



Believe: A Nativity Devotion

This Christmas season, I invite you to take a journey through the Nativity narrative. This devotional takes an intimate look at several characters from the Nativity story and examines how their faith led them to make decisions. It amazes me what faith was shown in the lives of those who are chronicled in the Nativity story as they faced cultural pressures, life-threatening situations and many less-than-desirable circumstances. This devotional will look at the history surrounding each character and make correlations between the whole of Scripture to the events that occurred on that fateful night in Bethlehem.

This devotional is broken up into four weeks with three to four devotions each week. With the busyness of the Christmas season, I wanted to provide a devotional that would help prepare your heart for the celebration of the birth of our Savior and help you make decisions on how the good news of Jesus Christ will encourage and strengthen your faith in the coming year. Jesus did not come and live the life that was called of Him just so that we would have a wonderful holiday to celebrate at the close of the year. Jesus died to transform our very lives.

My prayer is that this devotional will be a blessing to you and draw you into the Nativity story with renewed joy and insight. Each devotion is followed by some reflection questions to encourage even more interaction with the nativity narrative.

- Paul Allen

Week 1:1 • Believe

Believe and You Will Be Saved

Reading: Acts 16:25-34

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."

Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

Belief is a foundational term in our Christian life, but how we define belief directly determines how what we believe will shape and impact our everyday lives. Webster's Dictionary defines belief as the acceptance of something to be true. This definition of belief is easily employed in our Christian worship. We believe that Jesus died for our sins. This is a true statement. We even believe that through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross that the penalty for our sins has been paid in full. These statements are not designed to be treated as true or false statements. When our belief is limited to true or false understanding, we miss the true intent of these biblical life-changers. The secondary definition for belief in Webster's Dictionary is trust, faith or confidence in something. This is the posture that Paul handles the truth of these statements in Scripture. Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. When Paul said this to the jailer, Paul was calling the man to trust in the Lord Jesus. That night, the jailer's newly found trust in the Lord moved him to respond differently toward not only Paul and Silas but also toward his own family. When we believe in Jesus, we are placing our faith and our trust in His ways and plan. We align ourselves with what He says is important and of greatest priority. This Christmas season, we invite you to explore the response of trust and faith displayed by the familiar characters of the nativity. As they believed in the promise of God and the coming Messiah, they responded with trust and obedience to the commands and the priorities of God. Our prayer is that the testimony of their faith will excite within us greater trust and faith in our Lord and His ways today. Let us journey together toward Bethlehem.

Reflection

What has been your internal definition of the word belief in regards to your relationship with Christ?

How does your belief in Christ lead you to respond differently toward your family? Toward your circumstances? Toward others?

Week 1:2 • Zechariah

How Can This Be

Reading: Luke 1:5-18

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

As we begin our journey to the nativity, we begin by looking at Zechariah, the soon to be uncle of Jesus and father of John the Baptist. Zechariah was a priest from the division of Abijah. The responsibilities of a priest in Israel were very demanding. In order to fulfill all of the responsibilities, the priest would have to spend all day and night in the temple. As a result, the Israelites developed a roster, or rotation, of priestly divisions to serve in the temple. In the first century, there were twenty-four divisions and the division of Abijah, under which Zechariah served, was the eighth. Each division would serve twice a year for a week each time.

It was a great blessing to serve as a priest. As a priest, you were responsible for helping the nation worship the Lord. You served the Lord and His people in the preparation of sacrifices for the atonement of sin as well as fellowship offerings to help God's people draw closer to Him. Zechariah was a doubly blessed priest for not only did he get to serve the Lord as a priest, but Zechariah was married to Elizabeth, the daughter of a priest. To marry a daughter of a priest was seen as a special blessing, and Luke records how special this blessing was upon both Zechariah and Elizabeth as he uses the words, righteous and blameless to describe them in Luke 1:6. They were not sinless, but their hearts served the Lord so faithfully that they were seen by the Lord and others as righteous and blameless.

This description though seems to speak in contradiction to their childless condition. To give birth to a child was seen as a fulfillment of the God given mandate to be fruitful and to multiply. It was believed that those who could not bear a child were subjects of God's judgment for their sin. Why would the Lord deny the gift of a child to a couple so pious and faithful? Here, we are faced with the first question regarding the depth of our belief and faith in the things of God in the nativity narrative. Do we believe and serve God faithfully when He gives us what we desire or when it appears that our service might earn us His favor? One of the key distinctions between the Israelites and the seven other nations that dwelt in the Promised Land in the book of Joshua centered on their approach to worship. The other nations worshipped their gods in an attempt to garner their favor to meet the needs and desires of the people. Israel, on the other hand, was called to worship the Lord out of a response for what He had already done. God moved first and the people responded in worship. As we move through the Scriptures, God reveals to us more fully this understanding of how He has moved first.

Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. Isaiah 65:24

God has already accomplished what He has promised even if we have not seen it yet. This is the truth found in the miracle of Jesus and the royal official in John 4:43-54. The official took Jesus at His word and found out that his son was healed just as Jesus had said even before the official's eyes had bore witness.

With Zechariah and Elizabeth, their childlessness did not sway the depth of their worship for they believed and trusted the words of the Lord that He had a plan for their lives that would result in their good. They worshipped and served the Lord with all of their heart because they knew that He had not abandoned them. In fact, when the angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah in the temple and told him that Elizabeth would bear a child, Zechariah was in disbelief. His service was not in an attempt to earn God's favor but a response to God's faithfulness to provide everything that He had already provided. Zechariah stands in disbelief of the Lord's favor even questioning how it could be possible because they were so advanced in years.

Reflection

How is your belief in God impacted when things do not go as you had planned?

How have you approached worship as a response to what God has already done even when you have not yet seen it?

Week 1:3 • Zechariah

The Testimony of Silence

Reading: Luke 1:18-25

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

As we saw yesterday, Zechariah's belief in the Lord impacted his everyday life. His worship and service to the Lord was rooted in his faith that the Lord had accomplished what He promised. This faith and belief was challenged as the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and tells him that he and Elizabeth were to be given the gift of a son.

Zechariah's response is not one of faith. He questions how this gift of a child could even be possible because he and his wife are advanced in years. When we hear about things occurring that are outside of the nature order, it is a reasonable response to question the validity of what has been said.

Zechariah was a priest who would have been well versed in the Scriptures. He had memorized the story of Abraham and Sarah when the Lord promised to them a child when they were well beyond childbearing age. Not only were Abraham and Sarah advanced in years when God made His promise with them, it would be almost twenty-five years later before the promise of God was fulfilled. While the natural order could not make sense of the possibility of Zechariah and Elizabeth bearing a child, God is not limited to the natural order. What a powerful reminder of the ultimate reality of the universe. A child is not a happenstance that occurs because two people engage in the process of child-making, but children are a gift from the Lord bestowed upon the parent by the grace and intention of the Almighty.

As Zechariah questions the possibility of Elizabeth carrying a child in her advanced years, the angel Gabriel strikes Zechariah with the inability to speak as a result of his lack of faith. He would not speak again until the child promised was born. It appears at first glance that the Lord was punishing Zechariah because of his lack of faith, but does that fit with what the narrative has spoken previously concerning Zechariah? Zechariah was described as righteous and blameless because of his belief and faith in the Lord. Why would God punish Zechariah for stumbling to believe immediately in something so unbelievable? The narrative continues with Zechariah leaving the temple and the people were awaiting his return. As he came out, he could not speak to them.

He gestured and signed what had happened and the people knew that he had seen a vision in the temple. Zechariah's lack of speech moved the people to believe that he had seen a vision from the Lord.

Our belief is a gift given to us by the Lord to transform our lives and to be a testimony to others of who God is. As our lives are transformed by our faith and trust in God's promises, joy can be found in the midst of turmoil and hope can be secure in the midst of despair. These truths overflow from our heart to the hearts of others as they experience our joy and hope even in desperate times. Zechariah's muteness was not a punishment. It was a sign to the world that God had drawn near. It was a billboard to everyone who knew Zechariah to be on the lookout because God was doing something. Just imagine what it is going to be like when the child of promise to Zechariah and Elizabeth is born and Zechariah speaks once again. When our faith is met by sight, our testimony is all the more transforming as we can tangibly hold the promise of God and experience His faithfulness through all of our senses.

Reflection

What does Zechariah's silence teach us about how God uses uncomfortable or undesirable things in our lives?

Describe a time where your faith was met with sight. How did that moment impact your faith in God and your desire to share your faith with others?

Week 1:4 • Elizabeth

The Lord Has Done This

Reading: Luke 1:5-7, 23-25

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

Elizabeth, like her husband Zechariah, is spoken about very highly in the Scriptures. Elizabeth was a descendent from the line of Aaron, the first priest that served the nation of Israel in the worship of the Lord. "Both of them," speaking of Zechariah and Elizabeth as a couple and as individuals, were righteous in the sight of God. This speaks to the character of Elizabeth and the depth by which her belief and faith

impacted her everyday life. Elizabeth was righteous in accordance with God's standard. This stands in contrast to the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law who are described as righteous in comparison to other people (Luke 18:11-12).

Furthermore, Elizabeth is described as observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. This brings to mind Psalm 119:1 where the psalmist writes, "Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord."

Elizabeth's trust in the Lord and belief in His commands led her to respond to God by being obedient to His commands and decrees. This is what it looks like to truly believe as we discussed in the first devotion. Elizabeth's belief in God led her to not only state in her heart that God's commands and decrees were true, but her belief moved her to obey and follow God's commands and decrees blamelessly. Elizabeth's life serves as a testimony of faith as she responded to the Lord with worship and obedience to His commands and His plan for her life.

Even though Elizabeth was advanced in years and had not received the blessing of the gift of a child, Elizabeth saw herself as blessed. She did not give herself over to the culture's belief that her barrenness was a sign of God's cursing or punishment.

Elizabeth lived out her belief seeing the many ways that the Lord had provided and been faithful to His promises in her life. Her view of God was not swayed by her limited perspective of His blessings in one specific area of her life, childbearing. God had provided everything that Elizabeth had needed throughout her life and she trusted that He would continue to all the rest of her days. Now, Elizabeth was going to be blessed with one of the deep desires of her heart. Have you ever received something that you had already made peace with not having?

The Scriptures tell us that after Zechariah's service at the temple had come to a completion, he returned home. Likely through the power of "superior charade skills", Zechariah shared with his wife what the angel Gabriel had revealed to him. For the next five months, Elizabeth remains in seclusion as this new life grew within her. There is no known tradition or cultural reason that necessitates such a long seclusion. Possibly, Elizabeth was keeping away from the public opinion that may have turned over time to call her and Zechariah doubly cursed by God for both her barrenness and now for Zechariah's muteness. Luke gives us a little glimpse into Elizabeth's thoughts as she sat alone with the Lord. "The Lord has done this for me. In these days He has shown His favor and taken away my disgrace among the people." Elizabeth had felt the weight of the opinion of those around her. She had felt the disgrace that had befallen her by the lips of her community. Take note though, her disgrace was not removed because her community was wrong about her being barren, but her disgrace was removed by the provision of the Lord. God was the reason for her worship just as He had been before she was with child. God's favor was always upon Elizabeth and this moment was just further confirmation.

Reflection

Why is it so easy to believe the opinions of others over the truth of the Lord especially when it comes to matters of our identity?

*Have you ever received something that you had already made peace with not having?
How did it impact your relationship with God?*

Week 2:1 • Mary

The Lord Has Done It Again

Reading: Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Our next character who showed their belief in the Lord in the nativity narrative is Mary, the soon to be mother of Jesus. Mary was related to Elizabeth, likely as a cousin. Mary is a young woman living in the Nazareth, a city in lower Galilee. She is a virgin who has been pledged to be married to a man named Joseph. Marriage in the first century Jewish culture consisted of two distinct stages. The first stage was engagement which involved a formal agreement initiated by a father seeking a wife for his son. The father of the son would make the agreement with the father of the bride and a dowry, or monetary gift given to the family of the bride to cover the loss of help that the daughter would have provided to the family if she were to stay in the family home, would be agreed upon. The agreement would be sealed with a written agreement or oath by the son and the couple would be engaged. While the engagement was initiated by the father of the son and the agreement would be officially made between the fathers of both families, the opinion and feelings of both the son and the daughter would be sought after and considered before the engagement was finalized. The engagement would end when the marriage was finalized at the marriage ceremony and festivities. It would be at this time that the couple would move together into the household and family of the husband.

Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph when the angel Gabriel came to Mary with news that she would bear a child while she was yet still a virgin. This is a dramatic shift for Mary's life. She is in the beginning stages of adulthood as she is about to start a

new phase of life in marrying Joseph and leaving the house of her father to unite with Joseph and his household. Now, Mary is being given the gift of a child that does not fit with the plans that have been made and would cause cultural shame and disgrace to befall Mary and Joseph. How do you respond when the plan of God stands in opposition to the plans that have been made already?

So here we have two similar stories occurring to cousins at opposite stages of life and circumstances. Elizabeth was beyond childbearing age and had made amends with the unreceived want of a child and the cultural disgrace that she had received from being barren. Mary is just about to enter into the childbearing phase of her life, but the gift of a child now would result in disgrace from her community and would compromise her relationship with the man she was pledged to marry. For Mary, her very life would be put at risk as the Jewish religious belief of the day stated that to have a child before the completion of the marriage was a violation of God's Law. Some would have even believed that God's Law would command that they stone Mary for violating the Law and having a child before her marriage to Joseph was finalized. God has given each of these women the gift of a child at seemingly inopportune times in their lives, but it is in these two drastically different and difficult circumstances that we see the impact of their belief and faith. Elizabeth and Mary respond to the Lord in the face of the cultural disgrace with the same resolve. "I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled." Their belief trusts in God's plan and in His provision and safety against the disgrace of their community. What faith to resolve that God's plan is greater than their own.

Reflection

How do you respond when the plan of God stands in opposition to the plans that you have made already?

What does the resolve of Mary to welcome the plan of God even though it could uproot her own plans teach you about what it means to believe in God?

Week 2:2 • Mary

Mary's Response

Reading: Luke 1:46-53

And Mary said:

*"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.*

*From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.*

*His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”
Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.*

Luke records the response of Mary to the news from the angel Gabriel that she would bear the child of promise. Mary's response brings to mind the response of Hannah from 1 Samuel 2:1-10 when she received the news from the priest that God had heard her cries and would give her a son. Hannah's son, Samuel, would be the final judge of Israel, the high priest and the one to anoint David as king over Israel. Just as Hannah's song begins by recognizing God's hand at work, Mary praises the Lord for His wonderful plan and for His place as her Savior.

Take note that Mary's opening line of praise to the Lord glorifies God for His mindfulness of His humble servant. The heroes of the Bible whose hearts are in alignment with God continually stand in awe and praise of the simple fact that our God who is so immense, powerful and glorious is mindful of His creation (Psalm 8:4; Job 7:17-18; Psalm 144:3). Throughout Israel's history, God has continually heard their cries, and He has been faithful to rescue them in their times of need. But God has not only been mindful of the nation as a whole. God has been mindful of individuals like Hannah, Rahab, Elizabeth, and now Mary. The mindfulness of God for His people is foundational to our faith and belief in God. His mindfulness of us fuels our hope in Him and His promises in the midst of trials and turmoil. We are not left alone as we hold to the truth that God not only is aware of each of us but that He intimately cares about our comings and goings. Our belief that the Lord is mindful of us and is actively working all things out for our good moves us to praise Him just as Mary does in her response to the gift of a child bestowed upon her.

Mary continues in her response to the news that she would give birth to the Messiah by praising the Lord for what this will mean for the nation. The nation of Israel was under extreme oppression at this time. Rome was the ruling power over the Israel, and while they allowed the Israelite people to govern themselves, the Romans imposed heavy taxes upon the people that left the majority of the population on the brink of poverty. Along with the oppression imposed by the Roman authority, members of the Jewish political and religious leadership had aligned themselves with the Roman Empire and became agents for the collection of these heavy taxes as well as imposing taxes of their own upon the people to line their own pockets. Every institution of hope for the general Jewish populace had been turned against the people for their own selfish gain. Mary and her community have felt the depth of this hopelessness and has prayed for the Lord to hear and answer their cries. In this promise of the birth of the Messiah, Mary knows in her heart that the Lord has answered the cries of His people. This Messiah will bring hope and relief to the people. The Christ was promised to bring forth once again the rule of the Lord. Mary rejoices that the Lord, who has overthrown oppressive regimes that have suffocated the Jewish nation in the past, is working once again on behalf of His people. Once again, the merciful Almighty One is moving on

behalf of Abraham's descendants. Salvation is on the horizon and God will be faithful to His promises.

Mary stays for an extended time with her cousin Elizabeth. Likely they encourage one another as both are facing pregnancies that are surrounded by gossip and cultural disdain. Elizabeth is past child-bearing age and her husband was made mute while serving in the temple preceding her pregnancy. This sounds more like the circumstances of God's judgment than His miraculous blessing. Mary is pregnant before her marriage to Joseph has been made complete and both Mary and Joseph have testified that this child is not as a result of their sexual union. To have a child out of wedlock is a punishable offense by Jewish law.

Reflection

Have you ever been faced with circumstances that you felt were from the Lord but were also full of grief or hardship? How did you respond to them?

Why does hope in God's promises move Mary to praise even though the possibility of the fulfillment of that hope was still so far off?

Week 2:3 • Joseph

Acceptance

Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

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.

Joseph enters into the nativity narrative with little known about him. From the genealogy found at the opening of Matthew's gospel, Joseph is from the tribe of Judah and his lineage can be traced back through the kings of Judah back to King David himself. The line of the kings though holds no weight or merit in their modern society. The standing king of Israel is a man named Herod the Great, a man not of Jewish descent but Jewish faith who was placed upon the throne by the Roman Empire to

govern the Roman occupied province of Judea after overthrowing the previous puppet ruler. Herod the Great's rule was a far cry from the rule of David. Herod used the people and their resources as means to appease Rome and retain his power. As the Roman Empire changes hands multiple times in the three decades that Herod is in power before the birth of Jesus, Herod lobbies the resources of his people and the collecting of absorbent taxes to stay in good graces with each new emperor of Rome. Herod also had grand ideas about colossal building projects that he desired to erect in legacy to his reign. The cost of all of these projects were also imposed upon the general populace of Judea as Herod continued to live out his lavish lifestyle. Herod increased temple taxes and imposed exorbitant taxes on animals and grains for sacrifice on the temple grounds. He even employed the high priest and the other religious leaders in the streamlining of these new revenue sources by encouraging them to condemn sacrifices brought by pilgrims to Jerusalem in conjunction with the four major festivals and the regular sin and fellowship offerings required by the Jewish law so that pilgrims would have to purchase new animals and grain from the temple grounds at the exorbitant rates. The Jewish people were being drained to absolute poverty by those who were supposed to be responsible for their care.

Joseph's royal lineage earned him no special treatment or reprieve from these harsh conditions. Joseph worked as a carpenter in the Galilean town of Nazareth. As a carpenter in the first century BCE, Joseph would have worked with stone and wood to construct furniture, doorway, gates and buildings. A carpenter was a skilled trade that required special tools, but this did not necessarily result in wealth. In fact, when Joseph and Mary head to the temple for her purification rite, forty days after giving birth to a male child, she makes a sacrifice to the Lord of two doves (Luke 2:24) which was the lesser offering made to the Lord in accordance with the Law in Leviticus 12:8. While his profession did not afford Joseph an extravagant lifestyle, Joseph was carving out for himself a respectable life and was looking forward to a future as he was betrothed to be married. It is in this moment that we receive a glimpse into the character of Joseph. Word has come to Joseph that Mary is rumored to be with child. Joseph knows that he has not been intimate with Mary so logically, this pregnancy did not come as a consequence of anything that he bears any responsibility for. According to the Jewish Law, Joseph had the right to charge Mary with an act of adultery, a cardinal sin and violation of the seventh commandment. Even though the marriage between Mary and Joseph was not complete, in the eyes of the culture and the law, entering into the process of marriage and entering the betrothal phase bound each party to one another and the laws surrounding marriage. The violation of adultery came with the penalty of death, but at the very least, the husband had the right to demand a divorce from his wife, no alimony or support to be given to the wife and no responsibility for any children resulting from the act of adultery. Since a broken marriage and a pregnant former wife would have resulted in public ridicule and shame for both the husband and wife, jilted husbands would publicly divorce their wives and publicly pronounce their charges to distance themselves from public disgrace. Joseph, upon hearing the news, resolves to bear any disgrace that might be imposed upon him and keep Mary from such a public disgrace by divorcing her quietly allowing room for the town rumor mill to come to their own conclusions. Matthew notes that Joseph's heart was faithful to the law. At the heart of the law, as Jesus would state in His ministry (Matthew 22:37-39), is

the command to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. While the letter of the law permitted public ridicule, Joseph was faithful to the heart of the law that called him to love his wife as he loved himself.

An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream after he had resolved to divorce Mary quietly. The angel assures Joseph that Mary has not violated the law nor committed an act of adultery. She is bearing the child of God, born not of physical means but conceived through the Holy Spirit. As the angel had shared with Mary, Joseph is told that the child to be born would be a fulfillment of all that the Lord had promised through the prophets. The child would be Immanuel, the promised one of God in the prophecy of Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14). In this prophecy, God would give a child to be born of a virgin, and this child would be the sign that God was with His people. What confirmation and hope would this child bring! As the nation and Joseph struggled to make ends meet, God had not abandoned them. He heard their cries and He has responded just as He promised. The air of change filled Joseph's head. God's messenger had just spoken the words that Joseph had longed to hear, but even more than that, the words that the nation of Israel had longed to hear for generations. God was drawing near to His people.

Joseph takes Mary into his house as his wife as planned. Any disgrace by the community rumor mill thrown their way pales in comparison to the words of the angel resounding in their heads. Today the Lord has drawn near and chosen you to be a part of the fulfillment of His promise to the nation. In the words of Isaiah:

*For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
There will be no end to the increase of His government or of
peace,
On the throne of David and over his kingdom,
To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness
From then on and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this. Isaiah 9:6-7*

Reflection

How did Joseph's faith in the law of God shape how he treated Mary in the midst of her perceived indiscretion?

How does your faith in God shape your character and how you treat one another? How well do you treat others as would yourself as Jesus states is the heart of the law?

Week 2:4 • Joseph

The Birth of Jesus

Reading: Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

As the birth of the promised child nears, Joseph and Mary are faced with a decree by the Roman government that would cause them great hardship. The Roman rule decreed a census should be taken of the empire. Such a census would be used for the collection of taxes as well as registration of all people under Roman rule. This registration would be especially crucial in provinces of the empire that were hostile to Roman rule which both Judea and Syria, the two provinces that comprised the nation of Israel, were considered to be. This census would require each household to return to the place of their ancestry in order that they might be counted. This was done so that as people moved freely around the empire in pursuit of financial gain, a record of them could be consistently kept as their place of being counted would remain the same.

Mary and Joseph had to navigate the difficult ninety mile journey from Nazareth in the province of Syria south to the town of Bethlehem in the province of Judea. This journey would be long and fraught with danger as they would be forced to travel around Samaria and be open to attack by bandits who would be on high alert with the many travelers in the region. This would have been a familiar journey for Mary and Joseph though as the route would share much of the same path as they would have journeyed multiple times a year to the city of Jerusalem to take part in the festivals required by the Jewish calendar. Adding to the concern of this journey would be how far along in her pregnancy Mary was. This journey would also not be a quick one. With the city of Bethlehem being ninety miles from Nazareth, the journey would have likely taken almost a full week to accomplish especially with Mary being in her third trimester.

Pregnancies in the first century were prone to miscarriage even in the third trimester. Travel along the rugged terrain and the exposure to the elements would have put the pregnancy at great risk so a slower pace with frequent stops would have been more likely. This would have meant that the minimal length of the trip to Bethlehem would have been a little over two weeks as the census would have required a day or two in Bethlehem. As the Scriptures state, while Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to Jesus. She wrapped him in cloth and placed him in a manger because they had not received a guest room for their stay in Bethlehem. Giving birth is a tremendous miracle that takes a tremendous toll on a woman's body. Mary would not have been in any condition to travel back to Nazareth for at least a few days after giving birth. Also, every Jewish male would need to undergo circumcision on the eighth day after birth in accordance with the Jewish law. The importance of timing of this sacred ritual in accordance with upholding the law would have been a priority over

traveling the ninety miles back to Nazareth. Now that Jesus has been born and circumcised, there is one more Jewish law that the family must adhere to, the purification rite of Mary. On the fortieth day after childbirth, the husband was to make a sacrifice at the temple on behalf of his wife (Leviticus 12:8). This would take place at the temple in Jerusalem which was only twenty-six miles from Bethlehem and on the route that they would take back to Nazareth. With all the time and labor that was involved in the ninety mile journey between Nazareth and Bethlehem, it would make sense for Mary and Joseph to stay an extended period in Bethlehem as they remained faithful to the demands of the Jewish law.

In our culture that moves quickly from one milestone to the next, the complexity of circumstances that surround the events of Jesus' birth led to the need to be patient and move more slowly. This slower pace could also coincide with the fulfillment of prophecy seen in the arrival of the magi and the protection of the family from the threat of Herod found later in the gospel of Matthew. Once again we see the faith of the characters of the nativity narrative lead their decision making and their actions. The faith of Mary and Joseph was the pivotal factor in how they responded to the extraordinary circumstances of the birth of the Messiah. They lived out the very things that had been prophesied many years before them. What a testimony their actions have left to how our faith should lead our lives.

Reflection

How did Mary and Joseph's faith in God lead in their decision making?

How does your faith in the Lord lead your decision making today?

Week 3:1 • King Herod

The King of the Jews

Reading: Matthew 2:1-8

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

*" 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel. '"*

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

Herod the Great was a figurehead king established to govern over the Herodian kingdom of Judea from 37BCE to 4BCE. He would be best known for his expansion of the second temple of God that had been originally built in 516BCE under the supervision of Zerubbabel. Herod expanded the temple grounds to double their previous size and adorned many rooms and colonnades with precious metals and rare woods. The temple was renamed Herod's temple in his honor and was designed to outshine the previous temple that had been constructed by King Solomon. The temple was constructed to be Herod's legacy, but the temple built by Herod would only stand until 70CE when it was destroyed by the Roman Emperor Titus following the rebellion by the Jews in 66CE. The temple of the Lord has not been rebuilt upon the temple mount since its destruction.

Herod was not Jewish by descent only by religious practice. Herod was an Edomite, descendants of Esau, whose family served the ruling class of the Nabatean Empire in Petra, present day Jordan. Herod was raised with a thirst for power. His family leveraged every relationship that they made in order that they might increase their position, power and prestige. This served Herod well as his father made close relations with Julius Caesar as he took power over the Roman Empire. Caesar installed Herod's father, Antipater, to govern over Jerusalem. This allowed Herod to make relationships with the other Roman emissaries who had authority over the greater area of Judea. After Antipater's death, Herod pleaded with the Roman Senate for control of Judea, and the Senate unexpectedly named Herod king over the province of Judea. This was likely due to Herod's willingness to support all Roman interests in the province no matter the cost.

Herod was a ruthless ruler. He saw the people he governed as nothing more than resources to accomplish his massive building projects and to meet the ever growing demands of Rome for taxes and goods. Herod mercilessly taxed the people of Judea to appease Rome and supply for grand plans and lifestyle. This left a disparaging gap between the aristocracy and the common man. Herod was also ruthless in his family matters, continually pitting his sons against one another in contests and schemes for power and prestige. This home environment of continual plotting and scheming breeds distrust within the family. Herod had three of his sons executed because he thought they were plotting to kill him. The Roman Emperor Augustus is quoted of speaking of Herod, "It is better to be Herod's pig than to his son." Speaking to the fact that as a Jew, Herod would not kill a pig, but he was very willing to have his own sons put to death.

In the nativity narrative, Herod is introduced nearing the end of his reign. He is on constant guard against threats to usurp his power. He is consumed with leaving a lasting legacy and will stop at nothing to ensure that takes place. When wise men from the east, likely the area of Babylon in modern day Iraq, stop at his palace seeking the foretold king of the Jews whose prophetic star had appeared in the night sky some ninety days earlier and had served as the guide for their travels, Herod was caught off-guard and quickly disturbed. How could Herod have not known about this? He swiftly calls his own scholars and wise men to his throne and he begins to question them

about this prophecy and the foretold future king of the Jews. The chief priests and scribes consulted the book of Micah for the prophecy of the Messiah's birthplace. To think that Herod, who had gone to such lengths to keep his power, would have his throne threatened by the birth of a baby in the small town of Bethlehem.

King Herod secretly calls the Magi from the East in order that he might more fully evaluate the threat and build a plan to eliminate it. Unlike the other characters in the nativity narrative, Herod does not have faith in God and does not follow the leadings of the Lord, but he does have great belief and faith in himself. His faith moves him to action, even when those actions take the lives of his own sons. The promise of a child born who prophetically would take the title of King of the Jews challenges Herod's faith in his rule so greatly, he will be willing to do even more horrific things to maintain his control.

Reflection

What things made an impression upon you or stuck out to you about King Herod?

How does Herod's life show the power of faith in oneself over God and the impact that has on the decisions that we make?

Week 3:2 • King Herod

Eliminating the Threat

Reading: Matthew 2:13-18

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

*"A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more."*

It is hard to believe the depths that jealousy, anger and rage will lead a person to respond. Herod's reign in Judea is a chronicling of a man who is driven by his jealousy, anger and rage. In fact, the Roman Empire during this period of time is a story of emperors who are driven by their jealousy, anger and rage and do unspeakable acts to

one another and anyone who threatens their power and authority. You can almost feel the anger that filled Herod's heart and see the rage in his eyes as you read that he realized he had been outwitted by the Magi. He had waited patiently for the Magi to return to his palace and tell him where the child of promise had been born. He was likely planning to dispatch of this threat to the throne quietly without anyone giving it a second thought. Now, Herod would have to devise a plan to eliminate this child on his own. The problem is that apart from the city of his birth, the chief priests and the scribes could give Herod no additional information as to the identity of the future king. One of the amazing aspects of God's plan for the coming of Jesus is that Jesus was given a holy title and would come from a royal line, but that at the moment in time when Jesus would be born, this lineage would have been forgotten and replaced by a ruler who not chosen by the Lord and did not identify with any of the twelve tribe of Israel. The chief priests and the religious rulers of the day missed the signs of the promised king's arrival for they were looking in palaces and amongst the households of prestigious individuals. Just as the glorious King David was not found among those in Saul's court or even the brothers of his own family for he was out in the fields, the Promised King Jesus was not found among the palace gates but was born in a stable tucked in a cave on the outskirts of Bethlehem.

After being outwitted, Herod turned to what he knew best in solving difficult situations that threatened his power, brutal and ruthless destruction. Herod commands the death of all boys in the region of Bethlehem who were two years old and younger to cover his basis in accordance with when the Magi had stated that the star had appeared in the sky. This event mirrors what was done by Pharaoh in the opening chapters of the Exodus as he seeks to limit the threat of an Israelite uprising in Egypt by killing a generation of male children (Exodus 1:16). Herod's death sentence to the male babies in Bethlehem would have been on a much smaller scale as the population of Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth was less than 1000. This is also possibly the reason while this event is absent from many historical documents as the number of babies put to death would have been ten or so. No matter the number, we are given a glimpse into the heart of Herod as he cared only for himself and would kill any and all who threatened his reign. But take note, as our faith is placed in the Lord, He is faithful to guard our faith and watch over us even when others seek to destroy. Joseph believed in the words of the angel when he was told that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. He responded by taking her as his wife and took care of her. Now, as Herod desired to eliminate the infant king, God once again sends word to Joseph through an angel to go to Egypt for a season. Joseph's faith in God moved him to delay his return home to Nazareth even longer and head to Egypt as instructed. Joseph's faith in the Lord moved him to action and obedience even though it was not what he had planned. Joseph recognized in the moment that even though he did not understand, God knew more than he could. God knew the heart of Herod and what actions would be birthed from Herod's jealous heart. He removed Joseph and his family from harm before Herod had made his decree for the death of the children in Bethlehem.

Reflection

How has the Lord watched out for you even in the midst of unforeseen circumstances?

How has this moved your faith in Him into greater obedience and action?

Week 3:3 • The Magi

Following the Star

Reading: Matthew 2:1-8

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

*" 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel. '"*

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

Who were the Magi? The Magi refers to a title given to men of renown who come from the East. In our cultural beliefs today, we often associate the Magi with wisemen due to their ability to discern the stars in the sky and the references that is made to them knowing the prophecies of many cultures. In other famous Christmas carols, the Magi are referred to as kings in response to the fine gifts that they bring with them that are fit for a person of royal means. The gifts that were brought by the Magi, gold, frankincense and myrrh, is also likely the reason why we number the Magi as three in correlation with the three gifts. From the nativity narrative and historical writings regarding the people groups that dwelt to the east of Judea during the time, the Magi were likely men of means from the area near Babylon, modern day Iraq. This is thought because the Magi consult multiple sources to identify the star in the sky and its purpose.

The Babylonian Empire was the empire that took the southern kingdom of Israel, Judah, into captivity in 586BCE. The manner of conquest employed by the Babylonians was to remove the conquered people from their homeland and scatter them throughout the empire. By displacing the people from their homes and scattering them, the Babylonians aimed to limit uprising by removing people from the familiarity of their surroundings and decreasing the relationships that they shared with individuals of a

common mindset and culture. This scattering of people also helped to promote the ideology of Babylonian culture that desired to see the conquered people adopt the Babylonian way of life. In the book of Daniel, we see this systematic brainwashing of the Jewish captives by King Nebuchadnezzar. As the Babylonians conquered a people, they would raid the palaces and confiscate anything of value, especially scrolls and writings. These items would be taken to the capital city.

From the book of Daniel, we read that King Darius the Mede made that no prayers would be lifted up in Babylon except to him as god. Daniel continued to pray to the Lord and was sentenced to be thrown into a lion's den. The Lord saves Daniel from being eaten by the lions, and upon witnessing this, King Darius decrees that the entire kingdom of Babylon should fear and revere the God of Daniel (Daniel 6:26-27). When the Babylonians are conquered by the Persians in 539BCE, Cyrus the Great makes an edict to allow the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their homes and temple (Ezra 1:1). Cyrus finds within the storehouses of Babylon items that had been taken from the temple by King Nebuchadnezzar and returns them to the Jewish pilgrims (Ezra 1:7).

All of this to say that the area of Babylon would be a likely backdrop for the Magi from the east to have originated with its rich history as a place where the sacred writings of multiple cultures were collected in one place by the Babylonian kings. The Magi were well versed in astronomy and noted the placement of stars in the sky. They also were well read in the prophecies of other cultures as they were concerned with the prophecy of the King of the Jews. The Magi's belief in what they had read and the importance of the prophesied King of the Jews moved them to undertake this lengthy journey to pay homage to the newborn king. The journey from the Babylonian capital to Jerusalem is around 900 miles.

As the Magi arrive at the palace of Herod the Great in Jerusalem, their attitude as recorded in Matthew's gospel is one of expectancy. They assume that they were not the only ones who had noticed the star and knew of its meaning. Their assumption is that the Jewish leaders would have seen the star and knew of its significance. They, like the Jewish culture of the day, may have expected to find the future king in the palace or other place of regal standing. Much to their surprise, Herod, the chief priests and scribes have no idea about the star or the future king that was to be born under it. They are bewildered and can offer no assistance. In fact, after conferring with the chief priests and scribes, Herod returns to the Magi and requests that they inform him where the child is when they find the baby so that he might worship the king. The chief priests and the scribes are able to offer a little assistance to the Magi as they are reminded of the prophesy in Micah that the king would be born in Bethlehem.

Reflection

Has your faith in the Lord ever moved you to undertake something that came at a great cost of resources or time?

How did your faith in the Lord help you to persevere and see it through to the end?

Week 3:4 • The Magi

Bring Him Gifts

Reading: Matthew 2:9-12

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The journey from their homeland to find the prophesied King of the Jews finally reaches its destination as the Magi follow the star to its final stopping place. They find the child that had been foretold and lay their gifts before Him. They bow down and worship Him. The deep rooted desire to be a part of this moment in history and pay homage to the promised king had now been fulfilled.

I stand in awe of the journey of the Magi found in Matthew 2. What faith they displayed. This journey would have been a significant undertaking. The journey would have placed them in continual jeopardy as the roads during the first century were fraught with peril from bandits. The gifts that were brought to honor the Jesus would have been desirable to thieves. The journey would have taken a significant amount of time, six months or more in total round trip. While Scripture does not record the exact amount of time that the Magi spend in Jesus' presence and with His family, the scene presents a short stay of a few days or less. When I travel, I have a hard time justifying going anywhere that my stay is less time than the time it takes to travel there and back. Yet here, these Magi and their entourage are willing to undergo a significant journey with all of its peril for the hope that their understanding of the stars and prophesies of ancient cultures was correct, and they would be able to worship and bestow gifts to a king of a nation that was not their own. This kind of faith I marvel at. It is easy to have faith and hope when what you can see and expect great benefit resulting from what you have placed your faith in. To have faith that moves you to action when the benefit does not directly effect you or the benefits are negligible is faith that is rarely seen or known.

I believe that the faith of the Magi and their willingness to act upon that faith makes them key figures in the nativity narrative. The gospel writer, Matthew, likely highlighted the visitation of these far off "kings" as confirmation of the kingship of Jesus as visiting emissaries have come to honor Him.

Today, the Magi are seen in many nativity scene depictions in remembrance of the gifts that they brought to the baby. Take note in the narrative that when the Magi arrive to meet Jesus, he is no longer lying in a manger in a cave used as a stable but rather his family has found a home to shelter them. The nativity story of Mary and Joseph being turned away from the inn and offered a stable as the only available room spoke not of

their entire stay in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph likely spent a minimum of forty days in Bethlehem awaiting the purification sacrifice required by the law to be made at the temple to cleanse women after giving birth. As was the custom in the Jewish culture, hospitality would have been shown to Mary and Joseph during their stay in Bethlehem and a proper room would have been provided to them when one was available.

As the Magi meet them in this home, they bow down and worship the promised king.

What a sight this must have been for Mary and Joseph to have these traveling dignitaries seek them out to worship their son. Joseph and Mary's hearts must have been reassured as this took place. All of the hardship, public shame and ridicule that may have befallen them by the townspeople as they were obedient to the Lord's commands in having Jesus were all vindicated as here the words of the angel were being affirmed in this coronation of royal gifts. As they opened the treasures of gold, frankincense and myrrh, the celebration must have been overwhelming. Such precious gifts were worthy and fitting for a king, not a child born in a manger to a carpenter and his teenage bride. This affirmation that Jesus would be all that the angel had foretold must have strengthened Mary and Joseph's faith as well.

In the closing verse of the story of the Magi, we once again see the depth of the faith of the Magi. They are warned in a dream not to go back to Herod. Throughout the nativity narrative, the Lord has spoken to characters through angels appearing to them in their dreams. The faith of the Magi is seen as they trust in the direction of the angel in their dreams and choose to go against the direction of Herod's request to return to the palace in Jerusalem with details of the place of the child's birth. The decision to go against Herod's request once again shows the faith of the Magi. The threat of Herod's retaliation against them for the slight of not upholding the request of the standing King of the Jews was not enough to overcome their trust in this divine messenger. While the Magi are not said to believe solely in the One True God, they show faith and trust in the revelation that has been revealed to them. They travelled great distance to worship Jesus and make an offering at His feet. I stand in awe as I read throughout the gospels the stories of individuals who are not believers but leave their encounter with the Christ transformed and changed. This is the promise of the Messiah that our faith in Him will lead to our lives being changed.

Reflection

How does the testimony of the Magi's journey and worship of the child Jesus impact your faith?

How has your faith in the Lord changed your life?

Week 4:1 • The Shepherds

A Heavenly Host Appears

Reading: Luke 2:8-15

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

Shepherds were a vital part of the life of people in the nation of Israel. Throughout the history of the land of Canaan, also known as the Promised Land and the province of Judea, shepherding has been a pivotal part of the economy. At the end of the book of Genesis, when Joseph moves his family into the land of Egypt, they are given the land of Goshen for they were shepherds in need of land to graze their flocks (Genesis 47:1-5). The people of Israel have been synonymous with shepherds all throughout their history as well because sheep have been an important part of their worship and relationship with God. The most significant feast of the year celebrated by the Jewish people is the Passover. This feast is in remembrance of the deliverance of the first born of each Israelite's home from the plague of the angel of death before the people of Israel were set free from slavery in Egypt. At the center of the Passover feast is a lamb whose blood was spilt upon the doorposts of the home to signify to the angel of the death that a lamb has given its life for the life of the first born male of the home. At the yearly Passover feast, a lamb is sacrificed at the temple by each Israelite family to be consumed in remembrance of the grace of the Lord. Sheep are also one of the animals that are accepted by Jewish law as a sacrifice made to the Lord for the atonement of sins and for fellowship with God.

With the flocks of sheep so pivotal to the Jewish culture, economy and religion, shepherds were necessary to care for and protect the flock. Throughout the history of Israel, there is no shepherd more famous than the shepherd who became king, David. David was from the town of Bethlehem and looked after his father Jesse's sheep in the hillside surrounding the town. Shepherding was not an easy or safe profession. When David spoke about his experiences shepherding to King Saul by telling the king that he had "killed both the lion and the bear" (1 Samuel 17). Sheep were the livelihood of many Jewish families and their safety and care was pivotal to sustaining life.

During Jesus' ministry, He is called the Good Shepherd on more than one occasion. In His teachings, Jesus describes two kinds of shepherds who were tasked with watching out for the flock, the hired hand and the shepherd to whom the flock belonged (John 10:11-18). Jesus states that the hired hand who has been tasked with watching over the sheep but sees the sheep as only a means to a paycheck runs when danger appears. As the wolf comes to devour the sheep, the hired hand sees no benefit in

risking his life and runs leaving all the sheep in peril. In contrast, Jesus states that He is the Good Shepherd. When the wolf comes to steal the sheep, the Good Shepherd assumes all of the risk and is even willing to lay down His life for the sheep.

I think it is fitting in light of Jesus' future title as the Good Shepherd that it is shepherds out in the fields who are the first to receive the news of the birth of the Messiah. Could you imagine being out in the quiet hillside of Bethlehem in the stillness of the night when suddenly in the sky there appears a bright light and an angel is seen at the center of the light. The light is so bright, it seems as though the sun has risen in the sky again. As you tremble in fear, the angel cries out for you to not be afraid as if that were even possible, but suddenly, fear is not overwhelming you but hope instead. For what the angel shares is something that you have heard spoken about in the synagogues all your life and what you and your family have sung about since you were a boy. The Messiah has come and is now here. Just as you are taking in the immensity of what is taking place, the angel is surrounded by many more angels, a complete choir of them. The heavenly host begins to sing with angelic voices that fill the night air and your ears with splendor like you have never heard. They sing a chorus that from this day forward will never leave your ears. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Just as quickly as the light enveloped you, it and the company of angels vanishes. It takes a few moments for your eyes to adjust back to the darkness. As you look around, you begin to wonder if it was all a dream or a figment of your imagination, that is until you see the other shepherds with their mouths wide open in awe for they had seen the same sight. How would you respond?

The shepherds were met by angels that brought sight to the things that they had only been able to hope for. The words of the Scriptures and the songs that they sang had just come to life in front of them. They saw what Jacob saw when he laid his head down on that rock at Bethel (Genesis 28:10-17) and what Isaiah had witnessed (Isaiah 6). There was only one appropriate response to make when your faith has become sight. The shepherds packed up and headed to Bethlehem to obey what the Lord had said. They packed up and headed off to find the Messiah and give Him praise.

Reflection

Why do you think that the shepherds were the first to be given the news of the birth of the Messiah?

How would you respond to the sight of the angels? How have you responded in the past to God answering your prayers?

Week 4:2 • The Shepherds

Come Let Us Worship

Reading: Luke 2:16-20

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 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. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

As the shepherds hurried off to Bethlehem to see what the angel of the Lord had foretold to them about the birth of the Messiah, they find Mary, Joseph and the promised child in a stable. The shepherds truly were the first to witness the birth of the Messiah. By the time that the Magi arrive to worship and bestow gifts upon Jesus, the family has moved into a home for the remainder of their stay in Bethlehem. Here, the shepherds lay eyes upon Jesus while he is still lying in a manger. What a lowly picture for the birth of the One who would be the King of the Jews. He is swaddled in a common linen cloth surrounded by straw and hay in a feeding trough. The cave is filled with the smell of animals and made crudely into a stable to shelter the animals from the harshness of the weather. The future king's first visitors are shepherds who have come straight from the fields. They have likely not bathed and their cloaks are stained and dusty from the work of their trade. The shepherds come without fine gifts to honor the king, likely nothing more than their mere presence. Hardly seems like a fitting scene for the arrival of the promised king and yet, it is perfectly fitting for who Jesus is.

Jesus came not to rule from a palace for His kingdom is not of earth. Jesus came not to have gifts bestowed upon Him but to bestow the gift of life and the gift to be called children of God upon each one of us. Jesus came to usher the lost, down trodden, sick, poor, heavy laden, hungry, desperate and seeking into the kingdom of God. Jesus came to meet people in places of life just like this stable, make shift and barely able to serve its purpose, and give them hope and a future. What better place could the Son of Man make His entrance into the world than among the very circumstances that He came to address and rescue. There is no better audience with whom to share this first meet and greet with than the shepherds.

All that it took for the shepherds to believe and know that what the angel had said was true and that the promise of God in the coming of the Messiah had occurred was to lay eyes on Jesus. Just the sight of Him made their hearts believe. Just being in the presence of this child moved their hearts to even greater faith. Their faith could not be contained. They were not content to just lay eyes on Jesus and then return to their flocks. The nativity story continues with the shepherds immediately spreading the word of what they had seen and what they had been told. They stood in the market square and gave testimony. They ran down to the well as the people gathered to draw their morning water and to water their animals in order that they might share what they had seen and been told. I have a feeling that by the end of the day, the entire population of Bethlehem heard about what had occurred that night in the fields outside the town and who had been born in the stable and was now lying in a manger.

Testifying of what they had seen did not quench the fire that burned in the hearts of the shepherds. The gospel records that they returned to the stable after sharing the good

news and they glorified God and praised Him for the gift of the Messiah. They likely continued praising Him all the way back to their flocks. Their faith had been made sight and they were forever changed. The Messiah has come and He was born in Bethlehem. The shepherds are not the only ones left changed though. The nativity narrative gives a swift glimpse into Mary's heart. "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." The visit of the shepherds may have caught Mary off guard. I can only imagine that when she was told by the angel that she was to give birth to the Messiah, she was not thinking that it would take place as it had. She had journeyed for days feeling everything that being ten months pregnant allows you to feel. When her and Joseph finally arrive in Bethlehem, there is no room for them in the whole town. All of the spare rooms within people's homes have been taken. The only shelter available is a cave that has been made into a makeshift stable. It is here that she gave birth to the promised king. She is not home where she may have had a proper place to lay her baby down and proper cloths in which to swaddle him. She is left to just make do with what surrounds her. Now, her first visitors are not friends or family but a group of unknown men who are unkept and likely a bit rough around the edges. And yet, the Scripture says that she treasured these things and stored them up in her heart. The visit of the shepherds was pondered again and again by Mary as she gazed upon her child. How precious and fitting that God would lead them to her door. This is the promise of the nativity. God has drawn near to us. Emmanuel, God with us, has been born and with Him, the Kingdom of God has been brought near.

Reflection

How do you think that Mary treasuring what had happened and pondering it often impacted her faith and life?

Why did the shepherds return to glorify and praise God after telling others about Jesus?

Week 4:3 • Us

How Shall We Respond

Reading: 1 Timothy 4:10-16

That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe.

Command and teach these things. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

I pray that this intimate look at the characters of the nativity story has stirred your faith in the Lord. As I look at each character, I can not help but see how their faith was not limited to just believing the right thing, but it was moved to action. In each character's life, their faith helped them overcome hardships, cultural pressures and even perceived threats of harm. Their faith pointed them back to the Lord and moved them to respond bodily to their belief in God. My prayer is that as you looked at the lives of Zechariah, Elizabeth, the Magi, King Herod, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds that you saw their faith and the impact that it had on the decisions that they made.

When Paul the apostle wrote his first letter to Timothy, he was writing to a young man that he had grown to love as they travelled on missionary journeys together. Timothy was now charged with leading the church in Ephesus and Paul desired to encourage him as he undertook this new role. Paul's words speak to the heart of every believer whose faith is in the Lord. Paul opens by reminding all believers that the reason why we labor and strive is because we believe that the person of God and the things that He promises are true. Do you believe that God is real and that what He says is true? If so, Paul states that your belief should move you to labor and strive that others might believe these things as well.

Just as the nativity narrative was written down to encourage and build up our faith, Paul writes that our lives are to be lived out to encourage and build up our faith and the faith of others. Have you ever thought about how the way you live your life encourages and builds up your own faith? Our lives are meant to be a testimony to who God is and to His faithfulness in our lives. When our priorities are on things other than God or when our focus is on the goings on of the world rather than God, we will find ourselves missing the movement of the Lord in our lives. This is the reason why in the seasons of the life where our eyes are fixed on the Lord, like a retreat, mission trip or the desperate times of life, we see God's hand at work everywhere, even in the mundane things of life. When we are seeking Him, we find Him for His hand is always at work. When our lives are being lived out in faith and our posture takes on what we read about Mary, treasuring the things of God and powering them often, we see that how we live our life strengthens our own faith. In the same vain, our lives lived out in faith strengthens the faith of others as they see God's hand at work and we give testimony of God's hand at work because we have seen Him move and that has moved us to share.

We will always have reasons why we do not feel like we can live or share about our lives in ways like Paul the apostle did, Paul tells us as he did Timothy, do not let those reasons stop you. Timothy was young and was concerned that his age and lack of experiences would limit the impact of his testimony because faith is refined in the fires of the real life trials and tribulations. While this is true to an extent, our faith finds its fullness in God. When our faith is rooted in the Lord, it has everything that it needs to lead us and to change lives.

In response to the gift of faith that Christ has given to us as He left heaven and came to earth, was laid in a manger, lived as we do, gave up His life for us, was crucified, died and buried, then rose again, how will you live moving forward? How will your faith be moved to action? How will you walk in obedience to God as the nativity characters

did? Make some tangible goals as followers of God on how this next year you will live more by faith. Write them down in the space provided and ponder these things often. I look forward to us encouraging one another through the testimony of our lives as we live by faith more fervently in the new year.

My Plan to Live By Faith in 2025

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.