLS

January 4, 2019

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

“And all Jerusalem with him.” It makes sense that Herod would be troubled by news of a rival king, even a baby. But why would the people of Jerusalem be troubled along with him?

Anyone who has ever lived with someone like Herod could tell you the answer. They were probably afraid of what Herod might do in his rage.

Herod was a violent and unpredictable man. He even put to death some of his own sons and their mother, his favorite wife. Later, when he himself was dying, Herod had the leading men of the country imprisoned and gave orders that they should be killed as soon as he himself died, in order that there would be genuine mourning at his death. A man who would do things like that might do anything! No one in Jerusalem wanted to be around when Herod got upset.

How much better it is for us, who belong to the real King! We don't have to walk on eggshells around Jesus, or be afraid that He will do terrible things to us in His anger. Our King came to have mercy on us and to give His life for His people.

Our God is the opposite of abusive—He loves us, is patient with us, and calls us back to Him in faith and repentance, time after time after time. Even the weakest and most fragile people can come to Jesus without fear, knowing that He will welcome them and treat them with compassion; as Isaiah says, “He will not cry aloud or lift up His voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed He will not break, and a faintly burning wick He will not quench” (Isaiah 42:2-3). Even little children are welcomed by Him.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord Jesus, draw me close to You, trusting in Your compassion and mercy. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Who is a person who always made you feel welcome and loved? Describe him or her.

Have you ever had to live or work with someone of unpredictable temper? How did you cope?

What does it mean to you, knowing that Christ is gentle and patient?

PROTECTOR

January 5, 2019

TEXT: Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the Child, to destroy Him.” And he rose and took the Child and His mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called My Son.” (Matthew 2:13-15)

Have you ever noticed that, apart from the first time, it is Joseph God speaks to, and not Mary? God brings Joseph into the whole situation by making it clear to him that the baby is in fact the Son of God; He then tells Joseph to go through with the wedding, making him Jesus’ foster-father and protector. From that point on, God sends dream after dream to Joseph: He warns him to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt when Herod threatened the baby’s life; He tells him when it’s safe to come back again; and He guides him to settle his family in Galilee, safely out of the reach of Herod’s dangerous son and successor.

Joseph is Jesus’ protector. He is not an afterthought—not a mere add-on to the basic Nativity set of Mary and baby. He takes the role of a father—he guides, he watches over, he protects. His role is vital. Without Joseph—what?

Without you—what? You too have a vital role in life, whether that’s as a protector, nurturer, pray-er, teacher, caregiver, care receiver, or any of a multitude of ways God gives us to serve one another. Your role is vital, whatever it may be. God has called you to it, no matter how major or minor it may seem. And God makes no mistakes.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, You know what You have in mind for me to be and do. Guide me so that I fulfill that role and take joy in it, remembering that You love me and have chosen me to be Your own. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Who has been your protector, at any point in your life? Who have you protected?

Do you ever feel like an add-on in someone else’s story? How does the Lord remind you that you are central to Him?

There are those, like the infant Jesus, who can’t “do” anything at all in their stage of life. What do you think is their God-given role—how does God bless others through them even at that time of life?

WISE BROTHER

January 6, 2019

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

Wisdom is not a word we usually associate with children. “Silly,” maybe. “Foolish.” “Naïve and inexperienced.” But not “wise.”

It must have been something else to have Jesus as a brother in your family. We know from the Bible He had at least four brothers and two sisters (Mark 6:3). What would it be like, to have a sinless brother? To have a wise one—one who never went joy-riding on the family donkey, who always took the garbage out without being reminded, who only used the sharp tools in the carpenter’s shop after getting permission?

My first impulse is to think, “That would be a nightmare.” Jesus would make the other kids look bad by contrast. But then, maybe not. Because He would also be the brother who helped you with your Hebrew homework. Who stuck up for you when the neighborhood bully was after you. Who comforted you when your best friend got angry with you, or when you got into trouble with mom and dad.

Truly, we don’t need to guess. Jesus is in fact our big Brother—our wise, loving, and good big brother. He is the one Paul calls “the wisdom of God,” who has become our “righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30). No joy-rides on a donkey for Him—instead a long, grueling walk to the cross. The carpenter’s sharp tools were used on Him there, so we could be saved. And as for taking out the garbage—well, yes indeed! He took out all the trash of the human race, all our sin and guilt and evil and shame. Never again do we have to live with those things. Now we live forever with our loving, wise Brother, who is not ashamed to call us His brothers and sisters. Thanks be to God.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for coming to be my brother and my Savior. Stay with me always. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What would you expect a wise child to be like? Be as specific as you can.

When you were a child, whom did you look up to, and why? This could be a brother or sister, or someone else.

How does Jesus’ wisdom comfort you?