Advent Reflections: The Gift Cycle

Advent

2011

As our hearts turn toward Christmas, let us take time every day to turn our hearts toward Jesus as well. May this season find us ever waiting and trusting in Him.

By Doug Hibbard

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Opening Thoughts:

I. Introduction

As I sit down to write this, I'm 34 years old. Unemployment in the United States of America is at 9%, a major university is facing a sexual abuse scandal, the overall governing bodies of the country are less approved of than moldy leftovers, and the world is getting a little more chaotic every day. It's an easy time to be paranoid. It's an easy time to be pessimistic. We do not quite live as Charles Darnay, where it is the best of times and the worst at once, but many have not seen much worse in their lifetime.

These times sit poorly with us all. Some, perhaps, sit at ease with no regard for the world at large, but even the many who are employed, snug in their homes and well-fed, worry for their fellow man. We see news from diverse and distant lands of terror and warfare, and news from close at home of agony and frustration. Our neighbors need work, their children need education, and their families need food that many can hardly spare.

We are in need of something. Our government ran on a platform of hope and change, and the following election was the rally of “Not that kind of change.” The coming election promises little better and many truly cannot wait that long for the social ills that plague us to be solved. We fill prisons faster than factories and school detentions faster than honor rolls. Some churches fill and empty every week with precious little hope.

We are in need of something. Our economy is based on consumption. For people to have the jobs they need to earn the money to buy food, people have to buy stuff. We need to consume, use up, and purchase again. The race does not end, for a new race is necessary. The money that is spent on things to make us happy requires us to buy insurance to pay for the therapy we need when the stuff does not make us happy.

We are in need of something. Our bookstores are filled with self-help sections. The phone book is filled with therapists and counselors, and we take drugs to fix our moods. We see stadiums fill to capacity for some preachers or gurus, and our religious quests take us around the world and back again. Movies, books, music, and gadgets promise to fulfill our missing parts, to plug the vacuum in our souls.

We are in need of something, but we hardly know where to look. Our hearts yearn for something dependable. Our minds seek a solid foundation. Our souls, our very being cries out that we need meaning, purpose, significance.

We are in need of something, something greater than ourselves. We are really in need of someone that can be our refuge, our hope, our foundation, our source of meaning and significance in this world.

Some of you are wondering “What is Advent?” and further, “What in the world does Advent have to do with this?”

The heart of Advent is the idea of coming, of expectation. Today, I want to challenge you in this: as we all scurry about, worrying about whether or not we can meet all of our expectations for this year, this Christmas, this holiday season, take a few moments each day to sit back in expectation.

Expectation of finding the grace you need.

Expectation of finding the hope you need.

Expectation of finding the love you need.

Expectation of finding the strength to share all of that with not a few, but all the people you encounter.

It's a big dream.

Let's chase it together because we need more than something, we need someone...we need Jesus. Now, most people that are reading a book about Advent already know a little about Jesus. You know that whole story: born of the Virgin Mary, lived in sinless perfection, died at the hands of sinful men, rose again, and then ascended to the right hand of God in heaven. He is the perfect Son of God, unique and yet together with God Himself. He was, in that time, not God only but fully man as well. He knows weakness, need, and pain. He also holds the power for all of it.

This book will not make you any richer in pocket, and finishing it will not find you a job or fill your pantry. Unfortunately, e-ink cannot do that. My hope is that by taking a few minutes each day you can find your way a step closer to Jesus this year during Advent.

II. How to use this guide

This is meant to be a short, daily reading guide. You'll generally find it helpful to have a Bible at hand, because most of the longer passages of Scripture will not be reproduced, but you ought to read them. Some of you will find even more benefit in firing up your CD player or iTunes to listen to a referenced song, but others may not.

Each of the four weeks will center on a specific theme of the Christmas story as we draw near to Christmas. There are six sections for each week to allow for the possibility that you'll miss a day. Perhaps your worship time on Sunday will keep you from this book that day: there's no harm in that. Each day will feature a Scripture segment, some thoughts related to it, a song to consider, and a challenge to put into action that day. There will be some days that feature both a hymn or carol and a "special" song, one that's meant to be listened to. Most of these can be found on various music streaming services like Rhapsody or Spotify; alternately they can be purchased from iTunes or Amazon.com. Hymn numbers will come from the 2008 *Baptist Hymnal* which is also published by Lifeway as *The Worship Hymnal*.

Yet keep this in mind: you cannot fail Advent. If Christmas comes, and it will, then the time to remember the birth of Christ comes. He never fails to come, and that's what this is about.

A quick word to some of my historical and theological brethren and sistren: this is not about the debate over the actual birthday of Jesus. I know your arguments, I've read the suggestions, and I'm not up for that debate here. This is my statement: if you are willing to knock out a month of your life in August or September to celebrate the birth of Christ and take that time to tell people about Him, not about why you think September is right, then more power to you. You can have Jesus in September and Santa in December if you'd like, but most of us would rather celebrate the Christ Child than debate the timing. There are bound to be some good books out there about the debate, go read one.

Week One: Gold

Week One, Day One: King of Kings

"*And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, and LORD OF LORDS."* (Revelation 19:16 NASB)

The beginning of Christmas is not found at the manger. The beginning is not even found when Gabriel comes to Mary or the Angel appears to Zechariah. The beginning is found, well, at the beginning. Remember the one back in Genesis 1 where God creates all the heavens and the earth? That one.

Preparing for Christmas this year, start with the first three Christmas gifts. Leave aside everything else, for the time being, and focus on the gifts the Magi brought to the Baby Jesus. The gifts were gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). There is much to say about these gifts. Let's start with gold.

Gold is a precious metal in almost any society in history. It does not tarnish, does not corrode, and there is a limited supply of it in existence. Over gold, wars have been fought, kingdoms have been bought, and countless lives exchanged for it.

Gold has such a striking effect that the first artifact used by Neil MacGregor to illustrate world history is, in fact, a gilded mummy case from Ancient Egypt.[1] The presence of gold shows the presence of royalty across many cultures.

Gold drove the myriads of "Forty-Niners" to California, brought the Gold Rush to Dahlonega, Georgia, and drew all types north to Alaska. Songs exalt it as the symbol of love and permanence, businesses call their benefits packages "golden handcuffs," and many people criticize the "golden parachutes" of executives.

Gold is hailed as the safe haven of investment, though the rules are tricky about it.[2] It is frequently blended with other metals to make jewelry, used in electronics, and even placed on football helmets and in fancy meals. The estimates, according to the Discovery Network website *How Stuff Works,* are that all the gold ever mined would not fill half of the Washington Monument.

Let's face it, this is precious stuff here on earth. We don't really play with it; we don't treat it like we treat ordinary metals like steel or aluminum. We certainly don't travel long distances to hand some gold over to a displaced set of new parents in another country.

Yet this is the first recorded gift of Christmas. It's presented to a baby who doesn't have a bed, much less a lockbox. He's born out in the stable, not in the palace. Yet He's given gifts like He's a king. Gold is a kingly gift and one not to be tossed about for just any carpenter's son.

So why gold? Because the recipient is no lightweight. He is the King. Do the Magi know this? Maybe not perfectly clearly, but they know enough. They know they come to honor a king.

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[1] See his work *A History of the World in 100 Objects: From the Handaxe to the Credit Card* from Viking Press, 2011.

[2] No, I am not counseling you on investments. Not at all.

For starters this Advent, let's consider this: even by a generous estimate, we don't know the half of the character and nature of God. We come this year towards Christmas as the Magi followed the star and bearing their gifts. We know that, at the end of the journey, at Christmas, we come before the manger and before the King.

We can start there. Do not think that degrees in theology and stacks of books are the opening necessity of Christmas. The opening necessity is far simpler: to come before the Baby in the manger, to come before the Christ Child and offer what you have. Recognize that He is the King of Kings, even if you cannot fathom all that this means.

You will find this: He will not leave you in the dark. He will show you more about Himself as the years go by than you could ever imagine.

Scripture passage for the day: Isaiah 55:8-9

> 8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
> nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
> 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
> so are my ways higher than your ways
> and my thoughts than your thoughts. [3]

Hymn for the day: Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne (Hymn #217)

Prayer: Lord God, I ask You to help me. I know that You are the King, but all that this means escapes me. Help me to grow in my understanding and commitment to you. I will grow in my understanding of your Kingship. I ask that You work in this world through me. In the name of Christ I pray, Amen.

Week One Day Two: King of Creation

"*All things were created through Him, and apart from Him not one thing was created that has been created.*" (John 1:3, HCSB)

There is no shortage of people and creatures that claim to be "king of" something. The lion is "king of the jungle." Godzilla is "king of the monsters." There's a Burger King, Kings of Leon, and a King of Rock and Roll. Across the pages of history are thousands of men who claimed to be king of something, from Ozymandias to George III. So, why is it that the claim of Jesus to be King is worth our time?

It's found in the first truth of His Kingship. His Kingship does not find its root in conquest. He did not complete some momentous quest for a sword or jewel, or inherit a kingdom passed on through generations. His kingdom starts before day one, because it is through Him that all things are created.

[3] *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Is 55:8–9.

His Kingdom is His because He made it. Take whatever look you like at the universe, and if you cannot find it the result of billions of years of randomness, a cosmic accident, then you are left with one basic option: this place was made by someone. I think that logic, theology, and science support a specific view of who that someone is.

That someone is the God of the Bible. The God who reveals Himself as eternally existing in Triune personhood, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This God expresses that "In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth" (Genesis 1:1) and then, in John 1:3 above tells us that through Jesus it was all done.

He is the King because He made it. It's not someone else's creation or territory, He's not King Jesus because He conquered anyone else's place. The marvel and majesty of stars that run by fusion, that's His handiwork. How amazing is that? Consider that mankind can only use fusion to destroy, but stars use fusion to fuel life. Consider that there is a North Star in the Northern Hemisphere---and the Southern Hemisphere features a constellation to help find South—are these things accidents or design?

Look at the marvel of flora and fauna…consider that the Christmas Star orchid needs a moth with an 11-inch proboscis to pollinate and survive. Remarkably, the Darwin's hawk moth lives on the same island and features just the right length of proboscis to make that happen. Hippos have birds and birds have hippos, and any casual read of a biology book will give you countless examples of symbiotic relationships that are astounding and point to the work of One to make it all start happening.

As we look toward the manger, let us remember this: this world was His in the first place. He came here not unfamiliar with what He would find, but knowing full well what was here. He made it all. The gold that was brought by the Magi?

It was through Jesus that it was made. Seventy-nine protons and electrons, eighteen different isotopes---all this was conceived in the mind of God in the first place. There is little that we can give Him that wasn't His in the first place. Yet this year, let us give Him back what He has given us: our lives and our futures. Committing our will to obey Him is the one thing we can give: will you give that?

Scripture passage for the day: John 1:10-11 (NIV)

"He was in the world, and
though the world was made through him,
the world did not recognize him.
He came to that which was his own,
but his own did not receive him."

Hymn for the day: In the Bleak Midwinter, Chorus is #207 "What Can I Give Him?"

Special music to listen and consider: "This is All I Have to Give" from Todd Agnew's *Do You See What I See?* Album, Ardent Music, 2006.

Prayer: King Jesus, I have nothing to give You. Even if I had gold, You made it in the first place. There's nothing within my power to hold that does not belong to You by creation. Yet this I have: my life. In

truth, when I have run it my own way, it hasn't gone that well, but I will submit it to Your kingship. As the song says, what can I give You? I will do my part. I give You my heart. My efforts, my attentions, my affections, all I have. Receive me into Your service. Let the name of Jesus, in which I pray, be the name I serve. Amen.

Week One Day Three: King of the Spiritual World

"Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them." Job 1:6[4]

There are things around us that we cannot see. Some people do not accept this to be true, because the idea of invisible reality is too much. Most of us lean into this direction, though we do not like to admit it.

We are, generally, cynical people who barely trust our own senses. Scrooge inspires us when he attributes Marley's Ghost to underdone potato above truth. Down in, though, we fear that we're wrong. We worry about shades and spectres, the paranormal and the supernatural.

These scare us because we cannot see them. What we cannot see, we so not understand. What we do not understand, we will never control. Fear is often that: the human response to lacking control.

Yet Jesus is King of the Spiritual World as well as the visible, material one. His time here demonstrated that, as stories of casting out demons and stifling unclean spirits show. Even before Christmas, Job's story shows that angels and demons answer to Him. The time since His Ascension shows the spiritual realm still answers to His Word.

Approaching the manger, it is hard to imagine that this small child rules anything, much less the unseen realms. Scripture does not tell us He abdicated the throne, only that He emptied His glory to put on flesh.

Today, consider this: all the minor and major things that have happened to put you where you are, these are in His control. The powers that work for and against good in this world, they answer to Him.

Is it any wonder that the angels celebrated His birth? Whether they sing or say, joy is the theme of their exaltation that night. He was born, not just King of Humanity, but their King as well.

It is the opposite of weakness to come before this baby in worship and reverence. Even the strong know when help is needed, when their strength is overmatched. Be strong enough to admit your fears, your terrors to Him. Let the King in the hay be your Guide and Protector against that which you do not understand.

[4] The word *LORD* renders the Hebrew covenant name for God and should be understood as distinguishing the God of the Bible from the other gods of the regions around Israel. See the inset panel on page 65 of *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook* from Baker Books or the introductory material on the NASB, NIV, or NLT about the Name. *Sons of God* in this context refers to angelic beings.

Scripture passage for the day: John 1:4-5 (NIV)

"In him was life,
and that life was the light of all mankind.
The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it."

Hymn for the day: Hark the Herald Angels Sing

Prayer: My Lord and My God, I do not understand all that that I see, much less the things that I do not see. I ask Your help in this, that I will trust that You control the many that are for us, against those set against us. Help my faith to grow and strengthen my defense against the evil ones. Let the Word of God be the strong sword I need, as I stand for You, Jesus, in whose name I pray. Amen.

Week One Day Four: King of All Powers

"Every person is to be in subjection to the govern authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." Romans 13:1 (NASB)

Now, let's establish something up front: placed in context, this verse does not demand that we always obey earthly kings and governments. Whether you compare it only to Acts 5:29 where Peter and the Apostles insist that obedience to God supersedes obedience to men or also to the grand context of Scripture where injustice and evil are to be resisted no matter the source, you cannot bandy this verse about to beat people into submission. This verse reflects that we ought to recognize that governing authority derives from God, but it does not require one to not try to improve the situation.

That being said, let us look more into this idea. Jesus is not an absentee King of this world. He is the King who reigns above all earthly powers. Whether you live in a representative democracy or an oppressive dictatorship, and for those of you who think you live in one that's really the other, at the back of that authority is God's allowance of it.

This is true whether the government does that which is righteous or that which is evil. Beyond the scope of this brief writing is the question of why God would allow a wicked authority to come to power. That's a question that deserves great treatment, and I'd commend you to Randy Alcorn's *If God is Good* for a theological treatment of the idea and to Eric Metaxas' *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* for a look at an individual who faced this issue with courage and resolve.

I see it this way: God allows human freedom. It is a messy thing to allow, for freedom to do right requires collateral freedom to do wrong, and insulating choices from having an impact on anyone else removes real consequence from the actions. Without having to consider consequences, freedom is an illusion: one that cannot hurt also cannot help.

It is difficult to praise God for wicked kings. This was a challenge throughout the Old Testament, as God used wicked kings to accomplish His purposes. It is a challenge to this day, to accept that God has a purpose for the suffering and pain caused by wicked authorities to this day. Yet He is in charge.

When the various kings and potentates rose and fell between David and Daniel, He was in charge. When Antiochus lost Israel and when the Hasmoneans gave way to Roman General Pompey, He was not sleeping. When Augustus called for a census and when Herod the Great, Pilate, and Herod Antipas were appointed, He allowed them.

As the debates rage in the United States, as revolutions rise and fall across the globe, God is in control. His kingdom is not limited to a geographic realm or to a system of government. The followers of Christ recognize that even the worst of dictators are temporary: none will escape this world alive and all will answer to God for how they have handled what they were entrusted.

Followers of Christ give their utmost allegiance to Him. Our votes, our speeches, our revolutionary activity must come in submission and obedience to Him. We trust that if our political lords and masters choose to mete out vengeance and violence that our Heavenly King will honor His word and bring us justice in due time.

Scripture Passage for the Day: James 5:10-11 (ESV)

"As an example of suffering and patience, brothers,
take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.
Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast.
You have heard of the steadfastness of Job,
and you have seen the purpose of the Lord,
how the Lord is compassionate and merciful."

Song for the Day: Crown Him with Many Crowns #304

Prayer: Lord God, You are more than a lightweight, temporary ruler like the ones who appear to control this world. I know that I must deal with tyrants and crackpots in this life and I submit myself to live in a way that honors You, no matter what they demand or expect. Let me not waste efforts that should go into spreading Your truth on trifling matters, but let me also stand up and speak when justice and righteousness are at stake. Let the name of Jesus be the One Name I exalt, and in this name I pray. Amen

Week One Day Five: King of God's People

"The LORD is King forever and ever…" Psalm 10:16

It is not enough to think of Jesus as King of the world by virtue of creation. It is crucial to think of Him also as the coming King of God's People. That has two things that need to be considered: the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of God.

To consider, first of all, the Kingship of God over Israel, we must look back at the Old Testament. Beginning with Exodus, we see God as the King of Israel in opposition to Pharaoh, King of Egypt. Pharaoh has oppressed the Israelites and they have cried out to God. God sends Moses, not to rule over

Israel, but to be His spokesman to Pharaoh. The whole showdown is a 15th Century BC equivalent of a showdown between powers.

What Pharaoh does not grasp is that he is not the Superpower in the situation. At the time, Egypt is the power in the Mediterranean region, exerting influence around the area, up the Nile, and as far away as the Iberian Peninsula. He has known no king that can stand up to him. Typically, the ambassador that comes before Pharaoh is there to seek his favor, to request peace and mercy from the great one.

Moses is not that ambassador. He comes, not on his knees to beg, but on his feet to bring a warning. On his feet to deliver a demand. On his feet, representing the King of Israel with a basic statement: let His people go or else. Then, God follows through on the "or else." He is the King there. In the following centuries, God leads the people of Israel in battle, provides for their needs, corrects their religious failures, and provides human leadership to guide them to Him. In the course of that time, a human line rises to represent Him, but not to supplant Him.

That line is headed by the man David, and his descendants are promised to rule Israel for ever. God provides a promise that He will establish David's throne forever. Yet that promise cannot be fulfilled in merely human terms. That King must be one who will never surrender the throne due to death. There can be no stopping this Kingdom. It is, however, important to recognize that when Jesus came, it was not an empty question that the Magi asked "Where is the born king of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:2)[5] Jesus is born as King of the Jews, first and foremost.

This is not the limit of His Kingdom, however. Starting with Rahab in Joshua, moving forward through Ruth, and on to the Centurion of Luke, Cornelius in Acts and the whole of the Roman Empire in the years after the Resurrection, the reader of the Bible sees God as King over all those who call upon Him. It is not an empty call in Romans 10 to confess that "Jesus is Lord:" this is a statement affirming His kingship above all. It is a statement of loyalty to Him and His Kingdom.

This Christmas, let us not fail to honor Him as the King. We owe our complete allegiance to Him, our devotion. He is the King of His people. Let us remember that.

Scripture Passage for the Day: Philippians 2:9-11 (ESV)

"Therefore God has highly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father."

Hymn for the Day: Come Thou Almighty King, #336

[5] Personal translation. Yes, I have fussed about other authors doing that. I feel bad for it. The fussing. Not the translating.

Prayer: God of Israel, You are the King of Your people. May we come together as the people of God and submit to You. You are the King, and You are *our King*. May we delight ourselves to see honor and praise given to You. May our lives be dedicated and given to the glory of Your Kingdom. May Your will be done on earth and in us as it is in Heaven. Jesus, we pray in Your name, Amen.

Week One Day Six: King of My Life

"For unto us, a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Isaiah 9:6 (NRSV)

The work of God through Jesus Christ was not merely for Him to come and remind us that He is the rightful King of Creation because He did the creating. He did not come just to check up on the spiritual portion of His kingdom, nor to merely reclaim the throne in Jerusalem. His time on earth was not spent to establish supremacy over other earthly kings. In fact, the only encounters with earthly kings and governors were disastrous: Herod the Great initiated the slaughter at Bethlehem, Herod Antipas does nothing, and Pontius Pilate orders Him crucified.

His work here was not simply to reclaim those titles. He was and remains the King of Kings. He came for a specific purpose that could not be accomplished through any other means. He came for you. He came for me. The Apostle Paul put it this way: "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst." (1 Timothy 1:15 NIV)* This is one of Paul's "trustworthy statements" that I believe he intends for Timothy and Titus to remember, teach, and apply to themselves. It's a trustworthy statement for me to say: Christ Jesus came to save sinners, and I am the worst sinner. If I approach life with that attitude, I will ever remember the grace shown me and be ready to extend that grace.

He came to save sinners. Yet sinners are not saved merely by His coming. One can parse down to the finest point what the precise order of God's work in saving sinners is, but it requires His coming and our surrendering. If you are counting on Jesus merely showing up to save you, it does not happen that way. Neither does it happen that you will work your way to Him.

He came that Bethlehem night to reach you. He came that you would recognize Him as King of *you*. That you would come, as the Magi and the shepherds, and worship. He came for you. All of what He went through was so that you would know His glory and so that you might come to Him. There is much about the price He paid: His death substituting for ours, His resurrection proving His divinity, and His ascension to power forevermore.

But today, encapsulate it here: at the manger, the baby waits. He made the trip to save you. What will you do about it? Bring Him gold? Why? In the back of the Book, we see that He uses the valuable things of this world to walk on: the extraordinary is pavement in eternity. Do you believe that? Read Revelation 21:21. The streets are made of gold.

Because the treasure of Heaven is Jesus and the presence of God, and that treasure was paid out to redeem *you*. Will you surrender to His kingdom? It is not for the faint of heart: it is for the fainting heart that can go no further. It is not for the self-sufficient: it is for the insufficient one who will turn to the sufficiency of Him.

If Advent passes and you have drawn no closer to the King of Kings who is also King of You, then the season is wasted. No matter what else happens, this much is critical: let Christmas not find you another year older and not a penny richer. Let Christmas find you older, certainly, but far richer in spirit and relationship with your King than it ever has before.

Scripture Passage for the Day: Revelation 21:6 (NASB95)

"Then He said to me, "It is done.
I am the Alpha and the Omega,
the beginning and the end.
I will give to the one who thirsts
from the spring of the water of life without cost."

Hymn for the Day: O Come, All Ye Faithful #199

Prayer: Father God, Creator-King, I have a problem. And that problem is me, most of the time. I am not often willing to release the rule of my own heart and my own life to You. I am more than ready that You rule over others, over this world, over suffering and disease, but I am not so ready that You reign over me right now. I recognize that I must stop this and change my direction. Without this, I know that I make light of Your work, of Your atoning death and Your glorious resurrection. Jesus, help me live in active obedience to You as my King. In Your name, for Your glory I pray, Amen.

Week Two: Frankincense

Week Two Day One: The Great Priest

"Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession;" Hebrews 3:1

The next gift mentioned in Matthew is called *frankincense*. This is where a good many of us get lost, since we do not often have much sense regarding scents. It is obtained from balsam trees, specifically ones that are indigenous to regions of Arabia and the Horn of Africa. In ancient times, it held a great value because of the localization of the economy.

Today, though, frankincense does not seem to be that big of a deal. At this moment, I can order a pound of frankincense from Amazon.com for under twenty dollars! It does not have the intrinsic worth that gold has. One reason is this: as long as you can grow a Boswellia tree, you can make more. It's like maple syrup: there is a specific source and varied conditions can cause a shortage, but if you can grow the tree and learn how to tap it, you can have more next year.

Why, then, is frankincense valuable? We can see that it is: if you look at Exodus, frankincense is part of the holy incense prescribed in the Torah. It can also be found in Song of Solomon as a part of social and intimate life. It was part of the sacrificial system in Leviticus. Even non-canonical books mention frankincense. 3 Maccabees mentions that elephants were given frankincense and wine to drive them mad! The stuff shows up in various places.

The main use, though, is not to drug elephants. That story is actually not very reliable anyway, but it is entertaining. The primary use of frankincense is in religious observances. It is, as mentioned, part of sacrifices, anointing, and Song of Solomon puts frankincense into the marriage celebration. Why is a tree product that valuable?

As I said above, it was difficult to obtain in a non-globalized economy. It requires effort to obtain. One can pay enough for it, but one could also find a way to grow it and prepare it yourself. God is gracious like this: wealth is not the key to worship. Effort is. Action that reveals the heart of the worshipper is more important than how big of a check was written. It was valuable because God commanded it.

And frankincense represents that. It was a necessary part of worship: it was used to anoint the High Priest and used in the most important sacrifices. It was a part of the smoke of the fire on the altar that went up before God constantly. Its presence signified the presence of God.

The Magi bring it to Jesus. Whether they fully understand how He is the High Priest for all time is a question that I cannot answer. I know that they could have read of His coming from one of their predecessors, known to them as Belteshazzar. He was a wise man of Babylon who went on to be a wise man of the Persian Empire, and it is from Persia that the Magi have come. Belteshazzar has mentioned the coming of a glorious one, and based on his experiences with telling dreams, reading miraculous handwriting, and surviving lions' dens, his voice would likely be remembered.

Daniel (that was Belteshazzar's other name. You might remember that one better, it was the one his mother gave him!) had spoken of the coming Anointed One in his writings[6] and the Magi are standing before that One. They present Him with a gift that does not acknowledge His kingship, but rather His Priesthood. As High Priest, He represents God to the people, and the people to God. He is the embodiment of religious truth and greatness.

Let us take time this week to examine Jesus as the Great High Priest.

Scripture Passage for the Day: Hebrews 8:1-2 (NASB95)

"Now the main point of what we are saying is this:
We do have such a high priest,
who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven,
and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord,
not by a mere human being."

Hymn for the Day: Come Thou Long Expected Jesus #176

Prayer: Almighty God, I have often sought to bring to you what I consider valuable. Yet Your priorities are different than mine, and I must learn to worship You as You command. I ask for help: Jesus came not only as my King, but as the only priest that I need. Help me to come to You through Him. Through His work and His word. I have learned to say I pray in His name, but help me learn what it is to pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

[6] Daniel 9:24-25; Messiah means "Anointed One"

Week Two Day Two: Priest Above All Religion

"Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6 (NIV)

The first place our minds go when we hear that Jesus is a "priest" is down the road to religion. Left to that path, we are headed to an unmitigated disaster if we do not put some hedges and explanations on that. The truth carries a much tighter focus than many of us like.

Most religions build on a structure of priesthood. The structure is this: there is something beyond what normal people understand, but there are a few that grasp the full truth. Those few then serve as intermediaries between ordinary folks and that something. You get this in Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Mormonism. You get it even in Buddhism and Atheism—yes, atheists have priests and prophets, too, who are out to "enlighten" everyone about the real truth that religious people ignore.

Even some forms of Christianity twist His truth and place additional layers between man and God. This pattern is so pervasive to religious belief that I think it is just an extension of human nature. We like to see what we worship, and if we cannot see it, we want a representative. So, the search continues throughout cultures, history, and time.

Except that people are troublesome. Too often, the people we look to as our examples and intermediaries resemble us more than they resemble the truth. This is our problem: those we would pick make poor examples and those who offer themselves are rarely any better.

Yet into this world, Jesus is born. He is born into a pluralistic society with a plethora of gods and goddesses. Wait, you thought He was born in Israel, land of the One True God, right? Except Israel is not independent, they are ruled by the Roman Empire. Rome was one of the first generally secular empires in world history. Rome had few gods of their own, but instead just adopted the gods of wherever they conquered. You could worship nearly anything or anybody you wanted in Rome as long as you paid your taxes and did not rebel against the government.

Jesus is born into a religiously diverse world. True, Islam does not exist at that point: Mohammed is born nearly 600 years later. When He came, He faced that diversity. Christmas did not happen in the world of the Jews.[7] It happened in the world of fallen humanity.

This same Jesus offered the quote above. That He is the only way to God. Not through rabbis or pastors, priests or imams, scientists or séances, but only through Jesus. Your religion, in the grand scheme of eternity, actually does not matter.

What matters is your response to Jesus. Do you recognize Him as *The High Priest*, the *One Way* to God or do you reject Him? To live out that serving and knowing God is Jesus *and* your religion calls Him a liar. To live out that serving a religion that ignores Him altogether is to marginalize Him.

[7] Not to deny the importance of Israel in the plan of God. There's just more to the story.

To marginalize and insult Him is to the same to God. He came to show us God, to give us the representation that we need, to provide the guidance back. Even in the days when the path is dark, following Him closely will provide the steps we need. If we place any other person between us and Him, we may mistake the way.

Scripture passage for the Day: Psalm 31:24

So be strong and courageous,
all you who put your hope in the LORD!

Hymn for the Day: He is Born #190

Prayer: God, You alone are God. And only through Jesus can we come to You. I ask for help to strip away the forms and formalities that I have placed between myself and Him. Help me to see clearly the One who You sent, that I may clearly serve You and worship. Thank You, Jesus, for coming. In Your name I pray, Amen.

Week Two Day Three: Priest Above All Division

"For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all." Ephesians 4:4-6

There are, unfortunately, divisions among those who claim the name of Christ. We tend to argue about things great and small. Where else can you find arguments so bitter that a person will not speak to someone five feet away?

Some of the arguments are necessary. It often happens that we take our eyes off the Cross and get greatly distracted. When that happens, wrong goals appear and wrong ideas are taught. Those times, the division is necessary. Sometimes, our vision gets blurry and we choose foolishness in our arguments.

This is sadly unavoidable because we are drawn to our self-interest more than anything else. We must remember that the debate should not be solved by our opinions or personal preferences. Rather, we must come back to our High Priest. We must come back to the manger.

Consider the manger: what division can we find in Bethlehem? The division between God and man is closing with the baby. He has come the greater difference, made the longer journey.

When we consider that, can we continue to bicker with one another? What distance are we refusing to cover?

The answer to our arguments must always come back to Him. Foremost in our mind must be this realization: Jesus is the standard of right. The follower of Christ recognizes that only Jesus has the authority to declare right from wrong. We can determine from His Word right from wrong, but it is not based on our own opinion.

As we have divisions within the family of believers, ask this: When the issue is presented to the High Priest, how will He see it?

This is not a question of unity ahead of truth: all unity among believers starts in three places: the Empty Tomb, the Cross, and the Manger. Unity without truth is more than an oxymoron: it is impossible. Rather, we should look at our divisions in light of Christ and the manger: where would be without Him at all?

We could not be divided about the time of His return, for we would not know it. We could not be divided about miracles and teachings, followers and successors, for there would be none of these things to discuss. If we start at the manger, start with remembering the relief that is finding God *with* us, many of those issues begin to fade in their importance.

Scripture passage for the day: Luke 2:17-18 (NIV)

"When they had seen him, they spread the word
concerning what had been told them about this child,
and all who heard it were amazed
at what the shepherds said to them."

Hymn for the day: The First Noel #180

Prayer: Almighty God, I like to have my way. Even when "my way" is to avoid making decisions, that is what I want. This habit does not help many people, and it can bring harm and division. Yet when I gaze in wonder at the manger, I realize that I cannot embrace bitter divisions. I will not accept a false unity that denies You, but I want to live with joy alongside my fellow followers of Jesus Christ, in whose name I pray, Amen.

Week Two Day Four: Priest Above All Practices

"God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." John 4:24 (NASB95)

If you live in the South, you probably realize that many Southerners do love football. Especially college football. The traditions and excitement that surround Saturdays between September and December overtake even the most casual of fans, and cause some of the sanest of people to do some rather crazy things.

The traditions of college football are as diverse as the crowds that do them. In Oxford, Mississippi, the well-dressed members of the football team walk through the tailgating crowd to get to the stadium. In Arkansas, grown people stand up and shout "Woo! Pig! SooIEEEE! to call the Hogs. Auburn University lets an eagle fly around the stadium.

Even the idea of "tailgating" is a strange one: essentially, people show up around the stadium way too early for the game, cooking food, sharing food with total strangers, and sometimes just eating

without bringing anything at all. There are reports that some people go just to tailgate, and then sit outside with their big-screen TVs in the back of a pick-up truck and watch the game there.

In all, football around here leads to some strange practices. There are unwritten rules and written rules for these matters. In most places, the written rules are posted and have to do with how much space you can take up, what methods can be used to cook, and how early you can be there. These rules may address bringing generators, tents, or rolling out fake grass. The unwritten rules are a different story. Some places, those rules include not using profanity around women and children. Some places, those rules are about how much food you have to bring if you want to eat other people's food. The rules may apply to how loud your music is or if fans of the opposite team get to eat or get harassed.

As Shakespeare might think, though, here's the rub: do you know the rules? Many people that participate know the rules at home, but they are clueless on the road. Others, like me, have heard the rumors and the legends, but have never participated. So I have no idea what the actual rules would be. I actually do not even know if the rules are different from War Memorial Stadium in Little Rock to Razorback Stadium in Fayetteville, and the same team plays both places!

When faced with so many ways to celebrate and congregate, how does one educate? How do the rules get passed on? Well, if you are fortunate, you get to start off life taking part in these times. You go as a kid and learn as you grow. Perhaps you come later, but have a friend who teaches you the rules.

And all this is just about football. What about something that really matters? We count down the days until game day, but we are also counting the days until Christmas. Not just because last-minute shopping just excites us, but because we look forward to celebrating the greatest that could happen. God comes, steps into history, and makes it possible that we can come to Him.

That excites me more than football. It ought to excite us all more than anything else that happens. Yet what are the rules for that excitement? That answers seems to parallel tailgating as it really does vary from place to place. One group would like you to dress this way, another that way—try showing up in a "contemporary" church with a tie on and see what reaction you get. One group celebrates so calmly that you hate to wake them up to end the service, while another group rattles the roof more than raises it!

So who is right? Jesus is right. He told the Samaritan woman above that worship was about "spirit and truth." One good way to understand that is this: it is not about location, for God is everywhere. It is not about right opinions, but about God's truth. Worship is about Him.

As you next read the Christmas story, look for how the shepherds, Magi, or even Mary and Joseph worshipped Christ. The Magi brought gifts, certainly, but did the shepherds? Who sang? The biblical story records *no singing* in the whole situation. Yet the shepherds know something important is happening: the angels told them. The Magi know, for they would not have made the trip for a hunch. Mary and Joseph certainly know the truth.

Yet their worship is not about the specific practices. When Jesus is the High Priest, it is not about the practice of worship. Worship is instead about the object of worship. Worship is about Jesus. The Christmas story records little of how the people worshipped the Baby Jesus because the story is about Jesus, not about them.

Considering Jesus as the High Priest above all practices reminds us of this: our focus on Him is what matters. If you walk away from worship speaking of the music and the feelings but not of Jesus, then you have missed the point. If you walk away from worship and speak of nothing or worse, complain of the hard pews or the time taken, then you have missed the point.

The practices are to run second to the Person of Christ.

Scripture passage for the day: Psalm 150:6 (HCSB)

Let everything that breathes praise the LORD.
Hallelujah!

Hymn for the day: What Child is This? #198

Prayer: Lord God, let my worship focus on You. I want to be less concerned with how and more concerned with whom. I repent of demanding the perfect environment to worship, and commit myself to worship as long as You and You alone are the object of my efforts. Thank You for grace through Jesus, in His name I pray, Amen.

Week Two Day Five: Priest Above All Problems

"Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His laws." Exodus 18:15-16

If a train leaves New York at 0545 traveling 60mph on the same track to Philadelphia as a train leaving Philadelphia leaves for New York at 0600 headed to New York traveling 45mph leaves on, how much time does the dispatcher have to warn both trains to stop?

Sound like a major issue? Maybe not if you live in Atlanta, but if you are on one of those trains, it is a huge deal. Yet what you see above is a typical story problem from a math book. It is, however, lacking information. For example, how far is it from Philadelphia to New York? How big of a train? After all, it takes longer to stop a 100-car banana train than to stop a 10-car passenger train.

Without that information, can you actually solve the problem? I'm not asking if your math skills are up to the division, multiplication, and addition necessary. You can see, though, that you do not possess all the information to solve the problem at hand.

This is considered a simple problem, one that a fifth grader may find in a math book. What about the problems we face in adulthood? Should I take this job? What do I do about my children? What is wrong with people these days that they just do not seem to care about their neighbors?

There is a huge demand for problem solving in our world. We take medications for our mental problems, take therapy for our emotional problems, and ask the courts to solve our family problems. Political problems have no solution and international problems cause more sleepless nights than midnight espressos.

Usually, this is because we plainly lack the whole information. Parents lack the total insight into the mind of their child, employees cannot fathom what the boss is up to, and no one knows what Congress will do. We might feel sad but not know if we have true depression, a bad day, or a nutritional problem. Then we take this solution: we go to an expert.

Except for this little issue: the experts often do not know either. If you go to the doctor, the first question you will be asked is "Why are you here?" or "What is the trouble today?" I have always resisted the urge, but there are days I am tempted to say: "You're doctor, doctor, you tell me!" Yet our experts, the doctors, auto mechanics, lawyers, and therapists of this world are all dealing with a shortage of clear insight to the problem.

Sometimes the experts help us. A counselor says the right thing, a doctor prescribes the right medication. Maybe a Congressman makes a reasonable law or a diplomat actually persuades warring groups to make peace. On rare occasions, mechanics and computer techs actually fix the problem the first time!

Yet when this happens, something else goes wrong. So, we retain problems. They grow and compound, take on a life all their own. All around us, the world gets a little crazier every day.

What can we do? It certainly does not seem that a small baby in a manger can fix it. Yet it is only people with problems that know what Advent is really about. If everything is perfect in your life, what are you waiting for? You have no needs, no concerns, and no expectation for improvement. In fact, your biggest fear is losing the perfection. For you, there is another book or sermon to speak to your issue.

For those of us who wait for things to get better, though, that is the spirit, the feeling, of the Advent season[8]. It is a recognition that the solutions to our problems will not come from us. The answer is not only to look outside of us for help, but to look at a plan that we cannot fathom. The answer to the world's issues is a baby? This is both undying truth and undeniably crazy from our perspective. How can this child help anyone?

He can, because His presence shows that God has not abandoned us. He is here to know what it is to suffer, to know hunger, sadness, tiredness. He is here to be tempted and overcome, to face trials and death.

And to overcome them all. There is nothing He cannot handle. Will the solution always make perfect logical sense to you and I? Of course not. I would not have sent a baby to a virgin who would have to give birth and lay Him in a manger, either.

God sees and understands the depths of our issues. And He presents Jesus, the High Priest as the solution to all of our problems. Let us see this for the truth and glory it is this year.

Scripture passage for the day: Matthew 10:26 (NLT)

"But don't be afraid of those who threaten you.

[8] If you would like to see this idea well-developed, read *God is in the Manger*, selections from the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I owe an unpayable debt to this and other writings of Bonhoeffer for the work you are reading and my own preaching, teaching, and growth.

For the time is coming when everything
that is covered will be revealed,
and all that is secret will be made known to all."

Hymn for the Day: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel #175[9]

Prayer: Lord God, You already know this, but I have problems. Some of my problems are big to me, and some are small to me. Compared to other people's problems, mine seem big most days and small other days. However, the key to me is this: these are my problems. My issues. The things that keep me awake at night. I commit myself to do two things about these problems. The first is this: I ask that you show me problems I can solve and help me solve them. I will do this if I am solving my problems or someone else's problems. The second is this: I ask for Your help, but I will wait for Your solution to my problems. I will stop trying to replace You with me. I trust that even if I cannot see how, through Jesus there is a solution. In His name I pray, Amen.

Week Two Day Six: Priest Above Me

"For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all—this was attested at the right time." 1 Timothy 2:5-6 (NRSV)

Now we come to the crux of the matter. Jesus is certainly the Priest above all religion, practices, problems, and divisions. Yet what about you? Do you recognize that Jesus is alive to be your High Priest?

It is not enough to say that He is greater than all else. Doing so would be true, but it remains a distant truth. I readily recognize that I could not go three rounds with George Foreman. What of it? The question is irrelevant: no one expects me to box and everyone knows Foreman can.

Recognizing Jesus as the High Priest above me is bringing this entire discussion home. Sure, Jesus has the answer for the world's problems. Do I admit He has the solution to my problem? Do I admit that He is the answer to the divisions I have with others?

More even than that: do I recognize that I cannot, on my own, make my way back to God? God is holy, righteous, and perfect. He is fundamentally different than I am. I am in one place at one time, limited in ability, knowledge, and judgment. God is not limited to locations and times, His abilities exceed my comprehension---and He understands Himself. He never makes a mistake, while I hope to avoid making fatal mistakes.

That a mere human cannot come to God without help should not surprise anyone. It should astound us that there is anyway made possible. Jesus makes that possible. The manger makes it possible. The manger is that moment when God opened the door. He put the mediator in place that could bring us back to Him.

[9] For those of you who like Country Music, I recommend Sugarland's interpretation of this song. Available as an MP3 download from Amazon or their "Gold and Green" album. I do not know if the rest of the album is worth it, though.

Is that personal for you? No other mediator will work: your pastor, your friend, your parent or your child cannot stand between you and God to bring you to Him. There is *one* mediator. God closed the whole gap that night in Bethlehem.

Where do stand at the manger? Do you stand near or behind another? The grace of God is this: there is room enough in the front row for everyone. You do not have to take that back seat. It works, really, the other way. There is only a front row. Those who are one row back are outside, and will stay there unless they come themselves into the presence. The way is open for all who would take it. He is the High Priest above all things, and that includes individual people.

Scripture passage for the day: Revelation 19:1 (NIV)

"After this I heard what sounded
like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting:
"Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,"

Hymn for the day: Good Christian Men, Rejoice #183

Prayer: Lord God, help me see Jesus as the only one between You and me. I ask for your help to move up to the front row, where nothing and no one stands between us. The only thing that should matter is You. Help me to live that truth. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Week Three: Myrrh

Week Three Day One: Senses and Sacrifice

"Then their father Israel said to them, 'If it must be so, then do this: take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry a present down to the man, a little balm and a little honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds." Genesis 43:11 (ESV)

Coming to the last gift, we find myrrh. Myrrh, like frankincense, was an all-purpose spice. It is another agricultural product. Well, more like a silvicultural product since it comes from trees, but you get the point. It is not something valuable because it is rare. It is instead valuable because people liked it.

How do I know people liked it? If you look through the Bible alone for the uses of myrrh, it shows up in many places. The above passage is the gifts Israel, or Jacob, sent to Pharaoh during the famine. Exodus places myrrh into the sacred oil used to anoint the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant. Proverbs and Song of Solomon[10]move myrrh into the intimacy of marriage.

[10] Or Song of Songs, or Canticles, if you prefer.

It is, apparently, a pleasant scent. Unlike frankincense, myrrh is nice on its own: frankincense is burned to release a smoke and an aroma. It can be heavy and oppressive, while myrrh is lighter. Myrrh even has medicinal effects, with some research indicating it can help with pain and cholesterol.[11]

The main use of myrrh, though, was in embalming. Ancient Egypt used myrrh in the preparation of mummies and many other nations used it for a burial spice. In prior times, deceased bodies were packed in spices to alleviate the odors involved with death.

It should not seem odd to you that the same fragrance is associated with worship, intimacy, and death. After all, modern Americans do the same thing with flowers. You find flowers on Valentine's Day, anniversaries, and at funerals. You find them in hospitals to cheer the sick and on tombs to mourn the dead. We use flowers for apologies and for congratulations.

Myrrh had a similar function: it was congratulatory and conciliatory, celebration and consolation.

It is nearly the perfect fragrance for Christmas. Christmas is about the senses and the sacrifice. About God becoming man so that our senses could understand better. About Jesus being the atonement for our sins, the sacrifice that we needed for forgiveness.

Scripture passage for the day: John 19:39-40 (ESV)

"Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night,
came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes,
about seventy-five pounds in weight.
So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices,
as is the burial custom of the Jews."

Hymn for the Day: Nothing but the Blood #223

Prayer: My senses, Lord God, are easily distracted. I ask that You help me focus them. I also realize I need to understand better what it is that You are my sacrifice. There can be no doubt that I need Your help to draw near. I ask that You work through me in Jesus' name, Amen.

Week Three Day Two: A Sense of Intimacy

"All Your garments are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia; Out of ivory palaces stringed instruments have made You glad." Psalm 45:8 (NASB95)

For now, lay aside the thought of myrrh as a burial spice. Instead, let us consider myrrh and its place among the fragrances of intimacy, of relationship, of celebration. Myrrh carries a picture in the Old Testament that is quite different than what we see in the few references to it in the New Testament.

[11] This is not a medical endorsement: there are experiments about this, not certainties. Do NOT go buy some myrrh and use it for your ailments. Talk to a medical professional.

In the Old Testament, myrrh is a part of the marriage celebration. The Scripture above, from Psalm 45, is a good reference point for that use. The whole of Psalm 45 is a celebration of marriage. There is some discussion about the date and target of the Psalm. The initial frame of reference is the wedding of one of the kings of Judah in the dynasty of David. Looking back over the Cross to the Psalm, most Christians see this Psalm as celebrating both the king's wedding and the glory of Jesus.

How does that work? One thing you should notice when you read through the whole Bible is the frequent use of marriage imagery to discuss the relationship between God and His people. Many of us see the picture in Ephesians 5, but the Old Testament prophets also use the picture.

The idea that we should gather here is one of intimacy and commitment. Those are the two keys of marriage. Now, do not take intimacy and pare it down to one thing. Intimacy is about knowing and being known. Life intimacy knows not just the surface of a person. Not only knowing how they act in restaurants but how they act at the breakfast table. Not seeing only shiny shoes but the dirty sneakers and flip-flops. The great thing about drawing near to God is seeing that He is always consistent. It is slightly terrifying to realize that He knows us and our inconsistent nature.

Intimacy is beyond the shallow words we often use. When next you encounter a group of people, ask them all how they are. See how many give you a "fine." Then watch the rest of the day—I would give you good odds that at least one is not "fine." I see it frequently from people who are guarded in real life but less so on social media. A person who is "fine" in the morning is "continuing to battle the depression that darkens every day" on Facebook in the afternoon.

Myrrh should remind us that God is not distant enough to miss this. He is right there, with us in all things. He is intimate with our days and our actions, our hopes and our setbacks. There is a relationship offered, a grace extended beginning at the manger and it goes on forever. It is to be known and loved.

Intimacy is not the only key, though. Commitment is the other. The two things go hand-in-hand, after all. How can you have intimacy if you are not committed to the one you are intimate with? Commitment says: your real self is safe with me. I will not run away no matter what I find out. I will hold true to my word in all things.

That kind of commitment is hard to do. Many of us struggle to be that committed to another. There is a point at which we back away. Yet God is not that way. The Manger as much as the Cross shows us His commitment: He came too far to turn back. He will not leave you now.

Scripture passage for the day: Deuteronomy 31:6 (NLT)

So be strong and courageous!
Do not be afraid and do not panic before them.
For the LORD your God will personally go ahead of you.
He will neither fail you nor abandon you.

Hymn for the day: How Great Our Joy (or *While by the Sheep We Watched)* #202

Prayer: Lord God, I admit that I fear being known. I see my own heart clearly and know how I would react to someone like me if I knew them fully. I would struggle to hold my commitment even to myself. One of my greatest needs is to take You at Your word and believe that You will not abandon me. I know

that I am not perfect, and that You are. I know that You are working to make me more like Jesus and commit to letting You work. It is in His name I pray, Amen.

Week Three Day Three: A Sense of Destiny

"For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes." John 12:35 (NASB95)

The sensation that is myrrh, though, does not stop in everyday use. Myrrh was a portion of the anointing oil of the Tabernacle. In fact, it was the largest portion of this oil. Exodus 30 records this oil and its purposes. Whatever was touched by this oil was considered holy. It was to be used on the priests and the implements of sacrifice. It was used on the altar and on the Ark of the Covenant.

The Ark of the Covenant was the symbol of the center of God's presence in those times. He never expresses Himself as limited to wherever the Ark is, but for the Israelites of those years, the Ark was where they could know God certainly was. The Ark was to be kept near to the altar for sacrifice and to be kept separate from the people by a heavy curtain.

Why? Because the presence of God is so great that people cannot stand before Him. He is beyond humanity in holiness and righteousness and is unapproachable by us. In this desperation, we carry a sense of despair.

Yet the gift of myrrh shows us a sense of destiny. In the earlier covenant, God's presence was represented by the Ark of the Covenant. In the end, though, it's just a gold-covered box. True, the artwork is magnificent and the item carries immense historical value. The Old Testament contains a few references to God's power affecting the Ark. In the end, though, it remains a box that God chose to use.

Jesus is different than the Ark. He is not merely the symbol of the presence of God, but the Incarnate God Himself. Incarnate means to "put on flesh," and that is what God does through the manger. He puts on flesh. He becomes one of us, though He does not discard His true Godhood at the same time.

The myrrh He receives should draw to mind all the holy objects that were anointed with myrrh in the Old Testament. Christ fulfills the need for those and exceeds their value. He becomes the One who can bring men to God. He is eternal, which the Tabernacle, the Temple, and the Ark have proven not to be. His destiny was shown in the myrrh: He will go past the heavy curtain, He is the Holiest.

Scripture passage for the day: 1 Timothy 6:15-16 (HCSB)

"God will bring this about in His own time.
He is the blessed and only Sovereign,
the King of kings, and the Lord of lords,
the only One who has immortality,
dwelling in unapproachable light; no one has seen or can see Him,
to Him be honor and eternal might. Amen."

Hymn for the day: Good Christian Men, Rejoice! #183

Prayer: Almighty, Most Holy God, I cannot express enough my gratitude at what You have done for me. The more I know myself, the more I realize that it took more than I could ever do to come to You. My sin, my heart, my affections are rarely clear as they should be. Thank You for making the way through the veil for me. I know that it cost Jesus His blood, and it is in His name I pray, Amen.

Week Three Day Four: The Sacrifice without Spot and Blemish

"I will not take what is yours for the LORD[12] or sacrifice a burnt offering that costs me nothing." (King David) 1 Chronicles 21:24

It is easy for us to picture Christmas in light of the Hallelujah Chorus and sing "Wonderful! Counselor! The Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace!" This is certainly the celebration of the overall character of Jesus of Nazareth, whose birth in Bethlehem anchors our celebrations. Yet Christians recognize not one Advent but two. The second is the one yet to come: when He returns and initiates the visible Kingdom of God in all things. The first Advent leads us to Bethlehem and the manger.

In the gap between the two Advents, something else had to happen. We return to the Old Testament for the picture of the system of sacrifices and offerings. Soon after Adam and Eve eat the fruit they should have left alone, we see Cain and Abel offering sacrifices. They take some of their labor and present it to God in both apology and gratitude.

The system develops, and then in Leviticus and the rest of the Law, God puts clear direction on sacrifices. There are clear examples and prescribed choices to be used as sacrifices. One key requirement was that any animal used as a sacrifice had to be as near to perfect as could be found. Diseased, lame, injured animals were not acceptable: God expected the best from His people.

A problem is evident, though, when you consider this. The best sacrifices are never quite good enough. The most sacrificing does for a lamb, ram, or turtle dove is hasten its death. It was going to die eventually. That blemish has been present ever since death entered this world at the hands of Adam and Eve. All living things die.[13]

There was only one exception to that rule. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, He came without death within Him. He came in perfection to the imperfect world. He was spotless: His death was not guaranteed in the natural course of events.

Beyond this, His life never required His death for His own sin. He committed none in the years of earthly life. He was, and is, truly without spot and without blemish. He is the only One capable of being the sacrifice for sin.

Scripture passage for the day: 1 Peter 1:18–19 (HCSB)

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[12] The word *LORD* renders the Hebrew covenant name for God and should be understood as distinguishing the God of the Bible from the other gods of the regions around Israel. See the inset panel on page 65 of *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook* from Baker Books or the introductory material on the NASB, NIV, or NLT about the name: *Yahweh*.

[13] Enoch and Elijah are another matter entirely for another day.

"For you know that you were redeemed
from your empty way of life inherited from the fathers,
not with perishable things like silver or gold,
but with the precious blood of Christ,
like that of a lamb without defect or blemish."

Hymn for the day: Blessed Redeemer #258

Prayer: Your holiness, O God, is more than I can bear. My spots and blemishes show up clearly in Your light. Thank You, Lord God, for Jesus who redeems me. In His name I pray, Amen.

Week Three Day Five: The Sacrifice without Coercion

"The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it." John 1:4-5 (NLT)

The lead-in to Christmas, the time when we celebrate Advent, is many things in our culture. Not all of these things are positive. This time of year, the 'holiday season' seems to also be that time of year when the guilt-machine in society is turned up an extra notch or two in intensity. During Christmas, we gather with people that we avoid throughout the year, we sandwich in trips to distant relatives that in all honesty, we can barely afford.

We buy gifts for people we do not like, and sometimes for people we do not even know. Rather than say no or express our own needs, we do and give out of a guilty compulsion. It is just a part of the American Holiday Stress Syndrome.[14] Now, sometimes we try to lay off as guilty compulsion someone urging us to do what is right in the first place. After all, Christian Believers, "Honor your father and mother" is still applicable in the 21st Century.

Still, whether guilt sends us to do what we should do or just something we do not want to do, we hardly do everything this time of year of our own free will. Even in the normal doings of life, free will is somewhat of a sideline. After all, it takes a decent amount of nutrition to exercise a free will and sometimes you do what you do not want to get that nutrition!

Christmas, though, starts with free will. Jesus did not come to this earth as a baby that night in Bethlehem because He had to. He chose to. It was of His own loving choice that He emptied Himself and dwelt among us. Really and truly, God could have simply ignored mankind or sent us packing on into eternity early. After all, He could have just made new people, right?

Instead, Jesus chooses to come to this world. He does this because He loves us. He does this because He wants to. He does this because we are trapped as the enemies of God and someone must show us the way to peace with God.

The way to peace with God, though, is through death. The universe has certain unbreakable laws. One is that sin cannot come into the presence of the Holy One. There is no loophole for this, no sneaking

[14] Not a recognized disease. At least I don't think so.

past the Alps to get there, no magnetic fields to shield the two opposing forces. It takes death, because death begins to remove the blemish. Death was and remains the wages of sin.

Therefore, when Jesus chose the manger, He also chose the Cross. He chose to pay for the peace between God and man, to suffer the wrath of God for the sins of men. His death on the Cross was the natural pairing of His trip into this world at Bethlehem. He came for one great purpose: to die for the sins of man. Much of the rest of His life was spent in accomplishing secondary goals and attesting His identity before the Cross.

Gloriously, the story of Jesus is not just the story of the Manger and the Cross. It is the story of the Manger, the Cross, and the Empty Tomb. For death cannot hold Him: in Him is life, not death. He is the fullness of God in the flesh. He is born to show the way, dies to atone for our sins, and rises to everlasting glory!

Consider this at Christmas this year: none of what He did was compelled. It was done for one reason and one reason only: the love of God for humanity. Take that for what you can, but for me it is the key to thankfulness and celebration at Christmas. The One who could choose to bring life did choose to bring it! With the choirs of history, I will sing and shout "Hallelujah! Praise the Lamb!"

Scripture passage for the day: John 10:18 (NASB95)

No one has taken it away from Me,
but I lay it down on My own initiative.
I have authority to lay it down,
and I have authority to take it up again.
This commandment I received from My Father.

Hymn for the day: Joy to the World! #181

Prayer: Lord Jesus, my will gets in the way. I see how much "want to" interferes with obedience. I thank You that You made the choice to come, to live, to die for sin, and to rise again. Thank you for being the mediator between God and humanity. In Your name I pray, Amen.

Week Three Day Six: The Sacrifice without Replacement

"And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the Most Holy Place." Hebrews 10:19–20 (NLT)

The last point about Jesus as our sacrifice is that He is the sacrifice without replacement. There is no substitute for Him to be found in heaven, on earth, or under the earth. Without holding to this truth, Christmas becomes less than just another day. It ends up as a colossal drain on your energy and a big mess at the mall for no good reason.

This idea bears both repeating and expanding: Jesus is either the sacrifice without replacement or Christmas, nay Christianity, is a complete waste. For Him to be without replacement, two things must be true: He must be without equal and we must be without options.

That we are without an option is made plain by Jesus Himself. He stated that He is "the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through" Him.[15] This leaves us only two choices: believe Him or not. If He cannot be trusted with telling us about God, than can we trust Him with anything else? Here is a man who claimed to also be God. His statements are recorded by people who allege that He was born of a virgin, that He raised the dead, that He fed thousands with snack lunches, and that He got up and out of a tomb after a Roman crucifixion.

Disbelief is the only option open to us. We cannot pass Him off as less than He claimed or as only partially what the Gospels tell us about Him. If He is not real in all He did, what is the value of any of it? The world sees many moralists and motivators. Why would we need one from a troubled Roman province of two thousand years ago? The choice is not Jesus among many options. The choice is Jesus or no Jesus.

The reason is that Jesus is without equal. He is called the "only begotten" or "one and only" Son of God by the Apostle John. There is no one who can claim equality with Him. None of the prophets of old ever claimed to fulfill the promises of God. John the Baptist quickly distanced himself from the high praise and even the angel at the end of Revelation points to God alone as worthy of worship.

Nothing can equal Jesus. Attempting to add our own merit to His sacrifice denies that His work remains enough. There is nothing to add, for the work is done. Out of gratitude, out of a heart set free to follow Him, we ought to do what He says, but it is not for our salvation that we do it. It is for His glory.

Nothing can equal Jesus. Attempting to add the worship of a good man or woman denies that His glory remains enough. There is nothing to add, for worship belongs to God alone. Out of gratitude, out of a heart filled with joy, we worship Him. Oftentimes we worship Him with others, we have those who guide and lead our worship, but they never stand equal to Him. They do not stand above us, but only slightly in front to serve as guides.

Nothing can equal Jesus. Attempting to add the paths that diverse from Him denies that He knew the whole truth. There is nothing to add, for His truth is all that there is. Out of gratitude, out of a heart cleared of darkness to see Him clearly, we know Him and His Word. We share His Word and His work with others. Men and women help us to see His truth clearly, but they cannot add to it.

The manger holds the only hope for mankind. The irreplaceable sacrifice without spot or blemish, freely given for the world is there. He may not seem like much. He may seem easily mislaid among the divisions of mankind and especially of those who claim Him as their own, but He is there. He may seem easily hidden behind other kings and counselors, priests and intimates, but He is there. May we seek Him with all of our heart this Christmas and throughout the days to come.

Scripture passage for the day: John 5:24 (NASB95)

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word,
and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life,
and does not come into judgment,
but has passed out of death into life.

[15] John 14:6, modified to fit the 3rd person grammar of the sentence.

Hymn for the day: Go Tell It on the Mountain #182

Prayer: O Lord my God, You are truly without parallel in this world. Nothing can truly equal You, yet my heart sometimes tries to replace You anyway. Help my unbelief, my struggle with this. Help my whole heart, the total of my will and emotions, to be locked in to worship and service of You and You alone. Further, mold my life to be the spark to draw others to Your light. In the precious name of Jesus I pray, Amen.

Week Four: The People

Week Four Day One: The People

"Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth." Luke 2:1

It is impossible to think of the Christmas story without dealing with people. Even the most introverted person has to acknowledge that Christmas happened among people. Luke gives us this verse, in which Caesar wanted to count all the inhabited earth. That would be a lot of people! While history helps us understand that Caesar Augustus meant to count the whole Roman Empire, I would not doubt he ordered it as a census of the whole world. After all, for an Emperor of Rome, there were only two parts of the world: Rome and the people Rome intended to conquer. He likely wanted a count of both.

What he got, at least in Judea, was a crowded inn. Here we again see people. People are everywhere in this story! The inn is so crowded that a couple, including a pregnant woman, takes shelter to deliver their baby and lay Him in a manger. Even there, people come. Shepherds from their fields come. These shepherds tell others, who tell others, who tell…well, you get the point.

Matthew gives us the picture of the family in a house in Bethlehem, and then on to Egypt. Guess what there is in Egypt? Yes indeed: more people.

Christmas just does not happen without people. There are certainly key people in this story: Mary, Joseph, shepherds, and the Magi. Yet let us not miss on the people we write off as background clutter in Christmas musicals. The people that are choir behind the soloists, the background faces in the painting, all of these are important.

Why? Because Jesus came for them, too. They are important as we look at the story because they should remind us of the background faces in our life. There are people we encounter on a daily basis that we never know. It may be the family that is on the same milk-buying schedule you are on at the grocery store. You know the ones; you see them every Tuesday afternoon when they pick up a gallon of two percent. You have joked together about disregarding the expiration dates because milk does not sit still in your households!

The background people are the rest of the multitude in the doctor's office waiting room. They are found in the other parts of your school or the next office over from yours. Perhaps they are in the

unload section of your hub, while you spend all day in the load section.[16] When you try to think of them, their faces are kind of blurry in your mind. It is likely true that yours is blurry to them as well.

Our challenge is this: consider those faces. They are real people. Real people that Christmas happened for just as much as it happened for you. Jesus came for that guy in the store as much as He came for you. He came, not just for your political party, but for the opposition. Not just for your team, but for the other team. He came for the band members, too, and the groundskeepers and the people who could not care less about sports at all.

If all of these are worth Jesus covering the distance to be born, what should they be worth to you?

Scripture passage for the day: Luke 2:38 (NLT)

She[17] came along just as Simeon
was talking with Mary and Joseph,
and she began praising God.
She talked about the child to everyone
who had been waiting
expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem.

Hymn for the day: O Little Town of Bethlehem #196

Prayer: My Lord and my God, You see people. Help me see them as well. Help me to love others as You love them. Work in my life to be the instrument of Your love for the world around me. Guide me to specific actions to take and give me the courage to do them. As Jesus came to us, I commit to go to others. In His name I pray, Amen.

Week Four Day Two: Mary

"Behold, the bond-slave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." Luke 1:38 (NASB95)

The focus on people in the story of Christmas has to include Mary. Though we cannot cross the line and attempt to place her equal with the Lord Jesus Christ, she is still critical to message of the Gospel. Her willingness to carry and deliver a child echoes as an example of sacrifice to this day. She alone could testify to the truth of His being born of a virgin, fulfilling Isaiah 7:14. She alone would know for certain how special her Son was, knowing who His Father was.

Her words are recorded in Luke and remembered in these days as The Magnificat. Her words remember the work that God had done and look ahead to what He will do. I will let her speak for herself in today's Scripture passage.

[16] That's for my UPS people. FedExers, too.
[17] Anna. The whole story is Luke 2:21-38 and worth your time to read it.

Scripture passage for the day: Luke 1:46-55 (NRSV) The Magnificat

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear
him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Hymn for the day: Silent Night #206

Special Music: I would highly recommend that you acquire a copy of Brad Paisley and Sara Evans' duet "New Again." The single file can be downloaded or the song is on the CD *Playlist: The Very Best of Brad Paisley.* If you can get that disc for under $8, as it is available online, then the price is worth it for that song.

Prayer: Almighty Father, I understand that You do not need another Mary in Your plan. I thank You for her willingness to serve You and bear Your Son. I ask that You guide me and use me to do whatever is critical in Your plan. I will serve and glorify You in it all, for Jesus Christ is my Lord and in His name I pray, Amen.

Week Four Day Three: Joseph

"Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David," Luke 2:4 (NASB)

Joseph. The other half of "Mary and Joseph," one of the most famous couples in world history. When you read the whole story, you discover something I consider extraordinary: he has no lines in the Bible. There are places where he obviously had to say something: after all, you have to say "I do" or the wedding does not count.

Yet besides these points where it is implied that Joseph has to have said something, we do not know anything he actually said. You could cast a Christmas movie with Joseph played by any "strong, silent type" actor. As long as he looks like he would not panic in a pinch, you have a Joseph.

Most of us cannot do that. We have to talk, we have to express. Words flow from our mouths from the moment we get up until the hours after we go to bed. Some people even use computer software to keep talking. Yes, there's an app for that.[18]

We could learn from Joseph. Joseph secures his place in the Christmas story by what he does more than by what he says. The story of Joseph is an action story. He takes Mary, he keeps her a virgin, and he travels to Bethlehem. From there, he gets up, flees to Egypt, and then remains there. Then, Joseph with family in tow goes and dwells in Nazareth.

We live in a world filled with words, but our actions reveal who we truly are and what we truly believe. Joseph could have paid flowery words of lip service to God and then bolted for Parthia after the angel appeared to him. He does no such thing and instead says home in Nazareth, takes his wife, and raises God's Son in his home.

What will your actions be this year? It is easy to get involved in the uproar that surrounds Christmas in modern times. Every year there is a push to insist that people remember this is Christmas and not a generic holiday. Every year there is a pushback to keep school kids and public parks playing only Jingle Bells instead of Silent Night.

Christians can burn up a lot of words about keeping Christ in Christmas and about remembering the reason for the season, but do our actions drown them out? One calm face among the madmen on Black Friday (or Christmas Eve shopping!) can keep Christ in Christmas to a store clerk. A customer that smiles, says "please" and "thank you", and leaves a charitable tip can say more to a waitress than demanding music about Baby Jesus in the restaurant.

Spending the time with your family at peace rather than dragging them from mall to store to mall to shopping plaza to find everything on everyone's list may just speak the volumes about focus and love that you have been trying to say. Letting the feast be smaller but the fellowship more relaxed will kill no one and might enliven the hearts of the ones involved!

Let your actions this year be the biggest part of your Christmas.

Scripture passage for the day: Matthew 1:24-25 (NIV)

When Joseph woke up,
he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him
and took Mary home as his wife.
But he did not consummate their marriage
until she gave birth to a son.
And he gave him the name Jesus.

Hymn for the day: O Holy Night #194

[18] Yes, I have that app. It stores items I want to put on Facebook and Twitter and posts them all around the clock. It's called Buffer and it's at Bufferapp.com.

Prayer: Lord God, my actions speak so loudly that my words cannot be heard. Help my actions to glorify You so that my words are additions and not corrections. Let me speak in word and deed this Christmas, and may it become a habit that honors Jesus throughout the year. In His name I pray, Amen.

Week Four Day Four: Angels

"And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened." Luke 2:9 (NASB95)

Yes, week four is for people. No, angels are not people. Not now, not ever, no matter what the movies show[19] us. The Christmas story needs the angels, though. So, let us take a look at angels and see what we can about them.

First, to address the angels are not people line. This is true as far as can be told from Scripture. It appears in Scripture that angels are created as angels and people are created as people. Eternity does not see that line blur or dissipate. Through it all, the angelic beings retain their distinction from the human ones.

That is not to say that angels are not important. Throughout Scripture, angels pop up to share God's messages or reinforce the grandeur of His presence. They serve as the army of God in ways that people never do and work to accomplish His purposes. In the Christmas story, angels bring messages to Mary and Joseph, and proclaim the birth of Jesus to the shepherds.

Throughout the whole story, angels are there. Angels go hand-in-hand with the Christmas story. The nativity scene needs its angels, the Christmas pageant needs one or two, and the songs about angels are, perhaps not legion, but many. Congregational singing has many more songs about angels than about Joseph.

Yet the most significant story in the Bible is one where the angels are conspicuously absent. The heavenly host that proclaimed "Glory to God in the Highest" is silent. The warriors who protected Elisha are nowhere to be seen. The sky is dark and no radiant angels illuminate it.

It is a day somewhere around thirty-three years after Christmas. The baby from the manger that caused so much exaltation is now the man on the Cross. Jesus, whose incarnation, was celebrated that Christmas is now dying for the sins of the world. Rather than angelic light turning night into day, rather than an extra star in the skies, the sun is obscured and darkened.

The angels could have stopped it at the command of Christ.[20] He did not command them. He went to the Cross for you and for me. When we have a moment to consider the minor happenings behind the great grace that is the Cross, consider this: the angels obeyed God's will to do nothing that day. And it saved us all.

[19] Yes, I like *It's a Wonderful Life*. No, entertainment media is not a good source of theology.
[20] Matthew 26:53

Action is a part of our life and obedience. Our action, though, must always be in obedience. The old saying of "Let's do something, even if it's the wrong thing" cannot be the rallying cry of the Christian. Like the angels of old, let us do when commanded and do not when commanded as well.

Scripture passage for the day: Luke 2:14 (KJV)

Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace,
Good will toward men.

Hymn for the day: Angels We Have Heard on High#184

Additional reading: Originally published as *Cosmic Christmas*, though now republished as *An Angel's Story,* Max Lucado wrote a fascinating story looking at Christmas from a different perspective. No, it's not Scripture. However, while it strains the imagination it does not put more strain on the text than can be borne. Reading it is worth your time. If you can find a copy.

Prayer: Lord, what can I say? There are realities and beings that I do not fully understand. What I do know is this: Jesus is the One who died for me, the One who rose again. I will follow Him and trust Him to command the angels as He sees fit. I also commit myself to act and wait as You direct. Let all my action glorify Christ, in whose name I pray, Amen.

Week Four Day Five: Magi and Shepherds

"So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger." Luke 2:16 (NASB95)

"When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." Matthew 2:10 (NASB95)

Two groups of men. Two similar reactions. Two very different backgrounds.

One group spends their nights with their eyes on the ground, watching sheep and guarding against thieves and predators. The other group spends their nights with their eyes on the skies, watching stars and guarding ancient wisdom against the ravages of time. One group is surrounded by smelly sheep and the general disdain of respectable people. The other group is the epitome of respectable people in their land. Shepherds and Magi are two groups of people whose paths would rarely, if ever cross. This is certainly true of the shepherds and Magi in the Christmas story: the shepherds are in Israel. The Magi come from "the east," which is likely Persia or beyond.

Yet both find their way to Bethlehem. The story shows the shepherds come and find Jesus in the manger and the Magi find Him in a house.[21] There likely was a time delay between the birth of Christ and the arrival of the Magi (or Wise Men, but I like Magi). How much is one of the great debates of Christendom, but I will not try to solve that one here.[22]

[21] I know, at Epiphany. Thank you my liturgical brethren.

[22] The Great Debates of Christendom are the issues in the Bible that only get argued about by Christians that live in relative ease and safety. There's bound to be a book in that somewhere.

The shepherds come charging in from the fields, while the Magi come ponderously from the East. The Magi stop in Jerusalem to see if anyone knows about this "King of the Jews" while the shepherds stop people on their way out of town to tell what they saw. The Magi leave quietly, the shepherds leave loudly, but neither is ever heard from again.

Seriously, neither group shows up in the story of the life of Christ. The Magi go back to their own country, the shepherds return to their sheep. What becomes of them? That's a question I would love to answer, but I cannot. Let us consider these men. Let us see the lesson in their disappearance.

We know that neither group just went out and dropped dead. The text records the Magi returned, they survived the return trip. The shepherds also went back and glorified God, so they made it back to the field. Where they went next is the question I want to answer, but I cannot.

These groups point us to the danger at Christmas. The danger for Christians is not government censorship or consumerism. Our hearts, if given to Christ, cannot be censored by the courts and will not tolerate the idolatry of consumerism. Our danger is more subtle. It is the danger to make much of Christmas and little of Christ.

It is the danger to make the celebration of a single event greater than the life of worship and service, commitment and love, intimacy and submission, that the event should have sparked. Where is your heart this Christmas? There is no harm in celebrating the day, keeping Christmas well in your heart upon that day.

Yet there is great harm in keeping a day when we are meant to keep a life. Let the shepherds and Magi teach us this: December 26th should be different because of December 25th.[23] If it is not, we have missed the point.

Scripture passage for the day: Luke 2:20 (NASB95)

The shepherds went back,
glorifying and praising God
for all that they had heard and seen
just as had been told them.

Hymn for the day: We Three Kings of Orient Are #215

Prayer: Ever-faithful God, I disappear sometimes. I am not always good with follow-through and follow-up. I ask for You to help me here, that I would persist where I am. That I would have the strength and courage to not vanish after one day but to celebrate You with my life in all my days. Jesus did so much more than come at Christmas, and in His name I ask for help, Amen.

[23] Another Great Debate of Christendom: Is that date right? Irrelevant: take the point instead. Is today different because of whenever you have considered the birth of Jesus?

Week Four Day Six: The Lord Jesus Christ

"Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created." Revelation 4:11 (NASB95)

Christmas in 21st Century America is about many things. The retail world counts on Christmas to balance the books. The movie world waits to release award-worthy films around Christmas. The schools count on those two weeks to restore the sanity of the teachers. Many families count on Christmas to be the time they get together.

Christmas 1914 was the scene of something even greater. In the opening year of World War One, the young soldiers at the front lines of Germany, France, and England were not yet so bitter that they forgot about Christmas. Ignoring orders from superior officers, small groups of men joined together where tens of thousands had been killed, and where hundreds of thousands more will be killed, and exchanged gifts.

Why?

Christmas is about more than all the things we can list. Christmas is about even more than just peace among men. Christmas is about Jesus. It is about His coming. Christmas is a reminder that we were enemies of God and that He took the steps to bring us peace.

It starts in the ages of eternity past, when God considered Creation. The measurable time begins with that Creation, and we see the handiwork of God. We see the Divine Logic behind Creation, and then something even more amazing happens.

The Divine Logic, the Word of God, becomes flesh and dwells among humanity. Rather than having to guess at who God is or what God is like, He can be seen. He can be talked to, questioned. His answers can be examined and compared to the long-held beliefs of many.

He lives a life that perfectly fulfills the prophecies of the Messiah. This includes items He could accomplish intentionally and ones that He could only cause if He truly is God. After all, no one picks the city of their birth some seven hundred years before it happens, do they? He meets the death that He said He would.

Then He rises from the dead. Unlike the miracles He has performed, no one has to call Him forth from the grave or tell Him to get up. He just does. The stone rolls away and the people can see the tomb is empty.

A little later, He returns to Heaven to take His seat at the right hand of God. He does not go to Heaven through death like humanity will, but ascends directly there. He ruled the universe from the beginning, and rules it now from His throne.

He is Jesus of Nazareth, called the Christ, King of King and Lord of Lords. He is the Alpha and Omega, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. He is worthy of worship, worthy to receive glory and honor, worthy to receive power, and capable of using it.

And He came because His love and His mercy motivated Him. To a people who had rejected Him into a world that continues to reject Him, He brought love and the payment of the penalty for sin. He is alive forevermore and will come again.

Christmas is one of 365¼ days that are His. May we celebrate Him, starting now and on into eternity.

Scripture passage for the day: Revelation 5:11-13 (NIV)

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels,
numbering thousands upon thousands,
and ten thousand times ten thousand.
They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.
In a loud voice they were saying:
"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom
and strength and honor and glory and praise!"
Then I heard every creature in heaven
and on earth and under the earth and on the sea,
and all that is in them, saying:
"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!"

Hymn for the day: I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day #187

Prayer: Jesus, You are everything. You brought peace between God and man, and You alone can bring peace on earth. There is little more to say than to express gratitude that You accept me not for what I have done but because You paid for my sins. My life is Yours, both this Christmas Day and every day afterwards. Let all I do be for Jesus' name and His sake, Amen.

Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to walk to the manger with me this year. I hope that you have found this little effort helpful in celebrating Advent. Now it's time to roll from Christmas to Epiphany! In case you have ever wondered, those are the twelve days of Christmas: the days from December 25 to January 6. Here are readings to use in those days:

December 25th: Luke 2:1-20
December 26th: Mathew 1:18-25
December 27th: John 1:1-18
December 28th: Luke 2:21-40
December 29th: Revelation 12:1-7
December 30th: Isaiah 7:14, 9:6-7; Micah 5:2
December 31st: Colossians 1:15-20

January 1st: Luke 1:5-25
January 2nd: Luke 1:26-56
January 3rd: Luke 1:57-80
January 4th: Genesis 3
January 5th: John 20:1-9
January 6th: Matthew 2:1-15