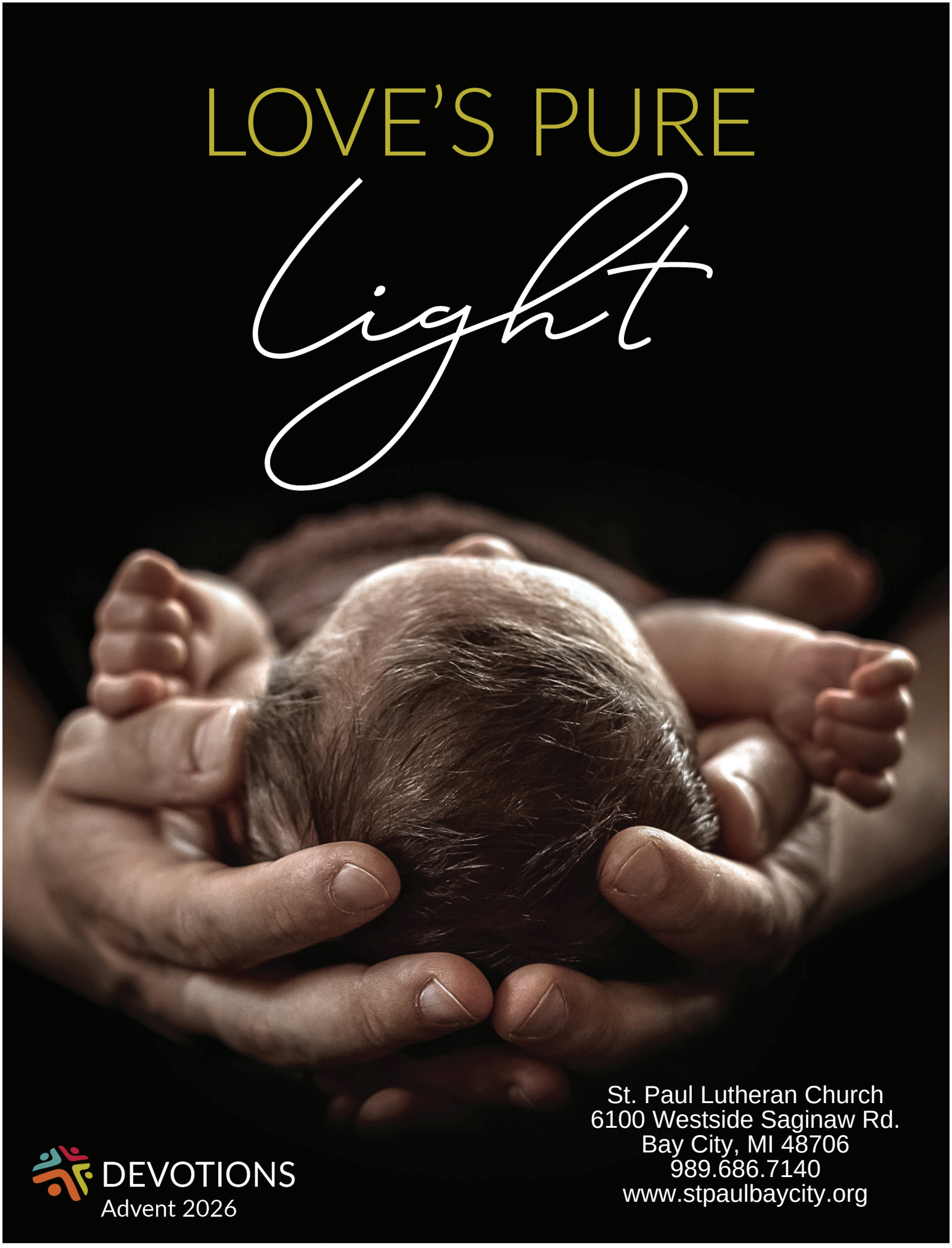
LOVE'S PURE *Light*



DEVOTIONS
Advent 2026

St. Paul Lutheran Church
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As an added feature, these devotions have reflection questions for each day's message. These can be used for self-study or as prompts for discussion when reflecting as a group.

Join us for worship this Advent and Christmas season!

Advent Services:
Wednesday, December 2 at 3:30 & 6:30 pm

Preschool-Y5/K Children's Christmas Program:
Sunday, December 6 at 2:00 pm

Song Service:
Wednesday, December 9 at 6:30 pm

1st-8th Grade Children's Christmas Program:
Wednesday, December 16 at 9 am & 6:30 pm

Christmas Eve Services:
Thursday, December 24
Celebration & Praise at 3:30 pm
Traditional Worship at 6:30 pm
Christmas Vespers at 11 pm

Christmas Day Service:
Friday, December 25 at 9 am

Advent Devotions were written by Dr. Kari Vo.
Brought to you in partnership with Lutheran Hour Ministries

RESCUE MISSION

TEXTS: *Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. (Matthew 1:18a)*

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

Luke and Matthew both start their Gospels with the story of Jesus' birth. They see this as an important part of the Gospel—the story of how God had love and mercy on us, broken people living in a broken world. God saw that we suffered under the power of evil, and that we could not fix ourselves—could never pull ourselves out of sin and death by our own efforts. In the end we would be destroyed. And God refused to let that happen.

So God solved our problem within Himself, within the Trinity. Acting out of sheer love and mercy, God the Father sent God the Son into our world to rescue us. Jesus came so close to us that He took on human nature. God Himself became a Man—and not just a man, but a tiny, crying baby, wrapped in baby clothes and lying in a manger. In that helpless baby we see God's love, lighting up our darkness and bringing us home to the Father.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, You know the darkness of my life. Draw me closer to You, for You are my light. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you prefer light or darkness? Why?
- Why would God come into our world as a baby instead of as a powerful, full-grown man?
- How did God first come into your own life? Was it a big deal, or something quiet and small?

SUNRISE

TEXT: *The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ … Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob … And David was the father of Solomon … and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh … and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. (Matthew 1:1a, 2a, 6b, 9b, 10a, 16)*

My bedroom has an eastern window, and I love to watch the sunrise in the winter. The first rays of light are so beautiful coming through the frosty air.

But sometimes it can be hard to see. There are houses that get in the way—yes, and tall trees. I'm not happy about that, but I have to put up with it if I want to see the sunrise at all.

And it's like that, too, with the first rays of light that shine into human history, foretelling Jesus' coming. We get the great heroes like Abraham and David—people who loved God and followed Him. These became ancestors of Jesus.

But we get those who hide the light, too. People like Ahaz and Manasseh—people who turned away from God and followed other gods—even committing human sacrifice! And yet these, too, are ancestors of Jesus.

I suppose that Jesus isn't afraid of the darkness. Because He Himself is the "sunrise [that] shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:78b-79). Through His suffering, death, and resurrection, He will destroy all sin and darkness, even the worst, and bring us into His own light forever.

WE PRAY: *Be my light, dear Lord! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you know of your own family history? Is it light, dark, or mixed?
- Why does Jesus seem so comfortable being around sinners in the stories of the Gospels?
- Would He be comfortable talking and eating with you? See Matthew 9:12-13.

HOPELESS

TEXT: *In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. (Luke 1:5-7)*

It's hard to go on year after year, praying for a baby and not getting one. It's heartbreaking. You start to wonder if God is angry with you. What else could explain why He refuses to give you the same gift that others have and don't seem to value?

Zechariah and Elizabeth knew this hopelessness. And yet they carried on, loving and trusting God even into old age. How did they do it? Sometimes I wonder.

It must be the Holy Spirit working, I think. Because it was even harder for this couple than it was for me to face year after year of unanswered prayers. I mean, they didn't have Jesus yet. And still they trusted.

And we go on, too, with the help of God. Because we do have Jesus. We know that we are not cursed, as Elizabeth's neighbors thought she was. We know that in fact we are God's beloved children, even when we must suffer without a clear answer to why. We know that God loves us so much He sent His Son Jesus to become our Savior, to live and to die and to rise again so that we could live with Him forever. And if God loves us that much, we can trust Him on the unanswered questions.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, You know what I'm concerned about. Help me. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What concerns and worries make it hard for you to trust God?
- Does God see you?
- You are not alone in your suffering. Who is with you forever? See Matthew 28:20.

FEAR

TEXT: *Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. 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. (Luke 1:8-12)*

I'm not surprised Zechariah was afraid when he saw the angel. I would be, too! Who wouldn't?

And yet … every day of our lives we come into close, intimate contact with someone far greater than any angel, with the God who made all things. Is it because He is invisible that we aren't constantly afraid?

Maybe. And yet, I wonder if there isn't a different, better reason … because this is the God who loves us so much He became a human being, a baby who would grow up to save us through His suffering, death, and resurrection. This is Jesus, who walked the same roads we do and bore the same griefs we must—and who loves us so much that He joined Himself to us, making us members of His own body. Now, where He goes, we go also, even into heaven itself. We will be with Him forever, closer than close.

In Jesus, God has shown us His own heart. And we cannot be afraid anymore—at least, not as people used to be. Now we come before Him with awe and reverence—but also with hearts full of grateful love, as His own children.

WE PRAY: *Dear Father, thank You for Your dearly beloved Son. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Are you afraid of God? If so, is it simple terror, or is it different? How so?
- How do you feel about Jesus, and why?
- How does He feel about you? How do you know?

THE GIFT BEFORE THE GIFT

TEXT: *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. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." (Luke 1:13-17)*

What a wonderful gift God is giving Zechariah and Elizabeth—and really, all people! Because He's about to send us the greatest of the prophets, one who will turn the hearts of God's people back to Him. Crowds of people will listen to John, be baptized, and then go on to follow Jesus and be saved.

John is the gift before the Gift—because God Himself is coming into the world as a Man, as Jesus Christ, just six months after John is born. He is coming to do what no prophet could ever do—to give His life as a ransom to rescue us from sin, death, and evil. Jesus will break the power of death over us forever when He rises from the dead. Now everyone who trusts in Him is free—and we will never be separated from the One who loves us so.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord Jesus, keep me as Yours forever. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you get ready for someone important to come to your home?
- How are you getting ready for Jesus' coming to you?
- When you see Jesus at last, what will you say to Him?

"HOW SHALL I KNOW …"

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)*

Oh dear. What are you thinking, Zechariah? You want an extra miracle to prove God's going to keep His promise? An angel's word is not enough for you?

Well, Zechariah got what he asked for. Nine months of silence to think about the error of his ways—and to think about the wonder of God's loving mercy. Because God is sending another baby shortly after John, the Messiah God promised to save us all—Jesus our Savior. And through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus will save all of us who trust in Him—even the doubters, like Zechariah. Like me.

But God's well able to deal with our doubts! He just gets on with what He's doing—loving, saving, showing mercy. And in the end, we doubters get to glorify Him just as Zechariah did, when his son was finally born and he named him "John" in accordance with God's command. And he used his newly restored voice to praise God, who had blessed him so much.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, when I doubt, help me and draw me closer to You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you see any humor in this story? If so, how?
- Why do you think the Lord included this story of doubt in the Bible?
- Who else doubted God's miracles (see Matthew 28:16-20). Did their doubts derail God's plans?

WAITING

TEXT: *And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. 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 1:21-25)*

There is a lot of waiting in this story. The people outside the temple, waiting for a sermon that never comes. Zechariah, waiting to go home and let his wife know—somehow!—what God has promised to do for them. Elizabeth, glowing with joy, keeping to herself during the first part of a pregnancy she thought would never happen.

But waiting is different depending on what you do with it. Elizabeth is probably using it for prayer and thinking. Zechariah—well, he's got some changes to make! Because clearly God *is* keeping His promise, and Zechariah needs to grow in trusting God if he's going to be the best father he can to a future prophet.

And then there's us—waiting for Christmas, which celebrates Jesus' first coming—and waiting for His Second Coming with hearts full of hope and joy. Because then we will see the One who loved us so much He came to suffer and die for us—yes, and to rise from the dead, so that we might live with Him forever!

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, as I wait, make me what You want me to be. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What are you waiting for in your life right now?
- How has God used past waiting times in your life to bless you?
- How could you use the waiting times in your life to grow in faith?

ONLY BEGOTTEN

I believe … in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds … —The Nicene Creed

I love this sentence in the Creed, but there's no denying it can confuse people. For example, when we talk about Jesus being the "only begotten Son of God," we aren't talking about His human nature. This has nothing to do with Mary or Bethlehem. No, we are talking about Jesus' divine nature—that is, the fact that He is God. If He is God, then how does He relate to God the Father?

We use the language "begotten" to refer to a child who comes from someone else's own body—for a father, we say he "begets" a child. Of course in the case of God the Father, He has no body, and we cannot say that He "begets" anybody in the same way a human man begets a child! So why use the word?

I think it's to emphasize the closeness of God the Father and God the Son—that is, Jesus. They share the same nature. God the Son is not a super-angel or a mere human being who has somehow been adopted or promoted to being God. He is God by nature, just as the Father is God, just as the Holy Spirit is God (and they all three together are one God!). He always has been. That's what "before all worlds" means. When it comes to His divine nature, Jesus has always existed from all eternity. He never had a beginning, and He will never have an ending.

WE PRAY: *Lord, I'm so glad that You are God, because that means You can do anything—even to save me. Thank You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- God the Father calls Jesus His Son. What does this tell you about Their love for each other?
- He also calls us His children by adoption, because we trust in Jesus. How does He feel about us?
- Jesus is the "only begotten." Is there anyone else like Him?

ORDINARY

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)*

I wonder where Gabriel found Mary—was she feeding the chickens? Carrying water? Maybe she was out in the garden, wiping the sweat out of her eyes to see her visitor—only to realize it was an angel. And then everything changed, forever.

Mary felt the importance of this moment. But she didn't know what was happening. She only knew that this angel was showing her the highest honor—far too high for an ordinary girl of Nazareth! And who was she, to be so honored?

We ask the same question when the Lord Himself comes to us in love, making Himself our Savior, making us part of His own body, His own bride. Who are we, that You should love us so?

It's the wrong question. The right question is "Who are You, O Lord?" Because God's reason for loving us lies entirely in His own nature. He's just like that. He loves us, the ordinary people He has made, with a love like a tsunami—overwhelming, deep, inescapable, past understanding. He insists on saving us, though He knows we are little and humble and broken. Even if it means dying and rising again for us, He will do it.

WE PRAY: *Lord, I'm not worthy. But have it Your own way, please! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- When do you most feel your own littleness?
- Why does God care about the small and ordinary?
- Would you refuse Him yourself, given He wants you so much?

GOD WORKING THROUGH US

TEXT: *And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall call His Name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:30-33)*

How strongly God's people longed for Jesus to come! God had promised to send Him—this Savior born from the family of David, but somehow also the Son of God Himself. And this Messiah, this Anointed One, would be the final King of Israel—the One who would bring in the golden age. Under Him, all evils would be destroyed forever—wars, famines, hatred, sin, and death itself.

Now the years of longing are over. Mary herself will bear the Messiah—yes, and nurse Him and raise Him and teach Him, until the right time came for Him to take up the work God sent Him into the world to do. What a joy! What a responsibility!

But the angel says she doesn't need to be afraid. Why? Because "You have found favor with God." God's mercy and grace will get Mary through this experience. She would share this work with Joseph, her husband-to-be. And God would guide them.

WE PRAY: *Lord, I know You have work for me to do, too. Show me what You want, and work through me to make it happen. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What work would Mary and Joseph need to do with God's help to raise Jesus?
- What work was Jesus going to do through His suffering, death, and resurrection? What was His purpose?
- What work has God given you, either now or in the past? Has He worked through you?

HOW WILL THIS BE

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)*

Who can blame Mary for her confusion? She knew very well that angels promising babies normally came to married women—in fact, to women who had been married a long time without children. Now she herself is facing a pregnancy, and her first question is "How?"

Mary wants to know: What does God want from her? Is she supposed to move the wedding up, or what? Because Mary is not doubting Gabriel in the way that Zechariah did. She simply wants to make sure she does what she's supposed to do.

Gabriel ends her confusion by explaining exactly what *God* intends to do. Mary can relax—God has it all in hand. This baby will be conceived by miracle—by the power of the Holy Spirit. And this is entirely fitting, as He will be both God and human—the Savior who will rescue all of us from the power of sin, death, and the devil. No wonder God is marking Him out as special, even from the time He is conceived! His death, resurrection, and ascension will be just as fitting to Jesus, our one-of-a-kind Savior.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, help me to trust You like Mary did. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- When in your life have you been asked to do something you did not expect?
- Did God help you with it?
- Will He help you with confusing and difficult times in the future? How do you know?

ASKED OR TOLD?

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

Some friends of mine were discussing Mary and arguing. "God didn't ask her," said one. "Was that fair?"

I can see what she meant. In our culture, we expect to be asked first. And yet—I can't help remembering the time a beloved friend of mine needed help in a difficult time. She couldn't contact me, so she simply committed me to do what was needed for her family. And I felt honored to be chosen that way.

Why? Because when someone treats you that way, it means they have no doubts that you'll come through for them. I think this was the case with God and with Mary.

Clearly Mary had a close and loving relationship with God. It looks like it was so close that God felt no need to ask her, knowing already what the answer was—and indeed, He was right. For Mary volunteers that answer with her own mouth here: "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

And Mary wasn't the only one. In her voice I hear the echo of her Son's own voice in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He faced arrest and death for our sake: "Father … not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42b). Jesus knew that His suffering, death, and resurrection would give life to all of us who trust in Him. So for love of us and for love of His Father, He agreed—just as His mother did, so many years before.

WE PRAY: *Lord Jesus, when I face a situation like that, help me to agree to follow Your will also. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever agreed to serve when no one asked you first?
- If you are willing, tell the story.
- Would you serve God without Him asking you? Why or why not?

THE KINDNESS OF GOD

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. (Luke 1:39-40)*

I love the kindness of God, to think about Mary's needs and to provide her with a place of refuge when she's still reeling from the amazing news He has given her! For God knows that Mary needs some time to think about how her life is changing. She isn't going to have the privacy to do that thinking at home—how would she explain her new tendency toward absent-mindedness? "I'm sorry, I was just thinking about what the angel said to me …" No.

Mary doesn't need the extra burden right now of explaining everything to her family and to Joseph when she can barely understand it herself. God knows this. And so He had Gabriel volunteer the information about Elizabeth her relative, who is pregnant with a miracle baby of her own right now. Surely God intended Mary to do just what she did—to visit Elizabeth and find the comfort and calm advice that she needs during this joyful, confusing time.

God knows what we need, too. And when we are stressed for any reason, we can run to our Savior, asking Him for help and guidance. He will surely give it, for He is the One who rescued us at the cost of His own death and resurrection. How much more will He help us now?

WE PRAY: *Lord Jesus, You know the stress I'm dealing with. Please help me! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Who do you run to for help when you're in trouble?
- Why that person?
- When have you found help in Jesus when you needed it so much?

THE HOLY SPIRIT'S GIFT

TEXT: *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? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (Luke 1:41-45)*

Elizabeth is overjoyed when she hears Mary saying hello. Right away she is filled with the Holy Spirit, and that is why she understands what Mary hasn't had a chance to tell her yet—that Mary is pregnant with Jesus, our Savior—the One Elizabeth already calls her Lord, even this young! John, too, recognizes Jesus, even though both of them are still inside their mothers' bodies.

How does this knowledge come about? Through the work of the Holy Spirit. It seems like a great miracle to us, but it is easy for Him to do.

The Spirit still does His miracles. We have no particular wisdom or strength that would help us to recognize Jesus our Savior—we are more helpless than unborn babies! But the Spirit can do this for us, and He does. He brings us to trust in the One who suffered and laid down His life for us so that we might live—and who rose again so that we might live in Him, forever. What a wonderful gift!

WE PRAY: *Lord Holy Spirit, thank You for bringing me to trust in Jesus. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- When did you come to trust in Jesus?
- Was it through Baptism, or some other way?
- What does the Holy Spirit do for you in your daily life?

LOVE'S PURE LIGHT

… God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made … —The Nicene Creed

Who are you? Where do you come from? These are the questions we ask when we meet someone new, even if we don't ask directly. Because they matter. If I know who you are and where you come from, I can decide whether I should trust you or not.

The Nicene Creed is a short summary of what the Bible has to tell us about God. In this section, it focuses on Jesus, and it describes Him as "very God of very God," where the word "very" means "true." Who is Jesus, this tiny baby lying in a manger? He is God. Where does He come from? He comes from God—that is, from God the Father. God the Father has sent Him into our world to rescue us. He will be our Light, and He will be our Life—because Jesus will suffer and die and rise from the dead, all to bring us back to God.

This gives us the answer to our questions, especially the unspoken one that matters most: Why should I trust You? We trust Jesus because He is God, and God is good. And we also trust Him because He is our Light. There is no darkness in Jesus—He has never betrayed or lied to anyone, and He won't start with us. He loves us. It's the whole reason He came.

WE PRAY: *Lord Jesus, give me Your Holy Spirit's help so that I can know You better and love and trust You more. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you get to know someone better?
- How do you get to know Jesus? Where can you find help for this?
- The Creed (and the Bible) says that Jesus made us. How well do you think He knows and loves you, given this fact?

"ALL GENERATIONS WILL CALL ME BLESSED"

TEXT: *And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His Name." (Luke 1:46-49)*

Mary is right in saying that all generations would call her "blessed." How could it be otherwise, when God gave her the wonderful gift of becoming Jesus' mother? And it is right for us to honor her, and to thank God for what He did through her and Joseph, bearing and raising and protecting God's Son, our Savior.

But we share that blessing—because now, Jesus belongs to all of us, or more accurately, we belong to Him. Every single one of us can have Him as our own dear Lord and Savior, closer than close, the One who loves us and who bought us back from death and ruin at the cost of His own life. Given what He did for us, how could we not love Him?

And now that He has risen from the dead, He gathers us together as His own people, His body, His Bride—the ones He loves and intends to keep with Him forever. He is our Life and we are His own. There is no better blessing we could have than Jesus.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, I am Yours and You are mine. Thank You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- How much does Jesus value you?
- How do you know?
- If you have Jesus, you have everything. Specifically, what good things do you have?

PROMISES KEPT

TEXT: *[Mary said,] "He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." (Luke 1:54-55)*

Mary finishes her song of praise by mentioning God's promises—because God was keeping His promises when He sent Jesus into the world. Which promises are we talking about?

Well, first there was the promise to Adam and Eve, that one of their descendants would destroy the devil and rescue us all from evil (see Genesis 3:15). Then there was the promise to Abraham, who thought he was childless, that he should become the father of nations, and how in him "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3b). That came true specifically in Abraham's greatest Descendant, Jesus.

God narrowed it down even further when He spoke to King David and told him that one of his descendants would be King forever (see 2 Samuel 7). And then the prophets told us more and more about what Jesus would be like and what He'd do—being born among us as a human being, living, serving, suffering, dying—and then rising again from the dead. Jesus kept all of these promises, down to the last detail.

And that is how we know He will keep His promises to us—to love us, forgive us, give us life, and raise us from the dead to be with Him forever on the day He returns. Jesus keeps His promises. Thank God!

WE PRAY: *Thank You, Lord, for all You've promised us—especially Jesus. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Which of God's promises means the most to you?
- Why do you think God gave us His promises in the first place?
- If Jesus is trustworthy (and He is!), what does that mean for your life?

SAFE PLACE

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

How kind God is, to provide Mary with a safe place to stay during her first three months of pregnancy! Elizabeth herself is pregnant as the result of God's miracle, so she's not going to doubt Mary's story or give her any trouble or grief. What a comfort it must have been, for Mary to tell her cousin the story of what the angel said to her, and to be trusted and believed.

Elizabeth's home was a safe refuge for physical reasons as well. Being pregnant, of course Mary wasn't using menstrual cloths. She was probably experiencing morning sickness, as well as the other discomforts that go with early pregnancy. At home it's almost certain someone would have noticed—and that would have started a huge family explosion, long before she was ready to deal with it. But in Elizabeth's home, the true reason was known—and Mary got nothing but sympathy.

Mary's safe place lasted for only three months before she had to go home and face the music. But our safe place lasts forever—because our refuge is Jesus, Mary's Son. He is the One we run to whenever we are in trouble or desperate for help, comfort, and mercy. He is the One who gave up His life to rescue and protect us. Now that He has risen from the dead, He will be our safe place forever. And He will never turn us away.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, thank You for protecting me. Please keep me close to You forever. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- When you are in trouble, whom do you seek out for help?
- Why?
- What do you see in Jesus that makes Him a safe person to run to for help?

A NEW NAME

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)*

I think we all know that God chose the name for Mary's baby; but I was interested to see that God did the same for Elizabeth's son. The angel told Zechariah to name him John, and it looks like he was able to communicate that to Elizabeth. And naturally she was intent on doing exactly what God wanted!

But the neighbors had other ideas. They wanted the old ways, the old name. Why not name him Zechariah, like his father? It's an honored name, meaning "God remembers."

But Elizabeth held out for the name the angel specified: "God is gracious." Not only had God been gracious to her and her husband by giving them this baby, but He was already being gracious to every human being ever born. Because Elizabeth knew that her young relative Mary was carrying the Christ Child, Jesus, our Savior. And Jesus would save us all through His life, death, and resurrection. He will be our gracious Savior forever.

WE PRAY: *Dear gracious Lord, thank You for putting Your own Name on me in Baptism, and making me Yours forever. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you know what your own name means?
- Why do you think God wanted to emphasize grace when He named John?
- What does it mean to you, that Jesus has baptized you into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit?

WHY SO LONG?

TEXT: *And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him. (Luke 1:63-66)*

I wonder if Zechariah was surprised when the baby was born, yet he still couldn't speak. I would have been! It must have been a long, long eight days he had to wait, still in silence, until John's circumcision.

Because in fact, what the angel Gabriel said was that Zechariah would stay silent "until the day that these things take place"—and there were several things that would take place, not just John's birth. Gabriel listed them: "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" (Luke 1:13b-14). That's four different things!

Was Gabriel being picky, then, requiring all four conditions to be met before Zechariah could speak again? I don't think so. I think that God was making it extremely clear that He would keep His promises, down to the very last phrase or word. And that includes His promises to send us a Savior, His own Son Jesus—who would rescue us all through His own birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection. Not a word of all God's promises would go unfulfilled. Thank God!

WE PRAY: *Thank You for keeping Your promises, Lord! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Do promises mean very much to you, generally speaking? Why or why not?
- What specific promises of God mean the most to you?
- How much do you have riding on them?

PERFECT TENSE, PERFECTLY GUARANTEED

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, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old … (Luke 1:67-70)*

Have you ever noticed the strange way the Holy Spirit picks His verbs when He's speaking through Zechariah? He says that God "has visited and redeemed His people" and that He "has raised up a horn of salvation for us." He's using the perfect tense—which we generally keep for things that have already happened.

Now, if you want to be picky, you can argue that it's perfectly true that God has visited His people at this point in the story. Jesus is already in Mary's uterus; He's about three months along, in fact. But to say that He has already redeemed His people—well, Jesus won't die or rise from the dead for another 33 years or so! What's going on?

I think the Holy Spirit speaks this way because what God plans to do is so sure and certain, we might as well speak of it in the past tense. It's a done deal. Jesus has come, and He will certainly save us from the power of sin, death, and evil. No need to fuss about verb tenses—it's guaranteed.

WE PRAY: *Thank You, dear Savior, that You are so trustworthy. Let me lean on what You've done for me forever. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Are you careful with your grammar and your spelling?
- How trustworthy do you find God's promises?
- What are you trusting Jesus for right now?

FOR OUR SALVATION

… Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven … —The Nicene Creed

I'm not going to lie, that little word "men" bothers me. I know that the true meaning in the original Greek is "people," not "males." The word "men" in English is a hold-over from the days of Shakespeare etc., when "men" referred to all humanity. For some people, it still does.

And yet, it bothers me. The English language is changing, and sometimes I can't help feeling left out. Did Jesus in fact come down from heaven for me? For you?

Even in Christ's church, human sin means we often manage to send one another the message, "Jesus is not for you." Not for you because of your race, color, or ethnicity. Because of your gender or age. Because of your class, education, or background. Because of your sins, whatever they may be.

This is a lie. Jesus is the Son of God and the Son of Man, come down from heaven for us—all of us. If you are human, Jesus is yours. If you are a sinner, Jesus is yours. He came to be your life, your forgiveness, your Savior. He came to make you His own, at the cost of His own suffering, blood, and death.

And Jesus rose for you—conquering death, overcoming all the powers of evil, and taking you to Himself as His own. You who trust in Him—you are part of His own body, regardless of what anybody else says. He holds you that close. You who love Him and believe in Him—you are part of His Bride, the people of God—and that's how much He loves you. He is your life, and you are His own.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, keep me Yours forever. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Is there any human being Jesus refuses to save?
- Why did He come down from heaven in the first place? What motivated Him?
- After all He's done to save the world—would Jesus overlook you?

STRESS AND FEAR

TEXT: *… 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. But … 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." (Matthew 1:18b-19, 20b-21)*

Imagine the stress and fear both Mary and Joseph must have felt when her secret became known! Mary must have wondered what Joseph would do. Joseph was grieving as he thought Mary had been unfaithful. He couldn't bear to harm her, but neither could he accept her impossible story.

Until God set him straight. In pure mercy, God sent an angel to tell Joseph it was all right, and the evil he feared was no evil at all, but actually a wonderful miracle—the Messiah, finally come to earth in the body of a virgin, as the Scriptures foretold. Only God could offer this reassurance to Joseph—and He did. And so these two people, Joseph and Mary, found the peace they needed, and the ability to build a marriage based on mutual trust.

And God's mercy allowed them to create a home filled with love and trust for Jesus to grow up in. How appropriate! Because Jesus has done this same thing for us, setting us free from the power of evil by His own suffering, death, and resurrection.

WE PRAY: *Lord Jesus, You take my worst nightmares and give me Your loving mercy instead. Thank You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- When you are upset, where do you find comfort?
- What kind of parents did God choose for Jesus?
- How is Jesus like Mary? Like Joseph?

A LONG FAITHFULNESS

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)*

It seems to me that Joseph had a harder time of it than Mary, at least in one way. She believed God, and very quickly she had Jesus Himself making His unborn presence known in the usual ways—morning sickness, a baby bump, and so on. Her faith soon blossomed into sight, as she knew for certain that the Child within her had been conceived without a human father. Joseph, though—he spent the rest of his life walking by faith.

Think about it. He had seen an angel, yes—but in a dream, not in daylight. Because of that dream Joseph obeyed God, accepted Mary's story, and brought her home to be his wife. His was a faithfulness that was repeated day after day—living in the strength of those dreams God sent him, and on the promises of the coming Savior in Scripture.

Surely there must have been times when the devil attacked him with doubts. And yet Joseph went on doing what God intended, faithfully guarding his wife and the Christ Child. He showed his faith in what he did; and all of us who love Jesus are grateful.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for Joseph's long faithfulness, that made it possible for You to grow up in safety and to save us all through Your own faithful death and resurrection. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you think it was easy for Joseph, or not? Why?
- What has your own life with God been more like—a deep faith with sudden miracles, or a long faithfulness that you take up again, day after day?
- Are you glad of the faith life God has chosen for you? Why or why not?

TIME TO GO

TEXT: *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered … And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee … 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, 3-5)*

It always amazes me to think that God's own Son was born in Bethlehem, just as the prophet foretold, as the result of a government tax scheme. Caesar wanted people registered so he could figure out how much money he could get out of them. And so a carpenter and his pregnant wife traveled about ninety miles when she was about to give birth—because Caesar said so.

This wasn't the childbirth Mary wished for. Because of Caesar, she would have her baby far from home, away from her mother and relatives. I'm sure she packed everything she could think of—blankets, baby clothes, whatever Nazarene mothers used for diaper rash—but she never expected to lay her Son in a manger for a crib!

Maybe it's better that God didn't tell her all this, ahead of time. Maybe it's better that we ourselves don't know all the amazing and scary and wonderful things God has in store for us as we follow Him. It's enough that Jesus knows, and that He is with us. The One who gave Himself into death for our sakes and then rose to life again will guard us with His love, every step of the way.

WE PRAY: *Dear Father, thank You for sending Jesus to us—even in this way we never expected. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- When in your life with Jesus have you seen things turn out differently than you expected?
- How did you know God was still with you, guiding and caring for you?
- Do you trust Him less or more, now that you've had that experience?

GOD'S TIMING

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

Babies come in their own time. That's what everyone tells you when you're waiting for your own, and fretting about the exact timing of the birth.

I wonder if Mary and Joseph were quite so happy about Jesus' timing, though. I suspect the first labor pains were recognized with dismay. They hadn't even found a decent place for her to give birth in, yet. Couldn't Jesus wait just a little longer?

No. Jesus was on His way, and happy about it, too. Because He was coming into the world to save us all, all the people God loved and made and wanted to be with Him forever. Jesus would be born and grow up among us, a human being among human beings. As an adult, He would serve and teach and preach and care. And then He would willingly suffer and die, taking us with Him through death and into everlasting life (see Romans 6:3-11). The Son of God, who loves us and chose to be born into our human nature, has risen from the dead forever, and promises to raise us also.

So now, we are waiting again. We wait for the day when Jesus returns to us and makes all things new—not just our bodies and souls, but the whole universe—everything He created. And we will be happy. Because we will be with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One God—who loves us more than we can ever understand.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, thank You for loving me and making me Your own. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- When do you want time to go faster? To go slower?
- Was the timing of Jesus' birth accidental or not? Why do you think so?
- What is God trying to say to us through the circumstances of Jesus' birth?

A PLACE FOR US

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

It's easy to feel sorry for Jesus and His family. No place for them in the inn! It was probably obvious that Mary was in labor. Couldn't someone have given up space just for a single night, to make her more comfortable?

Apparently not. We don't know exactly where they ended up, except that there was a manger there, and the new parents put their baby to sleep in it—probably to keep Him warm and safely off the ground. They wouldn't want rats biting Him!

But God thought this was an excellent place for Jesus to be born. Because we know that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the Holy Trinity, One God—agreed on all the details of Jesus' coming long before it ever happened. God the Son knew that He'd be lying in a manger on His first night on earth—and that was okay with Him.

Because God was making a place for us. He was making a place for us in His kingdom—for all the broken, hopeless, lost human beings who had turned away from God's light so long ago. God was coming into our world to be a human being, and to reconcile us to Himself (see 2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus' death and resurrection would do what we could never do—bring us back to God as His own dear children—wanted, cherished, and deeply loved. Now, because of Jesus, there is a place for us.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, thank You for bringing me home to You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- If you've ever cared for a baby, where did you put it to sleep? Why there?
- Where does God want to put you?
- You are deeply wanted by God. What details in the Christmas story tell you this most clearly?

TO YOU IS BORN A SAVIOR

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. 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." 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 2:8-14)*

I love the fact that God sent angels to tell the shepherds the good news about Jesus. Not rich people, not famous people—shepherds. People who worked hard and stayed up all night to take care of their sheep. People who were looked down on by the religious establishment, since their work meant they couldn't always attend worship or fast or follow the strict customs of the day.

And what did the angels say to these smelly, dirty people? They said, "To YOU is born a Savior." Not to some other people way over there. Not to people who are luckier than you are. To us. To me. To you, you who are reading this devotion right now. To you Jesus has been born. For you Jesus has come, to live and to die and to rise again, all so God can call you His beloved child.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, thank You for coming to me! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Is it easy to believe Jesus came for you?
- Why or why not?
- Is it still true, regardless of how you feel?

ONE OF US

… and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary. —The Nicene Creed

I love that the Holy Spirit chose to use Mary, a young woman, when He caused our Lord Jesus to be born in human flesh. He could have done something else—for example, He could have decided to make Jesus human through a completely new creation, separate from Adam and Eve and all their sinful children. But He didn't. Because God became a Man through Mary, He is now our blood relative. There is no person on earth who is not connected to Jesus in the most intimate way, through our very family lines. He is not a stranger. He is one of us.

This means that we can come to Him as we would to a trusted member of our families, never doubting that He will do all He can to help us. Of course He will—He is one of us, and He loves us! Our problems are His problems, our needs are what He came to meet. And if our families are troubled, and our relationships are sick and poisoned—well, then, at least we have one Person we can trust to show us what real love is—and to help with healing.

Jesus is bound to us by His own body and blood—the blood He shed for us on the cross where He died to save us, and the body He rose with, alive again, three days later. Jesus chose this on purpose, so that we could belong to Him forever.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, thank You for giving Your all for us. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever sought help from a relative? This can include people who are as close as family.
- Why would Jesus join our web of human relationships when He knows it's contaminated by evil?
- What would you like to ask Jesus for help on, right now?

GOOD NEWS!

TEXT: *… the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And … they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered … And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:15b-16, 17b-18a, 20)*

The shepherds didn't keep this good news to themselves. They told everybody about God's message—that a Savior, the promised Messiah, had been born in Bethlehem. The shepherds took the angels seriously when they said that this was "good news of great joy that will be for ALL the people" (Luke 2:10b).

What would this baby do when He grew up? The shepherds didn't know the details, but they knew that He was going to save us, because the angels told them so. And that's exactly what Jesus did when He laid down His life to break the power of sin, death, and the devil over us.

We are privileged to live after Jesus' coming, and to know the rest of the story. We know that He grew up to preach and heal and care for people in need. We have seen how He willingly suffered and died to take away all our guilt and shame, and to reconcile us to God forever. We know that Jesus has risen from the dead, breaking death's power forever, and giving eternal life to everyone who trusts in Him.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, You really are our Savior. Thank You! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Who do you think the shepherds told?
- Do you think people believed them? Why or why not?
- Have you been privileged to tell anybody about Jesus? If so, how did it go?

READ THE LABEL!

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

And he [Joseph] called His Name Jesus. (Matthew 1:25b)

I love how straightforward God is when He tells both Mary and Joseph to name the baby "Jesus"! Because that name means "God is salvation." And through the angel, God explains His choice: "[Mary] will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21)

Simple. Accurate. Straightforward. There is no way to mistake the reason why God sent Jesus into the world. It's right there in His Name! It's as if God put a big label on Him, reading "This is your Savior. This is the One who will forgive your wrongdoing and set you right with God."

And of course that's what Jesus did when He suffered, died, and rose from the dead for us. But there's more than that in His Name—for it means "GOD is salvation." And that's who Jesus is—human, yes, but also God Himself. We never need to doubt how God feels about us, or what He is like. We can simply look at Jesus, and we know. He loves us.

WE PRAY: *Lord Jesus, I'm so glad You are mine! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you read labels? If so, do you think they are usually trustworthy or not?
- If Jesus is God (and He is!), what is God like? How does God feel about you?
- How do you know, judging from Jesus' life? From His death? From His resurrection?

FINALLY!

TEXT: *And he [Simeon] 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 and said, "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation." … And there was a prophetess, Anna … [who] began to give thanks to God and to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:27-30, 36a, 38b)*

I wonder if Joseph and Mary felt overwhelmed as they watched these two people, Anna and Simeon, delighting in Jesus, their six-week-old baby. They had only come to the temple that day to do what parents of a firstborn son always did—to offer sacrifices and present Him to the Lord. No doubt there were other couples there with their own babies. But Anna and Simeon made a beeline to Jesus, because they recognized Him as the Savior God had promised. And they were overjoyed.

We, too, rejoice in Jesus—because this tiny baby is God Himself, born into the world to save us. He comes not to judge us but to rescue us—to bring us out from under the power of death and evil, into the joy and peace of God's own family. How could we not love Him? Jesus loved us first—even giving up His own life so that we might live. And now that He has risen from the dead, we know that we, too, will live forever, with the Lord we love and delight in.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, thank You for coming to me! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What is one thing you waited for and were delighted when you finally got it?
- Did you come to know Jesus as a baby, or later in life?
- How would you react if you suddenly found Him there in the same place as you?

DARK SHADOWS

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." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. (Matthew 2:1-3)*

It grieves me that the Christmas story has this dark episode in the middle of it. It seems that even the Son of God can't come into the world without some mixture of evil and horror.

In this case, the problem is a power-hungry king. He's at least half-mad and a murderer of his own family, as well, and he is not happy to hear strangers talking about a new king. His first impulse is to murder the baby, and every step he takes is toward that goal.

At this point, Mary and Joseph have no idea what's hanging over their heads—specifically, over Jesus' head. But God knows, and He will deal with the problem. Because it isn't time for Jesus to die, not yet. Though in Jesus, God has already become a human being, still, we need Jesus to do even more.

We need Him to live among us, showing us what God's heart is really like. We need Him to teach us, to care for us and to heal us. We need Him to choose disciples and to train them so they will be ready to strengthen Jesus' baby church. Most of all, we need Jesus to suffer, to die, and to rise again for our sakes—so that we may become children of God.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, when darkness comes into my life, be my light! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What kinds of darkness have you struggled with?
- How has Jesus cared for you during those times?
- What do you know about Jesus' heart toward you personally?

NOT THE KING THEY EXPECTED

TEXT: *And going into the house, they saw the Child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:11-12)*

I love to think of the wise men, crowding into whatever tiny house Joseph may have found for his family by now. And Mary, holding her baby so the strangers can see Him—and trying to stop Jesus from putting His presents in His mouth! Maybe the gold would have been safe for Him to teethe on, if it was big enough.

By this point the wise men had realized this "King of the Jews" wasn't going to be the usual royal baby they expected when they started their journey. So maybe they weren't too surprised by what they found in Bethlehem. And they lived up to their name when they heeded God's warning not to go back to King Herod and endanger the young family.

For us too, Jesus may be "not what we expected" when we first meet Him. After all, He's good, holy, powerful, God Himself! That description makes me shake in my shoes. I am too much of a sinner to feel comfortable with that.

But He is also loving, kind, merciful, humble, gentle, and patient—and a Friend of sinners, like me. In fact, as an adult Jesus gave up His life to rescue me and all the rest of sinful humanity—and then rose from the dead to give us life that will last forever in His kingdom. Now that's a King I can love!

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, thank You that You love us, and treat us with gentleness. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What other words would you use to describe Jesus?
- Could you feel comfortable around Him? Why or why not?
- What would you expect from a king like this?

A GOOD FATHER

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)*

It amazes me how much trust God puts in Joseph—this ordinary carpenter from Galilee. Mary is busy with Jesus, nursing Him, bathing Him, changing His diapers. God relies on Joseph to protect the little family, getting them safely to Egypt—and then back home again.

And what a job he does! Joseph is the best of fathers to Jesus, as he listens to the Lord and does exactly as he's told to protect the baby Savior. He is humble, practical, and courageous. In Egypt he finds a home for his family, and then, no doubt, he goes out seeking work to provide for them. Joseph turns his own life upside down to care for Jesus his adopted son—and his Savior, too.

I wonder how often Jesus thought about Joseph in the years of His ministry. Certainly the love and faithfulness Jesus showed to us were attitudes He had seen in Joseph as well. And when He willingly sacrificed Himself to rescue us all from the power of evil and death, Jesus was echoing what Joseph once did—though now in a much greater way.

WE PRAY: *Lord, thank You for caring for me through Your death and resurrection! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you think Joseph found out the way to Egypt?
- What do you think they lived on while he was seeking work?
- Did God choose Joseph just as He chose Mary? Why do you think so?

CHILDISH QUESTIONS

And was made Man … —The Nicene Creed

Of course it's impossible for a human being to ever understand God's experience; but I can't help wondering what it was like for God to become a Man. These are not proper theological questions; they are the questions a child might have. I know that. And yet, I wonder: What was it like, for God to become a Man?

I would like to ask Jesus: Did it feel—well, confining? As if humanity was somehow like a too-small suit to pour God's own nature into?

Was it a sacrifice? We are told that Jesus laid aside His glory and honor and so much of His power and knowledge when He became a Man—at least, when it comes to His use of it for Himself! Did that hurt? Was it uncomfortable, strange, odd? Like losing your eyesight or hearing, the use of an arm or leg?

I know of course that God knows everything. And yet I wonder … Did it feel different? Did it add anything to God's experience that wasn't there before—or that was already there, but in a different way?

And the last one: Would He do it again?

That is the only question with an answer I feel certain of. Because the answer is certainly Yes. Yes, if we needed it, Jesus would do it again. If we needed Him to become a Man to suffer and die and rise from the dead, all to rescue us, the people He loves, and to bring us home to God forever … would He do it?

Yes.

WE PRAY: *Dearest Lord: Thank You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Read Philippians 2:5-11. How does Paul describe what Jesus did?
- What do you yourself wonder about, when you think about God becoming a man?
- Jesus has not stopped being human. He took His human nature right back to heaven when He ascended, and He will be human forever. What does that mean to you? What difference does it make?

DEATH AND THE CHRISTMAS STORY

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

It grieves me that death is in the Christmas story—and in such a prominent place, too! It takes up center stage in Matthew's retelling. Clearly God thought we should know that fear and death and grief played a major role in Jesus' coming to us.

And of course He's right. Because fear and grief and death play a major role in our own lives, too. Who among us has never lived in terror—feared the worst—ran for safety—suffered at the hand of someone stronger? Who among us has never lost anyone to death?

I don't know anyone but the youngest child who hasn't suffered in these ways. And as the years go by, our experience with sin and pain and grief and death gets heavier and heavier, until it sometimes seems like a miracle that we can still walk upright. Who can help us? Who cares enough to help us?

Jesus. That last living baby of Bethlehem knows and cares, and He gave up His own life to save us. Jesus died on the cross to put an end to all these evils—to redeem us and to remake us, and the universe in which we live, at the Last Day when He comes again. And Jesus rose from the dead, never to die again—and He promises to raise us, too. In the meantime, we live with His new, everlasting life inside us, already, even now, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

WE PRAY: *Living Lord, hold me close to You when evil comes near. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you do when you're afraid?
- How do you turn to Jesus for help?
- Tell about a time when Jesus was there for you when you were suffering.

THE BACK OF BEYOND

TEXT: *But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the Child and His mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the Child's life are dead." And he rose and took the Child and His mother and went … to the district of Galilee … And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth. (Matthew 2:19-21a, 22b, 23a)*

Though Jesus was born in Bethlehem, so close to the capital city of Jerusalem, that wasn't where He grew up. He grew up in Galilee at the northern end of ancient Israel—just a day's walk from places filled with non-Jewish people who spoke strange languages and didn't keep God's Law. To the Jewish religious leaders, this was the back of beyond. Why would God call the Messiah from there?

It's a good question! I suspect God did that because Jesus is more than just the Jewish Messiah; He is also the Savior of the world.

I'm glad Jesus lived in Egypt, and then in Nazareth, so close to the Gentiles. Because that puts Him closer to me—and to you—and to all of us, who are not born members of God's people of Israel. Jesus came to give His life for all of us, Jew and Gentile alike. And now that He has risen from the dead, we will all live together as one body, given life by Jesus our dear Savior.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, thank You for the new life You give us. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you felt like an outsider?
- Did anyone treat Jesus as an outsider? See John 1:43-46 and John 7:40-52.
- Jesus has made you God's own child. Are you still an outsider? Why or why not?

A QUIET TIME

TEXT: *And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon Him. … And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:39-40, 52)*

Up till now, the story of Jesus has been filled with drama. An angel comes to Zechariah. An angel comes to Mary! Joseph finds out the news—and has his life changed forever. The distant Roman emperor gets involved by forcing them to travel. Jesus is born away from home and laid in a manger. More angels. Wise men from a distant land! An evil king. The flight into Egypt. Life as a refugee. And finally, time to travel home.

Now the story goes quiet—because Jesus will stay in Nazareth (with occasional trips to worship in Jerusalem!) until He is 30 years old. What will He do there? Grow. Learn. Play with other children. Study in the local school. Help His mother with chores. Help His father with the carpentry shop. If, as seems likely, Joseph died sometime during those years, Jesus would have supported the family as any good son would.

I'm glad Jesus had some quiet years. Because ahead of Him lies more drama. Teaching, preaching, and healing. Miracles. New disciples. New enemies. Danger from kings and governors. Betrayal, suffering, and death. And finally, resurrection, with the gift of new life to give to all the people of the world.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, thank You for all that You have done to save me. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you like a quiet life, or an exciting one? Why?
- If you could travel back in time to see just one event in Jesus' life, what would it be?
- How has Jesus' life changed yours?

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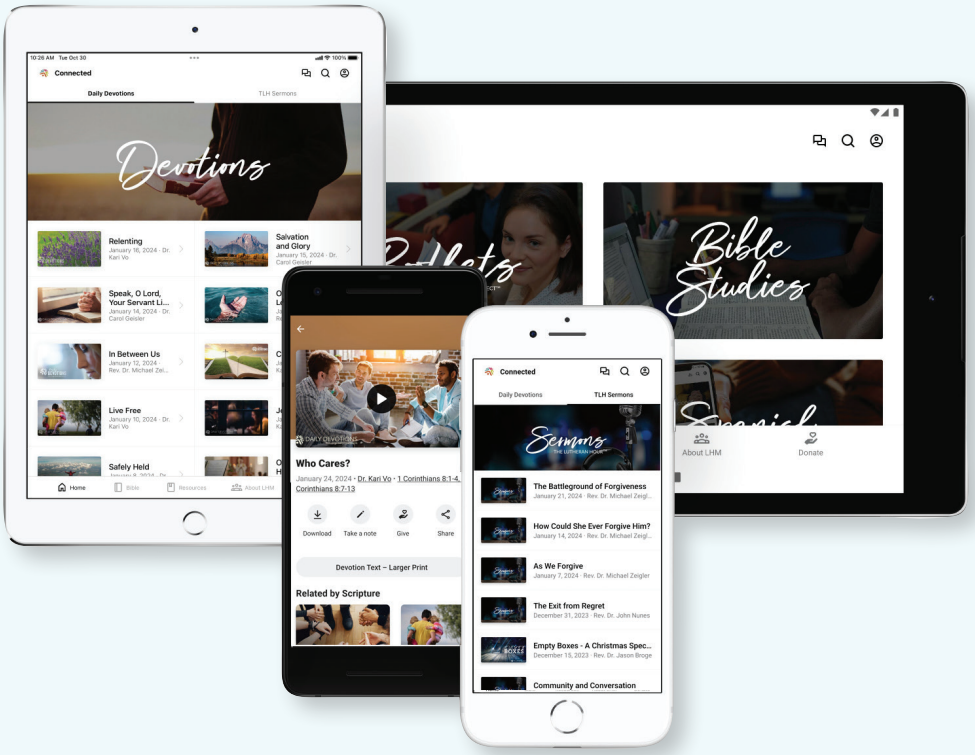

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