

Through Their Eyes

Zechariah

Mary



Joseph

Angel

Advent 2014

Through Their Eyes

Devotionals written by
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Letter from the Pastor

For the past several years, BRCC has celebrated Advent. During the weeks leading up to Christmas, we have focused on the fact that Jesus – the Eternal Son of God – became human for us and for our salvation. Each Sunday, we have special Scripture readings and light a candle to signify that Christ is the light of the world. We often have special music. Advent is a time of real joy and celebration for our church.

In previous years, we have focused on four traditional themes: hope, peace, love and joy. This year, however, we are doing something different. We will be looking at the Christmas story through the eyes of its main participants – Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and the Angels. We will conclude this time of celebration and reflection with a special Christmas Eve service where we will see the original Christmas through the eyes of the shepherds.

In looking at the Christmas story from these various angles, we are not merely trying to stoke curiosity. On the contrary, we hope it will help each of us to see the event from a fresh perspective. As we consider how Christ's Incarnation affected each of these individuals and groups, we hope it will allow us to examine our response to the story of God's amazing love shown in the coming of Christ, and in so doing that it will cause us to worship God anew with wonder, gratitude, and faith.

To aid in all of this, we have again produced an Advent devotional. You may use it as an individual or a family. Each week focuses on the person or group we are considering that week – and all point us to Jesus. As in last year, the devotions were written by several people, and each will have its own flavor and thought. However, we believe all of them will help us understand the coming of Christ better and will spur us on in our love and devotion to God. We pray this devotional will be a blessing and will prepare each of you to focus on Jesus this Advent season, so that we may sing with the angels, "Glory to God in the Highest!"

Bret

Daily Devotionals

Week One



Zechariah

December 7

Serving In The Temple

[W]hile he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord . Luke 1:8-9

A priest's opportunity to present the afternoon incense offering in the temple would likely only have come around once in a lifetime, so the important decision about who would get the privilege was ritually left in God's hands. Lots were one way that pious Jews left space for Yahweh to direct their steps. Zechariah, who was "advanced in years" (vs 7), had probably been passed over many times for this chance to enter the holiest part of the temple. During the years Zechariah had not been selected by lot, his personal prayer for a child had also not been answered. What might he have told himself about the reasons his prayer hadn't been answered, the reason God had not selected his lot?

Throughout Jewish scriptures, incense symbolizes the prayers of God's people. Consequently, Zechariah had finally been chosen, figuratively speaking, to carry the prayers of all pious Jews into God's presence. The consummation of Zechariah's life of faithful service as a priest had finally come.

We who are in Christ now have direct access to God in prayer. Miraculously, through Christ's sacrifice, the lot always chooses us: we can bring our prayers and intercessions into God's throne room. Because the act of prayer brings us into God's presence, our deepest needs can always be met. Yet this privilege sometimes feels routine, especially when a long-expressed desire has not been fulfilled. We need God to surprise and renew us through the power of His presence.

O God, may my times with you during this Advent season be marked with excitement, trust, and hope, and let me bring my prayers and my intercession for others before you with a sense of awe and gratitude. Amen.

December 2

My Heart, God's Plan

[T]he angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son . . .” Luke 1:13

When Zechariah entered the temple's inner court, he likely had many prayers in his mind. As a priest, his role was to present the enduring and purified prayers of God's people for salvation and forgiveness. For pious Jews who believed the prophets, the most urgent prayer was for God to send His anointed servant to rescue Israel from Roman and spiritual bondage.

Zechariah and Elizabeth also had a personal prayer: they longed for a son. This was a simple petition, a human longing that requires no justification or explanation. A child can bring joy and completion to a marriage; an heir can bring new meaning and purpose to a lifetime of service. Loving a child is a supreme joy that God himself engages in as the creator of all life.

Was this prayer on Zechariah's mind when he encountered the angel? The prayer had been unanswered for a long time, and Zechariah and Elizabeth were old. Yet their many years of praying and longing for the personal gift of a child turned out to be part of the long yearning of Israel for a Messiah. God's plan to prepare the way for Jesus to enter the world as its Savior and Lord included the fulfillment of Zechariah and Elizabeth's dreams for a son.

What a fearful and joyful discovery Zechariah made that day: Yahweh took his most intimate longing and long-term sorrow and showed him how its fulfillment was part of His eternal and universal plan of salvation. God's glory shines brightly in the way He perfectly aligns our small picture with His big picture.

Father God, open my heart to trust you in the small things and to seek the connections between my longings and your plans. May my interactions with others help them make these connections as well. Amen.

December 3

The Attitude Of The Righteous

“[H]e . . . will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”
Luke 1:17

The angel Gabriel describes John the Baptist’s mission on earth as one of family reconciliation. Family relationships that have been broken or violated will be restored and renewed in response to John’s ministry. Of all God’s miracles, reforming the human heart is surely the greatest and most mysterious.

Gabriel says that John will have the “spirit and power of Elijah,” a revered prophet who chastened Jewish kings and confronted hundreds of idolatrous priests in Israel. Elijah’s greatest accomplishments involved purifying Israel from idolatry and cruel, self-interested rulers. Zechariah would not have had to think hard to see the parallels between Elijah’s world and his own: Herod the Great was a brutal and murderous king, and Israel was occupied by an idolatrous foreign power. Both of these evils took root in the hearts of the people and created a hunger and thirst for righteousness that could only be met through repentance and the symbolic death and restoration of baptism.

Our own broken relationships, desire for power over circumstances, and foolish dependence on things other than God for salvation are barriers that must be swept away for us to be prepared to receive the Lord this Advent. We need God to send us a prophet so that our minds and hearts can be reformed to reflect the “attitude of the righteous.” Only then will the peace of God reign in our hearts and through our lives.

Lord God, turn my heart toward right relationships, love, and obedience. Give me wisdom to hear you speak into my life so that I may be purified and prepared to receive the great treasure of your Son. Amen.

December 4
Certainty

“How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.” Luke 1:18

The Bible is full of promises that believers can cling to in times of trouble and doubt. We hear the Good News of God whenever we listen to godly teachers. We are loved, we are chosen, we are redeemed! Being a priest, Zechariah knew by heart many mind-blowing promises of God. Yet he was staggered by Gabriel’s declaration that he would have a son.

Gabriel’s declaration was easy to test. Once Elizabeth began showing the signs of pregnancy, Zechariah would “know this for certain.” Faith, however, operates in the time between promise and fulfillment, and Zechariah would have known well Abraham’s long wait of faith when he received a similar promise from God: “[H]e believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:1-6). Despite our many failings, believing God when He speaks releases a covering of righteousness.

Zechariah’s disbelief was based on circumstances he could see and a history of disappointment. His first reaction was not to think of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah’s experiences of seeing God answer prayers for a child. He believed his past experiences more than he believed the testimony of scripture.

Our life with God has seasons of certainty when even our frail senses and judgment can perceive the fulfillment of God’s promises. In this, the rationality of faith is constantly demonstrated. Our righteousness, however, comes from a deeper place, and sometimes, a darker season. When we know and trust our divine Companion and Lord more fully than our circumstances, God himself becomes our comfort, joy, and very great reward.

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, show me your face so that your beauty and grace may compel my trust. Amen.

December 5

The Gift Of Silence

“[B]ehold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.” Luke 1:20

We often say things we regret when our thoughts are not controlled by faith. While others may be affected by the doubts and defeatism in our speech, the main audience of our skepticism is us. We maintain an internal dialogue of doubt or faith that largely determines our spirits, our perceptiveness, and our effectiveness. We should therefore learn to see Zechariah’s speechlessness as a blessing and not a punishment.

Zechariah was a priest who was accustomed to instructing the people. His words carried weight. Given how long he stayed inside the inner court of the temple, he would have been under considerable pressure to explain what had occurred. Gabriel declared that Zechariah “did not believe” his message, and so he would not have been able to share God’s word accurately and fully. Thanks to God’s action in silencing his voice, Zechariah didn’t have to give an explanation that exceeded his faith and understanding. Instead, he was given the opportunity to wait, to reflect, and to receive the prophecy he delivers after John’s birth (see verses 67-79).

We are blessed when God allows us to quietly wait for His words to be fulfilled. We don’t have to be hypocrites or skeptics, no matter what doubts or chaos may be inside. Silent Zechariah was still able to communicate fully with God. “In quietness and trust is your strength” (Isaiah 30:15).

Lord God, Holy One of Israel, I am not able to speak your glories unless you instruct me. Place your peace within my heart and mind and make my thoughts, Your thoughts, and Your words, my words. Amen.

December 6
Praising God

[A]t once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he began to speak in praise of God. Luke 1:64

Zechariah's silence lasted a long time. His silence, along with Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy, made John famous at birth. If you've ever known happy, expectant parents, you've probably observed how much they like to talk about the stages of pregnancy and their anticipation of the birth. For Zechariah and Elizabeth, this normal circumstance must have been amplified because of their long wait to conceive. However much his lack of speech may have inconvenienced him, Zechariah would only have had to look at Elizabeth's growing belly to smile and think again about how God was answering their prayers and those of Israel for the advent of their Messiah.

Zechariah's silence allowed his faith in "the tender mercy of our God" (verse 78) to ripen. His silence renewed his intimacy and interdependence with Elizabeth, to whom he had eventually been able to communicate some details of Gabriel's message. His silence ended in an act of obedience and authority when he affirmed that his son should be named John, just as Gabriel directed. Since no one in his family had ever been named John, Zechariah's acceptance of it as his son's true name was an implicit recognition that God was doing something new in his family and in the world.

Holy silence deepens our understanding of God, renews our will to obey, and stokes our desire to worship. In silence, we hear the words of the Holy Spirit, and when we speak, the power of God is released.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the season of Advent and the opportunities it gives us to praise You before all people. Please fill us with your Holy Spirit so that our words can smooth the path of others to You. Amen.

Week Two



Mary

Troubling Words, Amazing Thought

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." 29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God." Luke 1:26-30

Try to imagine what this moment was like for Mary. A young virgin girl is sitting alone, when suddenly an angel appears. As if that was not enough, the angel greets you with words declaring that you are highly favored – that the Lord is with you. How would you respond to such an event?

We are told that Mary was troubled. She was unsure of what to make of the angel's words. How was God with her? Wasn't she just a young, poor virgin, living in a backwater town in Israel? Why would God have noticed her? How is it that she was favored? Nothing in her outward circumstances indicated that she was the object of God's special attention or favor. Why would the angel say such a thing? Yet the angel reassures her – she has nothing to fear – she has indeed found favor with God.

Do we realize that we too have found favor with God? Because of Jesus, Mary's Son, we are now God's beloved children. No longer do we need to fear God – for in Christ He is our loving Father. Furthermore, this is true regardless of our outward circumstances. We may have no favor in the eyes of the world – we may even be despised or rejected, counted as insignificant – but because of Christ we have favor with the Most High God.

O God our Father, like Mary I am staggered by the thought that I am your favored child. Yet, You have told me this is so. Throughout this Advent season, help me to reflect on the great privilege that is given to me because of the coming of Christ. May I never doubt or take for granted that I am your child, living under your favor, because of Jesus my Savior and Lord. Amen.

Nothing Is Impossible With God

You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus...34 “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” 35 The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. 37 For nothing is impossible with God.” Luke 1:31, 34–37

If Mary was troubled at Gabriel’s greeting, she was floored by his message: she was to have a child. Mary wanted to believe the angel, but how could this be? She was a virgin, so how could she give birth to a child?

And if we are honest, Gabriel’s answer probably did not relieve all of Mary’s questions and doubts. What would it mean for the Holy Spirit to overshadow her? Nothing like this had ever happened before – and Gabriel’s answer did not exactly give a full explanation.

However, the last statement by the angel is the one that provides the real answer to all of our questions and fears – nothing is impossible with God. Like Mary, we often face uncertainties and cannot see or understand how God’s promise can be fulfilled. But the answer does not lie in our understanding, but in God’s power. The fulfillment of the promise may be beyond our ability to envision or grasp, but it is never beyond God’s power – for nothing is impossible with God. With God, even the Virgin can conceive and bear a Child – a Son who is Emmanuel, God with us.

What things in your life seem impossible? What seems beyond your ability to understand or to even imagine? This Advent, look to God rather than your own understanding, trusting in the fact that nothing is impossible with God. Almighty God, so many things in this life are beyond my ability to understand or change. This Advent, may your Spirit come to me and fill me with faith. May He help me to see that though I am weak, you are strong, and that nothing is impossible for You. Amen.

December 10

Responding To God In Faith

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.”
Luke 1:38

The first part of Luke’s Gospel is full of astounding messages brought by the angel Gabriel. Elizabeth is to conceive in her old age. Mary is highly favored by God, and will conceive – even though she is a virgin.

Understandably, such announcements provoke questions in those who receive them. These are not everyday events! Consequently, we are not surprised to find Zechariah doubting the promise given through Gabriel. And we find ourselves sympathizing with Mary’s question about how a virgin can possibly conceive!

However, although Mary asks a question, she does not doubt the promise. In one of the most faith-filled responses in human history, Mary simply declares, “May God’s will be done.” Although she does not understand how this promise can be fulfilled or all that it will entail in the future, she knows Who has made the promise – God. And that is enough for Mary. In this response, Mary is given to us as an example. God desires that we would trust in Him with bold faith like Mary.

How do we respond when faced with the staggering promises of God? Do we, like Zechariah, say there must be some mistake? Or do we, like Mary, say, “I am God’s servant – may He fulfill His promise!” This Advent, may we be like Mary and express bold faith in God’s promises, trusting Him with our present and our future, knowing that with Him, nothing is impossible.

O Lord, my God, with my mouth I confess that You are Almighty, but in my heart I find myself doubting your promises. This Advent, may your Spirit produce simple faith in me, so that like Mary, the mother of my Lord, I might say, “I am your servant – fulfill all that you have promised!” Amen.

December 11

Filled With Praise

And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me — holy is his name. Luke 1:46–49

Shortly after Gabriel leaves, Mary goes to visit Elizabeth. When she arrives, she discovers that the angel’s words are indeed true – Elizabeth is pregnant. What is more, even though Mary probably gives no sign of being pregnant yet, Elizabeth blesses Mary as the mother of her Lord!

As Mary begins to see the fulfillment of God’s promises, she is filled with praise. Mary says her soul glorifies and rejoices in God her Savior. She does not arrogantly believe that these things have happened because of her own virtue or by her own power. These things have been done because of God’s grace and through His power. Consequently, the credit all belongs to God.

Yet Mary goes on to recognize that she will be remembered by all generations and will be called blessed. Think of it – a humble peasant girl is remembered thousands of years later because God had come to her, and she had responded in faith. For this humble virgin was no longer just another young woman – she was carrying the very Son of God in her womb.

Although you and I will never know what it is like to be the Mother of the Son of God, we do know what it is like to have God be mindful of our lowly state. We know what it is like to have God show us unmerited favor. We know what it is like to have the Lord do great things in our behalf. This Advent, as we reflect on all God has done for us in Christ, may we, like Mary, open our mouths with praise – for He has done great things for us!

God, this Advent I open my mouth in praise for all you have done for me. I was lowly, undeserving of your attention, and yet You sent your Son to save me. I glorify You, for You have used Your might to do great things for me. May Your Spirit always remind me of this, and may my heart and mouth always be filled with your praise. Amen.

Pondering The Works Of The Lord

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." 16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2:15–19

After the birth of Jesus, amazing messages continued to come to Mary. On the night of Jesus' birth, shepherds found Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, and shared that angels had told them that Jesus was the Savior of the world. Of course, this was not new information to Mary. Gabriel told her that the Child she would bear would be the Holy Son of God, so the message she received from the shepherds confirmed what she had already heard.

Yet Luke tells us that Mary "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." At first, we might be surprised that Mary would need to ponder them. Had not God fulfilled His Word about her becoming pregnant even though she was a virgin? Had not aged Elizabeth become pregnant? Had not Mary given birth to a son? So why does she need to ponder these things?

If we think about it, however, her need becomes understandable. Often, when God is at work in our life, we still do not fully understand what is happening. We see dimly, as in a mirror (1 Corinthians 13:12). Consequently, we need to continue to ponder what God is saying and doing, for as we do so we receive further insight into God's marvelous words and deeds.

O Lord, my God, Your ways are beyond my understanding. Even when I clearly see Your hand at work, I fail to fully comprehend all You are doing. This Advent, help me to take time to ponder Your Word and your work, that I may understand, trust, and obey You more fully. Amen.

December 13

A Pierced Soul

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." Luke 2:33–35

At the appropriate time, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the Temple to dedicate Him to the Lord. On the day they did this, two more people came forward to confirm that Jesus was indeed no ordinary child, but was, in fact, the Messiah. These people, an elderly man and woman named Simeon and Anna, made amazing statements and prophecies about Jesus. Once again, Mary could only marvel at the message God was sending her.

However, Simeon also had a message about Mary. Not only would Jesus' life and ministry dramatically affect others – it would also alter Mary's life forever. Simeon told Mary that a sword would pierce her own soul. Being the mother of the Son of God, the Savior of the world, would not leave Mary unaffected. As is almost always the case, Mary's faith and obedience would be costly. Along with the joy she would experience as God fulfilled His Word, there would also be pain. When Jesus came to be rejected and put to death, it would be as if a sword was piercing Mary's very soul.

Have you realized that faith and obedience can be costly? Even when God fulfills His Word, the reaction of this fallen world can produce deep and lasting pain in a believer's life. On the one hand, we taste the joy of the Lord as we see Him fulfill His Word; on the other, there can be pain so deep that our very soul is pierced. In order to avoid such pain, we may be tempted to pull back from obedience. However, doing so does not always grant relief from pain, but it does guarantee that we will not experience the joy of seeing God fulfill His plans in our lives. Don't let the fear of potential pain keep you from obeying God - press in and trust Him with your joy and pain.

O God of all comfort, the thought of deep pain causes me great fear. Yet I want to trust You not only with my joy, but also with my pain. May a desire to obey You so completely fill my soul this day that I obey You – no matter the cost. Amen.

Week Three



Joseph

December 15

A Just Man

Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. Matt. 1:19

It must have come as quite a shock when Mary confessed to Joseph that she was pregnant. Joseph knew that it was not his baby that Mary was carrying. What was he to think? How could Mary betray him? How could she be unfaithful especially so early in their new life together? And who was the man that had come between him and his wife? You can rightly imagine that Joseph was as hurt, angry and confused as any of us would be in a situation like this.

It is normal when you are angry and confused to want to get back at the person who hurt you. But that was not Joseph's way. He likely had the impulse to embarrass Mary; after all, he was embarrassed by her. He likely had the impulse to be cruel to her. But Joseph was a righteous man. In what must have been the most difficult moment of his life, he did what seemed the best thing. He planned to divorce her quietly - without embarrassment. But God's plan was even greater. No embarrassment, no divorce - rather complete redemption. In this moment of Joseph's life he got a taste of the compassion that God has towards all of us. He does not simply spare us the bad which we deserve; He, in fact, gives us all the good that we do not deserve.

I worship You, Heavenly Father. You have shown us Your love and compassion. Thank you for Your never ending love towards Your family. Please cause me to be righteous in my thoughts and actions towards others just as You taught Joseph to be. Let me bring You glory through my life. Amen.

December 16

Hearing God In Dreams

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Matt. 1:20

I have to imagine that Joseph was quite on edge during the months leading up to Jesus’ birth. Such a wide range of emotions will make anyone quite tired. So how will God direct those who are exhausted? Well, why not speak through dreams? Consider what this says about God. God knew just how tired Joseph was. And God knew that Joseph needed to hear a clear set of directions. So God sent an angel to Joseph while he was sleeping to give him both rest and revelation.

Have you ever felt as though you were at the end of your ability? God knows your weakness, and He does not look at you to despise you when you are weak. No, He comes gently and boldly to give you exactly what you need when and how you need it. This is seen most clearly in the birth of Jesus. Jesus was born when the time was just right. God’s timing and provision can always be trusted, for He is both faithful and good.

Glorious God, You are to be praised more than any other good in all the world. Thank you for Your faithful care for us. Thank you for knowing our needs and our difficulties and meeting us where we are. Please strengthen me today so that I may trust You more fully for I truly am weak. Amen.

December 17

Preserving The Sacred

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. Matt. 1:24–25

Joseph proves himself a man of obedience and faith right here. It would have been enough for Joseph to simply not divorce Mary. He could have treated her with contempt for the rest of their lives. But Joseph is a righteous man. His response to the revelation of the angel in the night is to show the greatest care and respect not just for Mary but also for the Lord. Joseph, choosing to not lay claim to what God had not given him, forgoes sexual intercourse with his wife. Let's not think that this is because Joseph was still angry with Mary. Quite the opposite. This was to preserve the sacred nature of the baby that grew in Mary's womb. When God chose Joseph to be the earthly father of the Son of God, sacrifice was the gift that Joseph received.

Husbands should take note of how Joseph models dwelling with his wife in an understanding way (see 1 Peter 3:7). Furthermore, all of us can learn patience and quiet trust as we nurture and protect those around us in whom God is at work, for it was, in fact, God through Jesus who ultimately dwelt with us in an understanding way.

Glorious Father, You are marvelous in all Your ways and I give You praise and honor this day. Thank you for allowing us to wear Your yoke. Please shape me and teach me as we walk this day so that I may show Your righteousness in this world. Amen.

December 18

Joseph, Adoptive Father

The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham . . . Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. Matthew 1:1 & 16

Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy of Jesus that emphasizes his connection to the two most important figures in Jewish national history: Abraham and David. The lengthy genealogy ends with the revelation that this is Joseph's family history. Jesus joins it only through adoption.

Matthew's version of the genealogy gives tremendous weight to Joseph's act of faith in receiving Jesus as his own son. Jesus, born to be the perpetual King of peace, fulfills promises made to both Abraham and David about how God would act to establish their families. Joseph's role in Jesus's life shows us that God did not choose to fulfill His promises in a natural, biological way. Instead, God fulfills them through the supernatural provision of a Son far greater than human nature alone could have birthed.

Matthew's account of Jesus's early years shows Joseph acting decisively to protect and provide for Jesus. He appears to fully embrace his role as Jesus's father on earth. Adoption reveals that a true family, like a true Israelite, is formed through faith and love (see Romans 4).

We who are now adopted into the family of God through Christ's sacrifice have entered a true family. Our joy and faith are expressed by believing, as Joseph does, that adoption is real, that the love, provision, and support we offer and receive in the church is a sign that God has become our Father.

Advent is the warm embrace of God drawing in all His children.

Father God, Thank you for fulfilling and redeeming my natural family and history when I received Jesus through faith. Continue to show me how this change is real and help me to choose love, generosity, and forgiveness as I grow alongside Your children in the church. Amen.

December 19

Refugees By God's Grace

Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt . . ." Matthew 2:13-14

A family that is forced to flee political violence in the middle of the night? Crossing borders as refugees with only the possessions that can be hurriedly gathered and carried? These are tragedies we see too frequently in the news as civil wars and repressive governments create intolerable conditions and dangers, and they were a part of Jesus's childhood too.

When Joseph became Jesus's father, he stepped into the middle of a war that Satan had been spitefully and fruitlessly waging against God and His people since God first made Himself vulnerable through the creation of finite human children. Courageous Joseph believed the messages angels gave him in dreams and acted without hesitation to wed Mary, adopt Jesus, flee to Egypt, and finally, return to a less prosperous province of Judea.

In all of these challenges, God provided what Joseph needed to act as Jesus's father. The gifts of the wealthy Magi made the journey of Joseph's family less difficult, just as God's warning made the circumstances less terrifying.

Where do we see resistance to God's reign of peace? Do we trust the quiet reassurance of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that the Lord will rescue, protect, and provide for us as we take our place in His kingdom on earth? No terrors can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Our Father in heaven, holy is Your name. May Your kingdom come and Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. As Joseph was your servant to protect Jesus, so also may I be empowered to display your love among the hurting and the lost. Amen.

December 20

My Father's House

When they saw Him, they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You." And He said to them, "Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?" Luke 2:48-49

Joseph and Mary were "astonished" when they realized Jesus had chosen to leave them in order to stay at the temple. Jesus's response indicates that they should have known where to find him. The contrast between Mary's "Your father" (Joseph) and Jesus's "My Father" (God) reveals the roots of Mary and Joseph's anxiety and the source of Jesus's perfectly innocent expectation that other humans would be as attentive to God as He is.

Jesus entered Joseph and Mary's life with strong affirmations of His divine origins, confirmed by angels, shepherds, other miracles, and foreign dignitaries, but after many years of having Him in their lives, they became accustomed to Him and perhaps even possessive of Him. Like all parents, they became worried when they realized Jesus was not with them as they journeyed away from Jerusalem.

We also can become overly familiar with our Lord and slip into thinking He follows us wherever we choose to go. If we become aware and anxious that we do not feel Jesus present in our life, we should remember that He came into the world to do His Father's will (John 6:38). When we feel He is absent from us, we must seek Him where He may be found.

Lord Jesus, I know You are always with me, but I am not always with You. Teach me to find you this Christmas by going where You go and doing what You would have me do. Amen.

Week Four



Angels

Longing To Look

It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. 1 Peter 1:12

We humans have a lot of silly thoughts about angels. Some of us imagine a sweet, fat, winged baby with a linen diaper and a bow and arrow, a robed one with a harp, or perhaps a small fellow on your shoulder fighting against a little red devil on your other shoulder. Scripture gives us only a vague sketch of what angels look like and do, so it is easy to accept these silly caricatures. What scripture does make evident is that we mortals are clutched by terror whenever an angel shows up with a message. Consequently, it may be difficult for us to picture angels bending low over the little town of Bethlehem, straining to get a look at the newborn baby Jesus. But this is what Peter would have us see. The mighty messenger warriors of Almighty God had been eagerly waiting for something enormous to happen. Just like an engaged couple waiting for their wedding day, knowing the “when” and “where” of God’s plan didn’t lessen their excitement about seeing it finally come to pass.

The angels knew that God was going to do something big, but knowing the plan is not the same as seeing your Creator in a manger. In fact, God alone fully knew what He had in mind for this first Christmas night. The angels who had faithfully served the will of the Creator for many thousands of years were more eager than little boys and girls waiting for the presents of Christmas morning. In these final days of Advent, we can get a taste of the glee and excitement that filled these heavenly heralds at the appearance of Jesus, the Messiah.

Our Heavenly Creator, You are worthy of praise from men and angels. May we today be captivated by the mystery of how our Creator Lord became creation. May all the world be silent before the wisdom and power that we see in Jesus, our Messiah. Amen.

December 23

Displaying To Angels

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. 1 Corinthians 4:9

What a strange thought Paul has here! We think of angels as standing in the presence of God, receiving and carrying out his commands. As God watches mankind, so angels watch mankind. As God gives instructions for mankind, the angels carry out His will and bring God's message to men. This one-way street of service and communication is as ancient and as constant as the stars in the night sky.

Reality, however, is a bit more complex, for God has decided that in the same way that angels bring God's message to mankind, He will also use mankind to display his wisdom, glory, and power to angels. Throughout the millennia that they had been watching men on the earth, the angels were witnessing God's grace at work, but at no time was this display more dramatic than on Christmas morning. For in that little stable, in a food trough, lay the god-man, the baby Jesus. Never had the angels imagined the length that God would go to, and the depths He would stoop to, in order to demonstrate His love and power to the world. This sacrificial love was born in Jesus, and Paul tells us that the amazing sight continues when His followers live and love in the power of the Holy Spirit.

God, mighty to save and eternal in love and holiness, You have taken pleasure in putting Your wisdom on display to angels and to all creation. Cause me also to be captured by the love which called the world into being and which is now invading this world of pain and bitterness with Your compassion and glory. Amen.

December 24

A Little Lower Than The Angels

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. Hebrews 2:9

Of all the strange things the angels witnessed on that first Christmas night, nothing could have been more disturbing than watching the humility of their creator and master, the eternal, immortal, almighty God, as he stepped down from His throne to take on human flesh and mortality. David and the writer of Hebrews use the phrase “a little lower than the angels” to describe both the glory and status of humans as God’s representative rulers on earth, and to show the pioneering choice of Jesus, the Christ, as he displayed the perfect fulfillment of this role (see Psalm 8:5). How the angels must have looked on in astonishment and wonder at seeing a Human who could represent God better than them!

Yet, in all of this humble activity, God was working out His will. At birth, a mere trough held the baby Christ, and at the point of death, the carved limbs of a tree held the crucified Savior. But no stone was big enough and no mortal flesh strong enough to hold back the power of the Messiah when He returned again to glorious life. The baby the angels saw that morning was not born to be an adored child or a mourned martyr, but a worshiped, triumphant King. There is now only one object, one throne, worthy of holding this great King - a human heart.

Blessed Jesus, You died that I might live. You stepped into this world that I might enter eternity. And You stepped down from Your throne that I might be invited to sit at Your table. Help me to look in wonder at this miracle of love that the angels know so well. Amen.