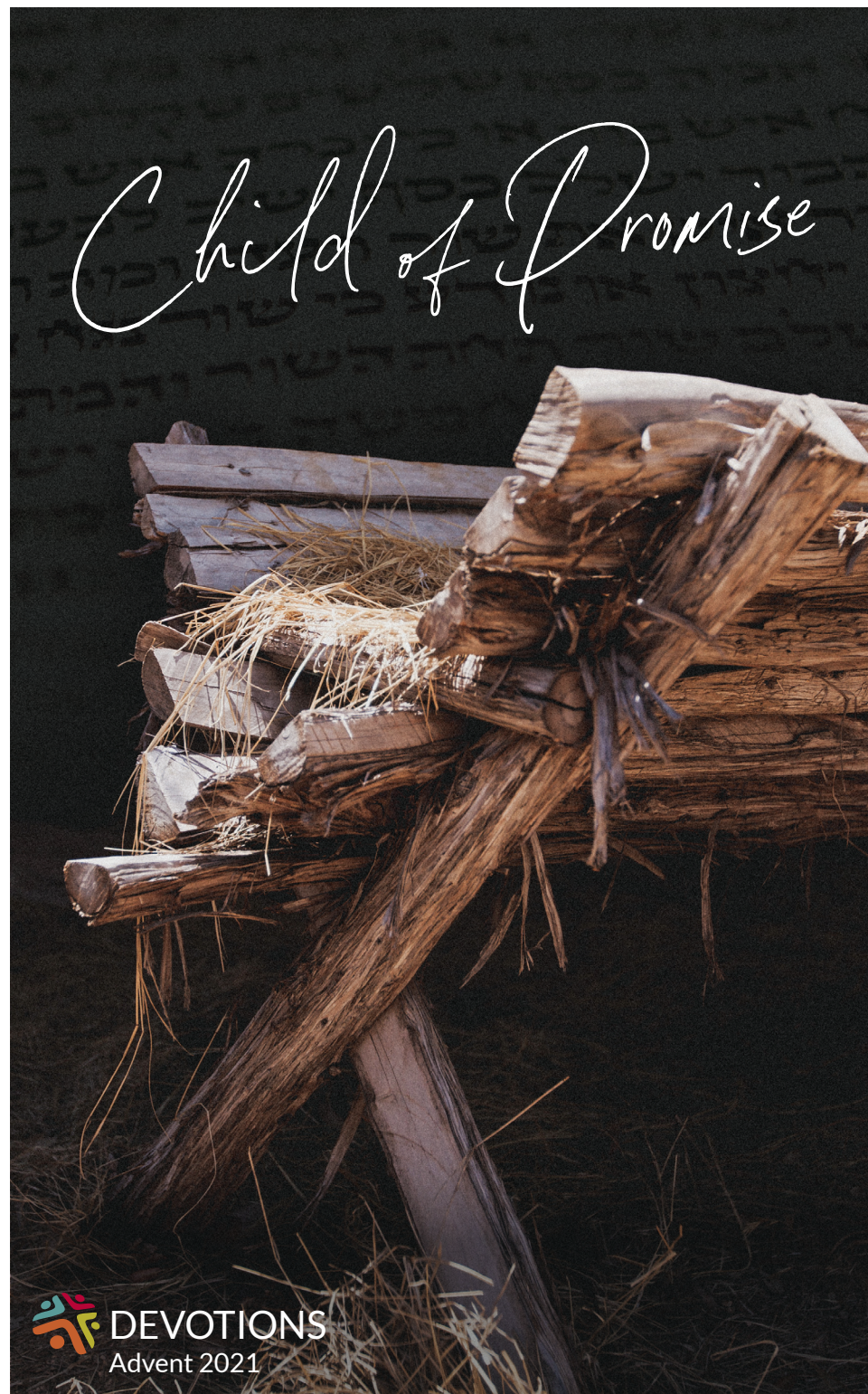




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Advent 2021

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GROWING

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)

Finally it was over. All the travel, all the miracles, all the wonder and terror and confusion and surprise—and they were home, safely, in Nazareth. Nothing exciting would happen there—nothing beyond the ordinary human events of birth and marriage and death, sadness and celebration. Jesus would be thirty before He left this place of quiet.

And that's good, because we need times of quiet and peace—times to grow, times to become strong. We need times to learn wisdom and grow close to God. Jesus had that. He gives us those times, too.

Maybe you are in a quiet time and place like that right now. Maybe you are in a place of turmoil, having your life turned upside down. Either way, Jesus is with you. He gave His life for you, and He will not leave you now. May God bless you always as you continue to grow in Jesus, the Savior God promised—the Lord we have forever.

Dear Father, thank You for Your Son! Keep me with You forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Are you in a quiet time or in a time of change and activity?
- How do you feel about where you are right now?
- How has God seen you through similar times in the past?

SIMPLE?

The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)

Mark begins so simply. He announces his topic—"the Gospel," that is, the "Good News" of Jesus. Jesus who? Jesus the Christ—that is, the Messiah, the One God promised to send hundreds of years ago, to save us all. Who's that, you say? The Son of God—God become a human being, a tiny baby lying in a manger—a Man hanging on a cross. Maybe it's not so simple after all.

Or maybe it is. Because all of this boils down to one thing—to love. God, the God who made the universe and everything in it, deciding to come down into the mess and the trouble and the ordinariness of our daily lives. God coming down out of heaven and into a young woman's womb. God, becoming one of us.

There are many ways to show love—even at a distance. God could have sent an angel. He could have showered His blessings on us from far away. He could have even stuck with the prophets we were already used to. But He came Himself.

And because Jesus came, everything is different. Because this is the beginning of the Gospel, the beginning of the Good News—which is for me and you and everybody, which goes on forever.

Lord Jesus, thank You for making Yourself our new beginning. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When do you most want a new beginning?
- Tell about a time when you went yourself to help someone.
- Why do you think Jesus calls Himself the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end (see Revelation 1:8)?

BEDTIME STORY

The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you ... 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 3:14a, 15)

It must have been a favorite bedtime story for Adam and Eve's children and grandchildren. It had all the elements—a good beginning, a tragic middle, and something exciting to look forward to at the end.

The story started out happily—God made people good and gave them a wonderful garden to live in. Then trouble came. The villain of the story showed up and tempted Adam and Eve into turning against God. As a result death, trouble, and suffering came into the world. How terrible!

Ah, but then—and this must have been their favorite bit—*then* God saved the day by promising a hero who would come and rescue everybody. This hero would be a human being just like them, but He would fight the ancient enemy and win! It would cost Him dearly, and He would suffer greatly, but in the end, He would save all humankind.

At this point those first children would have had to go to sleep. They knew no more than that. But we know more—we know the Name of the Hero. He is Jesus Christ, our Savior. He is the One born of a woman just as we are—born to take on the power of the devil and to defeat him, at the cost of His own suffering and death. And we know the best part of all—that Jesus has risen and is alive forever, victorious over death—and because we belong to Him, so now are we.

Lord, thank You for being the Hero we needed to save us from death and evil. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is your favorite bedtime, campfire, or other story?
- Why do you love it so much?
- What parts of Jesus' story are your favorite, and why?

WISDOM

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 land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea ... he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. (Matthew 2:19-22)

How can we know what God wants us to do when it isn't spelled out in the Bible? For instance, should I take that job, buy that house, marry that person? Plenty of people wish that God would speak to them clearly and give them the answers.

We know God spoke to the prophets clearly—and of course Jesus spoke to His disciples and the crowds. But even then, it was rarely the simple, complete answer people wanted, and usually they still had to use their brains.

Think about the story of Joseph. Herod was dead, but his son Archelaus was king over Judea—and he was known to be cruel and dangerous. Should Joseph take his family back to Judea, the last place they had lived? His own common sense said no—go somewhere else. Soon after, God confirmed that decision in a dream. The family went to Galilee instead—where Jesus could grow up in safety.

You too may be facing an important decision. As you pray and read the Bible, don't forget to use the wisdom God has given you, both your own and that of Christian friends. That too is a good gift of God, one that comes to us through our Savior Jesus. He Himself is "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24b).

Lord, renew my mind so that I may make decisions according to Your direction for my life. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you find it easy or hard to make decisions?
- If you could ask God one question and get a clear answer, what would it be?
- Tell a story about a time when you asked for God's help to make a decision.

THE LAST WORD

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

This is the part of the Christmas story we don't like talking about—the part where several dozen innocent babies get murdered. That's bad, but what's worse is that their death is closely related to Jesus' birth. The best thing in the world—Jesus' coming—sets off a chain reaction that leads to massacre.

Of course, it wasn't Jesus' fault; an evil king chose to commit murder, not Jesus. And yet it feels strange to read how God rescued His own Son from the slaughter and left the other babies to die. How is that fair? How is that even bearable?

It isn't. Good and evil so intertwined isn't bearable by anybody. God Himself can't stand it. And that's why He came into this world at the first Christmas—to put an end to these horrors and rescue us all.

If you think about it, the truth is that Herod got his way. None of the babies escaped death—not even Jesus. His death just took a little longer. Thirty years later, another Herod—this Herod's son—would hand “the King of the Jews” over to death on a Roman cross. The last baby of Bethlehem would fall to Herod's will.

And yet—and yet, Herod does not have the last word after all. For three days later, Jesus would rise from the dead, never to die again. And Jesus brought with Him that same gift of life and light to give to everyone who belongs to Him—to me, to you, to the babies who died for Him at Bethlehem. Herod doesn't have the last word—Jesus does.

Lord, help me to see past the horrors of this world to Your life, mercy, and deliverance. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why do you think God allowed this horrible story to be recorded?
- What do you do when the horrors of this world are too much for you?
- How does Jesus help you at such times?

CHANGE OF PLANS

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the Lord had told him. (Genesis 12:1-4a)

I wonder what Abram thought of his life, just before God called him. He was a man in his seventies, married but without children, which was the one great sadness of his life. Still, he and his wife lived among their relatives, so they weren't entirely alone, and they were probably fairly well off. Surely the rest of his life would be predictable—the same old thing until the day he died.

And then God spoke to him. He said, “Leave home and go where I send you. Leave your relatives, your house, the city, and the ways that you know. Take Me instead. I will do something amazing with you. And because of you, and your family, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.”

Abram's plans were gone, just like that. From then on, Abram would never know from one year to the next where he would live or what would happen to him there. But he knew God's unshakeable promise: “In your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Acts 3:25b).

Jesus would come from Abram's family. And God would bless all people through Jesus' birth, suffering, death, and resurrection. This was God's plan—to draw all the families of the world into His own family, through Jesus our Savior.

Father, thank You for planning to make me Your child through Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you like sudden change or not?
- Tell about a time when your plans for your life changed unexpectedly. How did you cope?
- When you don't know what the future holds, how do you find comfort in God?

OFFSPRING OF ABRAHAM

“Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” (Genesis 28:14)

We know that Jesus is the promised Offspring of Abram, now known as Abraham—He is the one that God said would be the blessing to every family of the earth. But what does it mean, to be the Offspring of Abraham? Besides the obvious, that is.

Well, it means first of all to be the child of a man who by all logic never should have had children. It means to be a miracle, born by God’s promise—an unexpected blessing, a child who might grow up to do anything, anything at all!

But it means more. It means to be the Offspring of a man of faith, a man who chucked everything and went out on a limb just because God said so—and who lived to see some of God’s wildest promises come true. Jesus did that, too. After all, He came down from heaven to become a Man, and why? Because God the Father asked it.

And it means even more than that. It means to be a blessing—the blessing, the One to bring all humanity out of the power of death and darkness. It means to be the One who “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10b)—through His own life, death, and resurrection.

Because of Jesus, all the families of the earth have the opportunity to be God’s family—to be born of the Holy Spirit, to become God’s offspring. Jesus Himself tells us that Abraham saw His coming and was glad (see John 8:56). We are glad, too!

Dear Father, thank You for Your Son Jesus, who makes us Your children. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Are you like your family or ancestors? If so, how?
- As Abraham’s offspring, Jesus is related to the whole human race. What does it mean to you, to think of Jesus as your relative?
- Why do you think God wanted Jesus to be a relative of yours and not just a stranger—an angel, for instance?

RESPONSIBILITIES

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. (Matthew 2:13-15a)

It surprises me how much trust God put in Joseph. When Jesus’ life is threatened, God doesn’t give king Herod a heart attack, or whisk Jesus to safety in a whirlwind. Instead, He speaks to Jesus’ earthly father Joseph. He trusts him with the safety of the Son of God Himself.

And Joseph comes through. As a believer, Joseph does what God tells him. As a father, Joseph does everything in his power to keep his little family safe. He doesn’t expect praise for it. He just does it.

That’s true for us as well. We all have responsibilities God has given us—in our families, in our neighborhoods or churches, at work, at school. What we do may look tiny, ordinary—what any decent person would do. But God is using it, even when we can’t imagine how.

This isn’t surprising, is it? For a God who came down from heaven to earth to become a Man, a carpenter, a traveling teacher, and healer? I am certain no bad tables ever came out of that workshop in Nazareth. What Jesus did, He did with all His love and obedience—whether it was healing the sick or saving the people of the world through His death and resurrection. And now He trusts us with His work in the world.

Lord Jesus, show me what You want me to do and help me to do it well with Your Spirit’s help. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name one responsibility God has trusted you with.
- Do you ever feel like your work doesn’t matter?
- What is a small responsibility that someone else carried out faithfully that made a huge difference to you?

ON THE RIGHT PATH

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. (Matthew 2:9-10)

The wise men were having a hard time. They saw the star and traveled joyfully to the king's court in Jerusalem—probably expecting to meet the new “king of the Jews” among Herod's sons or grandsons. Instead, they got a homicidal maniac who wanted to use them as spies so he could track down the baby King and kill Him. This wasn't what they expected! They must have been badly shaken.

Now the wise men are headed to Bethlehem all unexpectedly. Are they even on the right path anymore? How glad they must have been to see their old friend, the star! It confirmed that they were going the right way. Maybe that's why they didn't waver when they found the baby in a house instead of a palace.

There are times in our own lives where things start off bright, only to take a terrible turn that makes us wonder if somehow we've fallen out of God's will. But we haven't. God is still caring for us, guiding us, holding us up—even when bad things happen, whether it's our fault or not. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God has made us His children. He won't let go of us, even when the world around us turns dark. He will lead us through the valley of the shadow, into His own everlasting life.

Lord, when I don't know what to do or where I'm going, guide me and uphold me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Tell a story about a time when you were lost—or thought you were.
- When you feel confused and lost in your life, what do you do to feel better?
- When has Jesus been a light to you in a dark time?

A HOUSE OF YOUR OWN

“Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to Me a son. ... And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before Me. Your throne shall be established forever.” (2 Samuel 7:11b-14a, 16)

King David loved the Lord. And so it was the dearest desire of his heart to do something to show that love. He knew that the house of God had been a traveling tent ever since the days of Moses, hundreds of years before—though he himself lived in a palace! That didn't seem right to him. So he planned to build God a magnificent temple.

But he got a surprise! God sent the prophet Nathan to tell him, “Forget about building Me a house. I'm going to build you a house that will last forever!”

God wasn't talking about a building, of course. He was playing on words. “House” can also mean “family” or “descendants.” God gave David the great wish of his heart—that one of his children would sit on the throne of Israel forever. God would never reject David's family as He had done with King Saul.

Of course, God was talking about Jesus—David's own many-times great-grandson. He would not be born in a palace, but lie in a manger instead. He would reign from a cross, not an ivory throne. And His crown would be made of thorns.

But through Jesus' death and resurrection, David and all believers would have a home forever with the Lord. We will never be rejected or thrown aside. Jesus is our House, our Home—and He lives and reigns forever.

Lord, You are my King and my joy. Thank You for making me Yours forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How many times have you moved in your life?
- If you were to choose a permanent home, where would it be?
- How has Jesus become home for you?

HIDDEN PROMISE

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)

We know this verse best as a prophecy of Jesus' birth, but have you ever heard where it came from in the beginning? There was a war going on against Judah, and King Ahaz was worried about losing. God told Isaiah the prophet to go talk to him and tell him not to be afraid. He even offered to do a miracle so the king could see it and be sure that he wasn't going to lose this war!

And can you believe it? The king said no. He wasn't interested in seeing any miracles. (Ahaz was one of Jesus' royal ancestors, but he was an evil king, and had no interest in following the Lord.)

Well, that didn't make God happy. And so He picked the miracle himself and announced it through Isaiah: A maiden would give birth to a son. A maiden, a virgin, a young woman—the Hebrew word includes all of these meanings.

And so the surface message to the king was simple: A young woman would have a baby, and before the child was old enough to eat solid food and make choices of his own, the enemies of Judah would be gone. It wouldn't take long at all.

King Ahaz ignored the promise and went his own bad way. But hidden in that surface promise was a deeper one for us—the promise of a much greater Child, Jesus, who would be born not just to a young woman but to a virgin. And He would be Immanuel, "God with us." He would save us from much greater enemies than Ahaz faced. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus would save us from the power of death and hell. See how much He loves us!

Father, thank You for giving us this double promise—and for giving us Your Son. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever known someone who cheated himself out of something wonderful, as Ahaz did?
- When did someone promise you something good and keep that promise?
- Why do you think God speaks in riddles sometimes?

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

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 ... Then Herod ... sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the Child, and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him." (Matthew 2:1-3, 7-8)

What an obvious lie! Herod was a cruel, paranoid king who had recently killed his own wife and sons when he thought they were a threat to him. And now he says, "Let me know when you find the baby, so I can come and worship him, too"—nobody could believe that.

But the wise men were not fools; they probably worked for kings themselves in their home country. They said nothing to contradict the king. Instead, they got safely out of Jerusalem, never to return. God made sure of it by warning them in a dream.

It's clear that Jesus was born into the same dark world we have today—a world that is not safe, where evil destroys human lives and wise people "keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time" (Amos 5:13b). And yet God has not deserted us. He has come Himself to rescue us, to make His light shine into the darkest corners of our world.

Jesus lay down His own life to make it happen—and then rose from the dead. Death and evil cannot put out His light. They cannot destroy us either, because the Holy Spirit has drawn us to Jesus' light and made us children of light through faith in Jesus (see 1 Thessalonians 5:5).

Lord, keep us in Your light and help us against the powers of darkness. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is the biggest lie anybody ever told you?
- What do you do when you are faced with evil?
- When have you seen Jesus bring light into a dark situation?

UPSET

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)

Simeon blesses the young family, but then he offers a warning: this Child's life will not be peaceful. God will upset the current situation. The high will fall; the lowly will rise, and Jesus will be opposed, even to the point of death. And finally, "the thoughts from many hearts will be revealed."

What is this? Why would God plan to upset things? Can't we just have peaceful, pain-free progress, with the human race slowly getting better and better in every way?

Apparently not. And we should not be surprised, living in a broken world as we do. There are so many evils that don't get better unless there is pain first. A bad appendix has to come out—there's no choice about surgery. A broken relationship needs honesty and openness if it's ever to get better. Corruption in politics needs to be exposed before it can be cleaned out.

But the ultimate goal is always healing—life, joy, peace. Jesus comes into this world, not just to upset it, but to set it right. If He humbles us, He will lift us up again. If we suffer, we know He will raise us up, just as He too suffered and was raised from the dead. Through Jesus, the thoughts of God's heart have been revealed—and they are love and mercy to us.

Lord, please hold on to me while I wait for You to set the world right again. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you like change or do you prefer peace? Why?
- Tell about a time when something had to be upset or broken before it could be fixed.
- When have you seen Jesus take your broken life and make something beautiful with it?

UPON HIS SHOULDER?

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. Of the increase of His government and of peace there will be no end. (Isaiah 9:6-7a)

Isaiah's words sound really weird to me. I am thinking about the newborn Jesus, such a tiny baby lying there in the manger—and suddenly Isaiah says, "the government shall be upon His shoulder." What? How can those tiny shoulders carry any weight at all? And what exactly does he mean by government, anyway?

Read verse 7. It looks like when Isaiah says "government," he doesn't mean the bureaucracy we usually think of. Instead he means the action of governing, ruling—what we call "being in charge," "taking care of things," or "making sure that everything happens the way it's supposed to." That is the government Jesus' shoulders will carry. He will do the work of a good shepherd, of a manager, of a king—of God.

That work includes all of us, with our sins and our troubles and our griefs—all the things that need to be set right. Only God's shoulders are strong enough for that. That's why Jesus can carry it—because He is God and human, too. And because He loves us, He will carry that weight gladly—all the way to the cross and beyond.

Lord, thank You for carrying the weight of our care now and forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever been in charge of something?
- How heavy was the weight of the "governing" you did?
- In what ways do you see Jesus governing your life?

A TREE REBORN

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. (Isaiah 11:1)

In my grandmother's backyard grew a beautiful orchid tree with white bark and leaves shaped like butterflies. Each Easter it was loaded with large, delicate flowers—purple and lilac and magenta, floating through the air to land on the grass. I loved that tree. But after my grandparents moved, the new owner cut it down. How sad I was!

That's similar to what God is talking about here, when He mentions the stump of Jesse. Jesse was the father of King David and of the royal line of Judah, which fell out of power when the Babylonians took everyone into exile. The royal line was no beautiful tree anymore. It was a stump—a dead tree, chopped down by its enemies.

But there is this about a tree—sometimes, if you wait long enough, the trunk will sprout again. The roots are still alive underground, and water will make them grow. In a few years, the tree is right back where it was—tall, green, fruitful.

What about King David's family—the line God said would always sit on the throne of God's people? Was it gone forever? No. When the Judeans returned from exile, Jesus' ancestors were among them. They weren't royal anymore. Soon they were shepherds, craftsmen, shopkeepers—ordinary folk. But they never forgot God's promise. And in the end, Jesus was born.

Jesus is that one lovely green shoot coming from what looks like a dead stump in the ground. Not just for David's family, but for the whole human race—all of us, ruined by sin and under the power of death. But Jesus is our hope and salvation. He is our life-giver. By taking our death upon Himself, He has given new life to us—to everyone who trusts in Him. We will live again, forever—in God.

Lord Jesus, You are our hope and our life. Thank You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever seen a stump come back to life again?
- How do you find hope in the middle of grief?
- When have you seen God bring new life out of something you thought was dead?

CHILD OF PROMISE

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon ... And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the Child Jesus ... he took Him up in his arms and blessed God ... And there was a prophetess, Anna ... 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 2:25a, 27a, 28a, 36a, 38a)

Simeon and Anna had been waiting for many years for the coming of the Savior. They knew what God promised in His Word. They knew that even though they lived humble lives in a conquered country, God had not forgotten them. God would keep His promise, no matter how impossible it looked. And so they continued to hope.

That day, Simeon saw Jesus and took Him up in his arms. Anna came as quickly as she could to share the joy. God was finally there, born among His people—and our rescue was underway.

Most likely Simeon and Anna both died before they saw Jesus finish His work. They were not there to see Him nailed to a cross, to hear Him cry out "It is finished!" They were not there to see the empty tomb on Sunday and hear Him calling their names—suddenly, unbelievably, alive again, full of joy and life and love.

But Simeon and Anna didn't need to be there. They had the promises, and God's promises are always true. We have the promises too—and so we know that because Jesus lay down His life for us, our sins are forgiven and He has made us God's own children. We know that He will raise us from the dead, just as He is raised and lives forever. We know God will do this for everyone who trusts in Jesus—because "everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13).

Father, thank You for sending Your Son according to Your good promises. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name someone you know who always keeps his or her promises. How do you feel about that person?
- Which of all God's promises is your favorite?
- When is one time in your life you found hope in God's promises?

UNDER THE LAW

And at the end of eight days, when He was circumcised, He was called Jesus ... 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 ... 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 2:21a, 22, 24)

January 1 is the Feast of the Circumcision. It marks the day Jesus turned eight days old, when all Jewish boys had to be circumcised as a sign that they were part of God's people. From that point on, He would be under the Law of Moses.

When He was forty days old, His family had more requirements of the Law to carry out. Mary had to make a sacrifice at the temple after childbirth. And Jesus, as a firstborn son, had to be presented to God at the temple as well. So this meant a trip to Jerusalem, about six miles away.

As human beings, we, too, come under the Law—the Ten Commandments, the basic knowledge of right and wrong, and most of all, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). We fail at these things all the time. We know that the Law is good, but we are not good, we are broken, and the Law just proves that again and again to us. We need help. We need a Savior.

Jesus knows our plight. He came to do for us what we could never do—fulfilling God's Law perfectly, and then setting us free from all the guilt and shame and death that we had brought on ourselves. It is as if He said to us, "I am yours and you are Mine. Your death has become My death, and My resurrection will be your life. Because you trust in Me, you are forgiven and safe and free forever."

Lord, thank You for taking my place and setting me free. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever tried to live a single day perfectly?
- If so, what happened? If not, what do you expect would happen?
- How does Jesus help you when you feel like a failure?

SMALL THINGS

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)

Have you ever noticed that God tends to choose the little things to serve His purpose? He chooses a childless man to father a nation, a shepherd boy to become a king. He chooses a tiny village near Jerusalem to become the birthplace for His own Son Jesus.

No doubt the people of Jerusalem would have complained. Theirs was the big city, the temple, the palaces; theirs were the priests and the kings and the soldiers. What did tiny Bethlehem have to offer?

Not much. The only thing Bethlehem had to offer was itself—its tiny, small, no-account self. That was just about right for what God wanted to do—to bring His Son Jesus, our Savior, into the world. Nobody would ever for a moment be able to claim credit for Him. Nobody could say, "Of course, He came from money; He had the best teachers; He grew up in a palace." Jesus had none of those benefits. What He had came from God alone.

And what did He have, then? He had God's little people—you, me, the shepherds, the local families. He had ordinary people, sinful and broken, beloved by God and called to be His own. He had Bethlehem to save—and then the rest of the world, even Jerusalem!—all of us His responsibility, His care, His beloved.

Jesus suffered, died, and rose from the dead in Jerusalem. But for God's first coming into the world as a human baby, He chose tiny Bethlehem, a place as humble as the people He came to save.

Lord, thank You that You chose me to be Your own, although I am small and unimportant. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you felt out of your depth because the others around you were greater or more important than you?
- When has God used you to do something too great or important for you?
- Why do you think God likes to use the weakest and least important for His work?

AN ORDINARY GRIEF

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah And he had a wife ... 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)

The story of Jesus' birth starts with an ordinary grief. Zechariah and Elizabeth are respectable, ordinary people who love the Lord and follow Him. But there is a great sadness in their lives. The one blessing they want the most has always been denied to them. Elizabeth has never had a baby, and now it is too late.

Chances are that Zechariah and Elizabeth didn't say very much about their sadness. A lot of people assume that infertility is a punishment from God. People in their village would have gossiped about them, trying to figure out what secret evil led to this. It would be easier just not to talk about it.

But God was listening, and God understood. And when it came time for God to send Jesus into the world, God did not forget this couple's grief. He chose them—not some more fortunate family!—to raise the child who would prepare the way for Jesus.

We, too, have ordinary griefs—people we love who have died, the loss of jobs or homes or health, broken marriages and friendships. And sometimes it feels like God isn't paying attention. But He is. And He sends us His own dear Son to be our Savior.

Through His own suffering, grief, and death, Jesus brings us life, healing, and hope. And because Jesus is alive again, now and forever, we know absolutely that one day God will wipe away every tear from our eyes—when Jesus returns and “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4b).

Lord, bless You for giving us Your Son to carry our griefs and sorrows. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you think Elizabeth and Zechariah felt about their situation?
- What is one ordinary grief you have experienced?
- How has the Lord helped you with it?

LET'S GO!

When the angels went away from them into heaven, 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 when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this Child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ... And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:15-18, 20)

Once the angels were gone, the shepherds didn't overthink it. They said, “Let's go!” They took off running toward Bethlehem and started hunting for the baby. (That must have made some noise, in those dark streets and alleys!)

And when they found Jesus, they were glad. They told everybody what the angels said, admired the baby, and headed back to the sheep, praising God.

The shepherds didn't overthink it. They just went. And they visited. And they told their story. And they went home.

We can do that too, can't we? When we're talking to friends or family who aren't Christians, we don't need to overthink it. We can simply pray and trust the whole situation to God, and then just be in the moment—say what comes to mind—be quiet, or speak—without worrying that somehow, some way, we're going to make a mistake that turns them away from Jesus. The Holy Spirit will take care of that stuff. He cares about these people even more than we do. After all, Jesus was born, and died, and rose again for them as well as us!

Dear Lord, help me to speak about You naturally when it's the right time, without worrying. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Are you uncomfortable mentioning Jesus to people you care about?
- Why or why not?
- What would it be like if you could stop overthinking it and just go with the flow?

WHAT A SIGN!

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)

Signs tell you things. How would the shepherds know that they had found the Savior, Christ the Lord? How would they know when they had found the Messiah, the Holy One, the Son of the living God? They would know when they saw the sign: a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

It's a pretty amazing contrast. Why would God choose such humble, human things to mark out His beloved Son Jesus? Why not a fiery pillar, or a choir of angels singing Jesus to sleep? Something more fitting to His glory.

Maybe God chose this to be the sign because this is the key to everything Jesus came to do: He "emptied Himself ... being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8). The Man who would lay down His life for humanity began it the same way: lying in a human baby's clothes, in a borrowed manger. This is how much He loves us.

Dear Lord, thank You for sharing in my humanity, so I may share in Your life and glory. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you think the shepherds found their way to Jesus?
- Do you think they were surprised by what they found?
- When has God surprised you by making Himself known to you in an unexpected way?

SAY WHAT?

There appeared to him an angel of the Lord 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. ..." And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." (Luke 1:11a, 12-15a, 18)

Sometimes you have to wonder about God's timing. Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed for a baby for so many years. Every month they hoped, and every month they were disappointed. When menopause came, they figured it was over. God had said no. Time to concentrate on other parts of life.

Then, bang! A baby. The angel gives the news so rapidly: "Your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John." And, and, and—Zechariah is still trying to wrap his mind around the concept of a baby—a baby now.

It's no surprise that it took Zechariah a while for the news to sink in. And then the first words out of his mouth are basically, "Seriously? Prove it to me."

Bad move, Zechariah. But what a human move. Because while we know God is a God of surprises, somehow we never expect Him to surprise us ... like that. By sending a couple a baby in their old age. By sending a virgin a baby at any age! By sending us Jesus, His own Son—to be that baby, lying in a lowly manger, come into this world to take on the devil with all his power—and win.

Who sends a baby to save the world? God does. Our God, who loves us and gives Himself for us.

Dear Lord, help me to cope when You bring surprises into my life. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever taken care of a newborn? What was it like?
- Who do you sympathize more with—doubting Zechariah or the doubted angel?
- When has God surprised you?

LAUGHTER

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 1:19-20)

I always laugh when I get to this part of the story. Zechariah demands proof that God will keep His promise, and the angel more or less rolls his eyes, points to himself, and says, "Hello! You are talking to an angel right here, right now, sent from God! What more do you need? But you want another sign. Fine. How about this: You get to be quiet for a little while. Just about ... nine months."

Laughter has a place in the Christmas story, because our God is a God of surprises—and a God of mercy, too. When we fall into sin and doubt, God doesn't zap us. He calls us back to Himself. When necessary, He disciplines us, but He does it for our good and for our eventual blessing. It must have been hard for Zechariah to endure silence for nine months—but what joy was at the end of it!

We, too, fall into sin and doubt—and how greatly we need God to call us back to Him out of our darkness. This is why Jesus came for us—to find us and to bring us back, patiently and lovingly and joyfully, and to restore us to God the Father. "Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad" (Psalm 126:2-3).

Thank You, Lord, for all the great things You have done for me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever really "put your foot in your mouth," as Zechariah did?
- Does it surprise you to think of God as a God of laughter?
- Name one great thing the Lord has done for you.

GOOD SHEPHERD

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)

The shepherds were out in the field that night, taking care of their sheep. They were protecting them from predators—lions, bears, wolves. If it was lambing season, they might have been helping the ewes in labor. Protection and caregiving was their job.

Maybe that's the reason why God chose them, of all people, to be the first to hear the wonderful news of Jesus' birth. "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy," says the angel. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10b-11).

Who is this Savior, Christ the Lord? He is your Caregiver, who watches over you and helps when you suffer. He is your own Shepherd—the One who will protect you from the powers of evil. He is Jesus, who will lay down His life to make you God's children—and rise from the dead, so that you can live forever.

What a reason to celebrate!

Dear Lord, You are my good Shepherd. Keep me with You always. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you served as a caregiver or protector?
- When is one specific time when somebody else protected or cared for you?
- Tell about a time when Jesus acted as a good Shepherd to you.

GIVING HIS BEST

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)

This was Jesus' introduction to the world: being wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Mary must have brought the swaddling clothes along on their journey from Nazareth, carefully packed against the day she would need them. The manger, on the other hand, was a last-minute thing—a stand-in for the cradle they didn't have, far from home as they were.

Both items were necessary. Swaddling clothes kept the baby warm and made sure He would grow up with straight, strong limbs, according to the thinking of the day. The manger kept Jesus safely off the ground, where He might be stepped on or bitten by rats.

It didn't look like much—some cloth strips and an animals' feeding box. But it was the best Mary and Joseph could do for the baby they loved. And to human eyes, Jesus Himself didn't look like much—but He was the very best God could do for us, the people He loved.

A tiny baby—this is God's way of rescuing the world? Yes. Because this baby would grow up as the Man Jesus Christ, who is God Himself living among us. Jesus spent His life caring, teaching, healing, helping—and then lay down His life for our sakes, in order to break the power of evil over us and all the world. When He rose from the dead, He broke the power of death, and now everyone who trusts in Him will live forever.

See how much God loves us!

Dear Father, thank You for Jesus, Your Son. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Tell about a time you didn't have something you needed, and had to improvise.
- How do people in your family or among your friends prepare for the birth of a baby?
- What is the best thing, besides Jesus, God has given you? (There might be several best things.)

A QUIET PAUSE

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 1:23-25)

Zechariah must have told his wife what happened when he got home. Oh, not by speech—the angel-promised muteness was already upon him. By writing, probably. However it happened, Elizabeth knew she was carrying a baby almost as soon as it happened—long before the most obvious signs of pregnancy came upon her—and she hid herself. She stayed at home as much as possible and didn't socialize or go out on her normal routine. Why?

Certainly she had a lot to think about. Her life was being turned upside down. Never again would she be pitied for wanting a child and having none. Instead, the too-quiet house would ring to the sounds of a baby's cry, and later to the noise of a little boy running in and out. She herself would be in for a ton of work. Babies aren't easy!

But that probably wasn't the main thing on her mind. God had said that her son would be the one to prepare the way for the Lord. That could mean nothing else but that the Messiah was coming—that God was about to redeem His people from the power of evil, as He promised so many, many years ago. What a wonderful thing! And Elizabeth's baby would be part of it.

There's no hiding a pregnancy when it gets far enough along. And there's no hiding God's work, either, when it comes to the point of birth. But quiet times are normal, and it's okay to step back and let God do whatever He's doing with you in quiet, out of sight—until the day He makes it public.

Dear Lord, do what You want to do with me, whether it's in quiet or in public. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Tell about an event that turned your life upside down.
- Would you say your life is mostly quiet, or mostly public?
- When you are waiting for the Lord to do His work, what kinds of things do you do?

SO ORDINARY

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

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. (Luke 1:26-27)

The contrast gets me every time. On the one hand we have Jesus as the Word of God, God the Son—He who made all things and who lives from everlasting to everlasting. And then we see Him gathering Himself up, folding Himself together, laying His glory aside—to become an embryo in a young girl's womb in a minor town in backwater Galilee. I'm not surprised Mary had a hard time with the idea!

As I look around my makeshift writing spot at home, I see such ordinary things. A potted plant in the window. A stack of bills. A pair of shoes, forgotten on the floor. A dog yawning in the corner. How can it be, that the great and holy God should have any interest in my ordinary life?

It is almost impossible to believe—except that He has said it, and God never tells a lie. Small and ordinary as we are, we matter to Him. He has told us: “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son” (John 3:16a). “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). “You did not choose Me, but I chose you” (John 15:16a).

God truly wants us—wants you!—and that's why Jesus came to save us.

Lord, I can't comprehend it, but I know that You love me. Help me to trust You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Are you uncomfortable meeting someone greater than you?
- Do you have a hard time believing it when someone makes it clear they love or take pleasure in you? If so, how do you cope?
- How do you plan to prepare this Advent for your great Guest?

READY OR NOT, HERE I COME!

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

When a baby decides it's coming, it's coming, and there's very little you can do to stop it. Joseph must have been frantic, trying to find a place where his wife could deliver her baby. Where was there room enough? Who would take them in? Was it clean, was it private, was there a midwife nearby?

I suspect Mary was beyond those concerns. Pain has a way of doing that.

Things were out of control. Except that, of course, they weren't. God had planned for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, and none of this surprised Him. He was taking care of them, no matter how scary things got. He was with them, and they were not alone.

God is with us, too, when we are afraid and confused. He knows what He is doing, though we do not. He is taking care of us. He will never leave us or abandon us. How could He, when He is the One who came to save us through such a haphazard, frightening birth as that?

Dear Jesus, be with me and help me when I am afraid and don't know what is happening. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What was your own birth like, if you know? Was it calm and planned out, or did things get crazy?
- Why do you think God chose such a haphazard, even dangerous birth for Jesus?
- When you were born into the Christian faith, was it calm and well-planned, or was it (humanly speaking) haphazard and risky?

CHESSBOARD

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, 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, 3-5)

It reminds me of a giant chessboard—the people moving across the Roman Empire at the bidding of an emperor they had never seen, but who still held the power to turn their lives upside down. Who among them would have realized that the emperor himself was a pawn—God’s tool for getting His unborn Son to Bethlehem to be born?

But he was. Whether Augustus knew it or not, he was not the most important person in that story. He lived and died without ever realizing that there was a new Person among his subjects—God Himself, born into the human family. Imagine missing that!

It’s easy for us to miss what God is doing in our lives, too. That’s okay—God doesn’t always announce what He’s up to. It might be years later before you see God’s hand in the events that are happening to you right now.

Then what should we be doing? The same thing Joseph did—handling the daily duties that God puts in front of us, even if it’s something as boring as tax registration. God will take care of the big picture. As for us, our eyes are on Jesus our Savior. He is our Shepherd, and He will lead us where God wants us to be. After all, He is the One who loves us enough to live, die, and rise for us!

Lord, when I can’t see what You are doing with my life, help me to trust You to lead me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you feel a strong need to understand what’s going on all the time, or not?
- What do you do when your life is upside down and you can’t tell what God is planning?
- Tell about a time when you didn’t see God’s hand at work, but looking back, you can see His care for you.

AM I IN TROUBLE?

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. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” (Luke 1:28-30)

Mary had the same kind of reaction a lot of us do when an authority figure comes to see us. At school, the dean or principal says, “Would you please step into my office?” and our worries go wild. At work, the top boss says, “I’d like a word,” and we wonder if that word is “fired.”

That’s natural, I suppose. We aren’t used to getting good news from important people. We know our faults, and we immediately think “I’m in trouble.”

But not this time. The angel reassures her. “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” he says, “you have found favor with God.” God doesn’t want to blame you for anything. He wants to give you something!

And that something is Jesus—God’s own Son, our Savior who loves us. God is giving us the best gift ever, because Jesus is the One who will take away all our sin—and all the fear and guilt that it causes us. Through His life, death, and resurrection, He will set us free from all this bad stuff, and give us the joy of being children of God.

Now we don’t have to be afraid when God says to us, “I would like a word with you.” We can respond as much loved children, and say, “I welcome You!”

Dear Father, help me to be glad and not afraid when You call me, because I know that in Jesus You have freed me from evil. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Are you comfortable or uncomfortable when “higher-ups” in your life want to talk to you?
- Tell about a time when you expected trouble and got something good instead.
- What makes you uncomfortable with God? What makes you comfortable with Him?

OVER OUR HEADS

“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.” And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:31-34)

It’s funny the contrast between what the angel is saying and what Mary takes in. The angel is going on and on about how great Jesus will be, how He will reign forever and be called the Son of the Most High. Mary clearly heard all that, as she was able to tell it to Luke many years later so He could write it down. But in the moment, she could only ask one question: “How?”

Mary knew she was a virgin, and virgins didn’t have babies. And so she tripped over the very first phrase: “You will conceive in your womb and bear a Son.” She didn’t understand. And so she asked.

Mary did right. She didn’t worry about looking stupid for asking a basic question. She didn’t hide her worries away and brood over them later. She asked. And God answered.

So many things in our life are over our heads. God sends something new, and we don’t know how to handle it. Why not imitate Mary, and ask Him? It’s what the Bible tells us to do: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (James 1:5). God is gentle and kind to those who approach Him like children, asking for help. After all, He is the One who sent His own Son into the world to become our Savior. The same God who treated Mary with care and respect will treat us with loving mercy as well.

Dear Father, when I don’t understand, please help and guide me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Are you ever embarrassed to ask a basic question? Why or why not?
- Tell about someone you know who is patient and gentle with the questions of people who don’t understand.
- What specific thing would you like to ask God now?

A LIFE DERAILED—BY BLESSING

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)

Think about how Joseph’s life was changed when he woke up. The day before, he had been planning a wedding—to be followed by living with a wife and children, maybe a small home, a carpentry shop, grandchildren—a quiet, ordinary life until the day he died. Not a bad life. A peaceful, blessed life.

But now, Joseph is a man with a mission: take care of God’s own incarnate Son. Protect Him and His mother. Guard them from gossip and public shame. Provide for their needs, even when labor starts far away from home. Outwit an evil king. Find a way to support them in faraway Egypt, living as refugees. And then slowly, carefully, quietly, reinsert the family into Galilee again—making no noise, attracting no enemies—and go on raising the Messiah in a forgotten backwater of the Roman Empire. You don’t ask much, do You, God?

I doubt Joseph would have complained, if we could ask him. Hard as his new life was, he got one thing of incomparable value out of it—Jesus, God’s Son and his Savior. And that’s what we get when God rearranges our lives for us, too. They may be hard; they may involve suffering and losses or frustrations we never imagined. But with it all, we have Jesus. Jesus never leaves us alone, no matter how hard it gets. He walks with us and picks us up when we fall. And He does it with nail-scarred hands—hands that remind us always of how much He loves us, enough to die and rise for us. It is enough.

Lord, when You rearrange my life, help me to trust in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When has God rearranged your life in a way you didn’t expect?
- What was your emotional reaction to the change?
- How has God helped you deal with it ever since?

MERCY

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 as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream (Matthew 1:18b-20a)

Consider Joseph. Here he is, stunned by the news that his fiancée is pregnant by someone else—so what does he do? Apparently, he goes home, lies down on his bed, and thinks. At least, that’s what I deduce from the fact that he then falls asleep and sees an angel telling him the truth about Mary—and the glorious news about Jesus.

But it’s the quiet response I can’t get over. How many men in his position would have raged and roared, letting the whole neighborhood know the situation? How many would have made a snap decision then and there, to everybody’s pain?

But Joseph isn’t like this. He thinks. He prays. He takes time to consider, not just his own future, but Mary’s. Joseph is a just man, and also a merciful one. He leaves time between the news and the decision. And during that time, God reaches him. Joseph reminds me of God the Father.

Because God, too, had bad news once upon a time, and had to consider what to do about it. His beloved human beings had rebelled against Him—had listened to the devil—had broken themselves and their world. And God responded with mercy. He sent Jesus to be one of us, a human being. He lived with us, served and cared for us, and gave His life for us. Through His death and resurrection, He brought us back to God the Father—no longer rebels, but now beloved children.

Dear Lord, thank You that You are patient and merciful with us, because You love us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Are you hot-tempered, or do you take your time to make a decision?
- When you are troubled and confused, where do you look for help?
- Why do you think God allowed Joseph to struggle with this news before He told him the truth?

UNASKED-FOR MERCY

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.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:35-38)

Notice that Gabriel volunteers the information about Mary’s cousin Elizabeth. He tells Mary that she is pregnant, six months along, and adds: “Nothing will be impossible with God.” Why did he do this?

I think for a couple of reasons. The first was an unasked-for mercy of God. Mary trusted God, but she would have no evidence from her personal experience for some time yet. Early signs of pregnancy can also be signs of something else, and the only absolutely trusted sign of pregnancy was quickening—the first time the mother felt the movements of her unborn baby. That’s a long time to run on faith alone. And so God gave Mary something concrete and visible that would stand as a sign that the rest of God’s promise was on the way.

But He did more than that. Mary would certainly be wondering what to do next. God solved that problem for her by suggesting a place of refuge. With Elizabeth pregnant, Mary had a perfectly sensible reason for leaving home for a while. Elizabeth would certainly need help, and who better to provide it than a younger relative? And her visit would allow Mary several months to get used to her own miracle, to think, pray, and discuss her situation with Elizabeth, and to get through the discomforts of early pregnancy.

This is the kind of God we have—One who sees what we need, before we even ask for it. This is the Savior we have, who came into the world to rescue us from evil, when we didn’t even know enough to ask for Him—because He loves us.

Lord, show me this same loving kindness always. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you know anybody who is famous for thinking ahead and solving problems?
- When do you find it hardest to trust God? What helps you then?
- When has God shown you mercy though you didn’t think to ask for it?

WHAT NOW?

And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:38b)

That was that. Once Mary had said “Amen” to the wonderful thing the Lord intended to do through her, Gabriel left. The visit was over. The place that had held an angel now held what? Empty floor, maybe; a broom or a cooking pot; maybe a stray chicken.

Now Mary had to face the rest of her life. How exciting! How scary! Nothing would ever be the same.

Times like this come to us too—sometimes joyful times, sometimes not. “You’re pregnant,” they told me, and I was overjoyed. “It’s cancer,” they said—and we were not. “We’re getting a divorce,” said people I loved, and my world fell apart. “Your application has been approved”—and new horizons opened up before me.

Who can cope with these changes? When the angel is gone and we are left to face things alone, who can help us? Only the Lord Himself.

The angel Gabriel left Mary—but the Lord did not. God stayed with her, supporting her, helping her to adjust to the strangest and most blessed news ever. At some point, maybe even then, the Holy Spirit was doing His work, bringing new life into her womb. Jesus Himself would be with her for nine months, as close as ever one human being is to another—from a single cell to a full-term baby, moving and kicking and living.

The Lord doesn’t leave us, either. When God made you His own, the Holy Spirit came to live in you forever. Jesus Himself has promised us, “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20b).

God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is with us forever. He will not leave us alone to face the changes of our lives. The same God who came to save us—to die and to rise again for us—will stay with us forever.

Dear Lord, stay with me and help me with the changes in my life. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Generally speaking, do you like change or not? Why?
- What changes are you facing right now?
- Tell about a time when God got you through a major change in your life.

MANY WILL REJOICE

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. 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. (Luke 1:57-64)

Have you ever noticed that Zechariah doesn’t get his voice back when the baby is born? I thought that was odd. What was God making him wait for?

So I went and checked the promise again. It says, “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 ... you will be silent and unable to speak *until the day that these things take place*” (Luke 1:13b-14, 20b).

So, a son was born, yes, and the parents were glad, yes. But “these things” were not completely fulfilled until the community rejoiced, and the baby was officially named John (meaning “the Lord is gracious”).

God sent John into the world to make Elizabeth and Zechariah happy, but not just them. John would prepare the way for Jesus, our Savior, and that made John a wonderful, long-awaited gift to the many, many people who were waiting for God to save them. Where John was, Jesus would not be far behind. No wonder Zechariah (and many others) raised their voices to celebrate!

Thank You, Lord, for sending John and then Jesus, our wonderful Savior. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When you were a child, what did you wait for with great longing?
- How do you bear it when you must wait for something you desperately want?
- Do you think Zechariah regretted his silent time or not? Why?

THE KINDNESS OF OTHERS

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

I wonder if it was hard for Elizabeth to depend so much on Mary. Three months of fetching and carrying, sweeping and cleaning—because it’s almost certain the hardest chores fell on Mary. Elizabeth was in her last trimester, and probably in her sixties or older.

I wonder if it was hard for Mary to depend so much on Elizabeth? After all, though they were relatives, Elizabeth was not her mother or sister. Mary was spending three months under her roof—eating her food, asking her advice, receiving her counsel.

If you’ve been brought up to be independent, it can be hard to depend on the kindness of others—even people close to you, like friends or family. And yet this is the way God intended us to live. As part of the body of Christ, we are interdependent whether we realize it or not. It wouldn’t be a bad idea for us to get used to it!

Maybe this is part of the reason why Jesus came into this world as a tiny baby—utterly dependent on His mother for milk, warmth, life itself. Dependent on Joseph for protection and provision. Dependent on the wider community for so many things—the shelter He was born in, the roads His parents traveled, the safety He found in Egypt as a refugee Child. Jesus knows what it means to be dependent.

We, too, know what it means to be dependent, because we are utterly and happily dependent on Jesus. He is our Savior, who died to make us children of God. He is our Lord, who rose from the dead to give us eternal life. Maybe, if we have learned to depend on Him directly, we can learn to depend on Him through His people as well—with His help.

Lord, when I have trouble accepting help, help me! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Is it easier for you to give help or accept it?
- Why do you think that is so?
- If you are willing, tell about a time when God blessed you through the help of another person.

PROMISE KEPT

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ... For from His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, He has made Him known. (John 1:14, 16-18)

After so many, many years, it happened. It happened in silence, hidden away inside a young girl’s body. God became a human being, the tiniest of humans, slipping quietly into human history without fanfare or spotlights. It would be nine months before anyone saw His face.

Mary would be the first to know Him. Was He active or quiet, rambunctious or peaceful? Did He kick a lot? Did He like movement or singing? What was Jesus like, before He was born?

Mary left us no record. But there were plenty of people to tell us what Jesus was like after His birth—yes, and how He is even today. “Full of grace and truth,” says John. “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

What kind of a person is He? A gracious one. One who is kind and merciful, who loves the unlovable and welcomes the unwelcome-able. Although He is pure and holy, we see Him welcoming guilty people of bad reputations—and they are happy to be near Him. Little children come to him. Lepers and foreigners get His attention and help. Nobody is too low for Him.

He is grace walking, talking, and breathing. He is grace dying—and rising again. He is Jesus, the image of the invisible God, our Savior.

Dear Lord, thank You for treating me with gracious love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you think of when you hear the word “gracious”?
- When did a fellow human being show you grace though you didn’t deserve it?
- If you are willing, tell about a specific time when God showed you grace.

RESPONDING TO JESUS

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? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. (Luke 1:39-44)

Imagine what it is like for John. There he is, still three months away from being born—and suddenly, through the Holy Spirit, he realizes that he is in the presence of Jesus his Savior. What can he do? He can't walk; he can't talk; he's not even born yet. All he can do is leap for joy—and that's exactly what he does!

An unborn baby is pretty limited in what he can do to welcome his Savior. We, too, may be limited physically or in other ways. For example, I myself can no longer kneel at the communion rail. My disability prevents it. A dear friend of mine has no car and cannot easily get to church. Others live among non-Christians who make it difficult for them to worship or gather with other believers. Still others are short on money, which makes it hard for them to welcome Jesus by helping "the least of these My brothers" (Matthew 25:40b).

It's so easy to get depressed about the things we cannot do, but the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. He is the One who let baby John know that Jesus was nearby, in His own mother's womb. He is the One who created faith in you, bringing you to know Jesus, who died and rose for you. We can trust God the Holy Spirit to help us go on responding with love and joy to Jesus our Savior, no matter how limited our circumstances become.

Dear Lord, show me how to love and welcome my Savior. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is one specific way you responded to Jesus' love this week?
- When have you felt helpless and dependent?
- How have you seen the Lord continue to work with you and through you, even at those times?

SINGING FOR JOY

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)

After a long and difficult journey, Mary was finally face-to-face with the one person in the world she could count on to believe her—her cousin Elizabeth. And then she found out that the Holy Spirit had brought the news ahead of her—all the explaining was already done. What could Mary do but sing for joy?

There are times when God blesses us in a way that makes our hearts overflow. Like Mary, we want to sing. Some of us do sing, whether we have a voice for it or not. Others of us find different ways to express our love and happiness—through prayer, through action, through talking to fellow Christians who will understand exactly how wonderful God has been to us.

It is good for us to remember these times of joy. Darkness will come again soon enough. As Mary sang, she still remembered that God would use her Child to scatter the proud and bring down the mighty. Did she fully realize that Jesus would do this through His own death on a cross? Maybe not. Or maybe yes, if she understood the Old Testament prophecies—in which case she might have also understood about the resurrection.

But when those dark days came, Mary would still have this to look back on—the day when she first had the chance to share her good news in all its fullness with someone else caught up in the same blessing. We have that too—our Baptism, confirmation, times at Communion, special times with fellow Christians. Thank God for those times.

Lord, when I am troubled, comfort me with the reminder of Your blessings and strengthen me to hope in You for the future. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name one of the happiest days of your life.
- What made it so wonderful?
- When you are troubled, what blessings from God do you look back upon?