



# GODWITHS

CELEBRATE IMMANUEL





**MORNINGSIDE**  
BAPTIST CHURCH

Dear Church Family:

Christmas is such a special time. As families gather around and celebrate, many do so with traditions from years past. Maybe yours is gathering with your family on Christmas Eve, or singing carols around a piano, or maybe it's baking cookies with your grandchildren; just like your grandparents did with you. Advent Devotionals are one of those traditions for me.

While our goal this year was to produce our own, it was simply not a task that we were able to accomplish. Our goal for 2023 is still the same; an Advent Devotional for Morningside, written by the saints of Morningside. I hope you will join in helping us complete that task. While we might not hold in our hands this year a Devotional Book written by our members; we hold a book written by folks who love us so.

This book is a collection of Advent Devotionals written by my father, Tom Austin. As many of you know, he's an Associate Pastor in Florida and a gifted writer. My prayer, and his, is that this book would be a blessing to you as you read the words, meditate on the scripture, and allow Christ to move in your heart.

Much love,

Pastor Andrew and Courtney; Kayleigh and Aubree Kate

## DECEMBER 1

JESUS: THE STAR OF JACOB

Background Passage: Numbers 24

Focal Passage: Numbers 24:15-19

Stars, we are fascinated by them, those created by both man and God. Be it actors, athletes, musicians, or social media stars, many people can't get enough of them. They hang on their every word as if it were gospel, know every movie, song, award, or stat by heart, have pictures of them and buy products and take positions on social and political issues because it aligns with their favorite star. Some even try to dress and talk like them. For many, they basically "worship" the stars.

As for the God-man type, everyone loves a star lite night. We are amazed at their beauty, size and numbers. We sing songs about them (Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star) and we wish upon them. They vanquish the darkness and light the way.

In scripture, the star is the symbol of an exceptional king. Recall in the story of Joseph, with his dream of the sun, moon and the eleven stars who all bowed down to him. We know he later would be an exceptional leader in Egypt and they would indeed be subject to him. In the Christmas account, it is an extremely bright star which caught the wise men's eyes and led them to the child Jesus, because they understood its significance.

We know that Jesus is certainly the most exceptional king there ever was or will be. He is the King of Kings. Ultimately, all other kings will bow down and be subject to Him. He is exceptional in His mercy, grace, forgiveness, love and so much more.

Scripture also refers to the nation of Israel as "Jacob" (see Jeremiah 30 for "Jacob's trouble, speaking of the nation of Israel in the time of the tribulation). We know that Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, one of Jacob's twelve sons. So, Jesus is Star of Jacob both in literal and figurative terms. Putting this together, we see that Jesus will be an exceptional king who will sit on His father David's throne.

Unfortunately for both types of stars, they slowly lose their brightness, eventually burning out, ultimately never to be remembered. But not so with the Star of Jacob. He is the exceptional king who will sit on His father David's throne and of whose kingdom there shall be no end (Is. 9:7, Luke 1:33) and to whom every knee shall bow. (Philippians 2:9-10)

Thank God that you serve a risen, glorious King whose brightness surpasses the brightest heavenly star of whose kingdom there shall be no end. But not only that, that you are a child of such a King through the blood of the Son.

## DECEMBER 2

JESUS: THE MIGHTY GOD

Background Passage: Isaiah 9:1-7

Focal Passage: Isaiah 9:6

When we see this time, I wonder if we really understand its significance. Yes, we see Jesus' might through all the miracles He performed. We understand that He is the third part of the Trinity. But for the early readers, this passage was huge.

Old Testament readers would recognize this as El or Elohim. This is the name God exclusively uses from Himself in the creation account. Isaiah was saying this child who was to be born would be the Creator Himself. How mind-boggling this must have been for them. It should be for us as well.

The Creator of the universe. The one who made everything from nothing simply by His spoken word. The one who tenderly with His own hands formed man. He is the One who is coming. But not just coming, but coming as a baby! The Creator will take the form of His creation. What an amazing and in reality, an incomprehensible thought. The One who made us will come like us, live like us, die like us, but ultimately be resurrected so that we may the relationship that We broke will be restored. What forgiveness! What love!

As you contemplate such love, ask yourself how can you better return such love?

## DECEMBER 3RD

### JESUS: OUR COUNSELOR

Background Passage: Isaiah 9:1-7

Focus Passage: Isaiah 9:6

Before Oprah, Dr. Phil and your neighborhood psychic and spiritual counselor there was Abby and Ann. Growing up most of the adults in my life would read the advice columns Ask Abby and Dear Ann. Most of the issues they dealt with involved relationships problems. Occasionally, I would read them as well and often was taken back by their advice, much of which I disagreed. In school, I had Mrs. Abrams, Mrs. Free and later Mrs. Stribling. All three very nice ladies but none of whom I really went to for advice. Later, in college, I got the "pleasure" of being the unofficial hall counselor, even over the official hall advisor. While there were a few issues related to school and jobs, the vast majority were relationship related.

In reflecting back to watching Dr. Phil, reading the advice columns and my school guidance counselors, they all had several things in common. First, they listened. They tried to fully understand the situation. Next, they seemed to empathize with the person. They were generally concerned for them, their feelings and wanted to help as much as possible. And finally, they, nor I, were always right.

Enter Jesus, the Wonderful Counselor. No one listens like Jesus. As much as we try, our hearing is distorted. Our experiences with the person, our emotional and physical state at the time, our worldview, and even our own baggage are

filters which can impede truly hearing the person. We understand the words, but we may not be able to connect on the deeper level. We may not be able to feel the pain, the hurt, anxiety, disappointment, fear, or other emotions, like Jesus can. While the one to whom we are sharing may love us, their love can't compare to that of Jesus. His desire to see us whole, healthy, and thriving as a person and as Christian and to experience His comfort, joy and peace is unmatched. And lastly, while we often strike out, He is batting 100%. His guidance and direction is always right. It's always on time. It's always for our benefit and His glory.

While we should seek godly counsel and be thankful for it, let us be more grateful that we have a Wonderful Counselor who loves us, wants and knows what's best for us and will always lead us in the right direction.

## DECEMBER 4

JESUS: OUR PRINCE OF PEACE

Background Passage: Isaiah 9:1-7

Focal Passage: Isaiah 9:6

Growing up in the 60's, I well remember the peace marches, protests and songs, seeking the end of the war in Vietnam and the end of violence in the US. But deep down many of them were also seeking something else-peace within themselves, and even unbeknownst they were seeking peace with God.

One of man's worst enemies is turmoil in his soul. Our past, current circumstances and the often-unknown future torments us. We regret our past, struggle with our present and have anxiety and fear over the future. While we seek in through many avenues, genuine peace to deal with each of these can only be found in Jesus.

From the time Adam and Eve yielded to that first lie, peace on earth has been elusive. Man has been at war, figuratively and literally, with each other. Untold amounts have been spent of wars, costing unknown number of deaths (well over a million in the US alone). Millions more have died through personal acts of violence. Laws, treaties, alliances, and even international organizations have failed to keep peace. This not include the millions who have suffered murder, assaults, rapes and all sorts of physical, verbal and emotional attacks and abuse.

While conflict and animosity among man has been costly, it pales in comparison to enormous impact of man's lack of peace with God. Individual

sin has alienated us from God resulting in us being His enemy. Except for our acceptance of His grace and mercy, our eternal destination would be hell.

Conflict within ourselves, with others and with God. Not the way we were created to live. Thankfully, Jesus, as the Prince of Peace can give us peace within our hearts, resolve conflict between men and most importantly reconcile us with God. Through Him, we can become brothers in Christ and be transformed from enemies with God to being His child.

May the Prince of Peace reign supremely in your heart.

As you reflect, is there anything which is causing you anxiety, fear or worry? Turn it over to God. Is there anyone with whom you need to make peace? Ask Him for the forgiveness and grace to so do. Most importantly, is there anything which is causing you not to have peace with Him? If so, get it right today.

## **DECEMBER 5**

JESUS: THE JUST AND RIGHTEOUS ETERNAL RULER

Background Passage: Isaiah 9:1-7

Focal Passage: Isaiah 9: 7

Justice. We want it. We seek it. We need it.

Over the last few years, the cries for justice have been louder among some groups within our nation. Everyone agrees with the call for a just society. The big problem is we don't agree on what entails a just society. Each of us, including our leaders, approach the concept with our own ideas, experiences and worldviews which color our definition of a just society. Unfortunately, these individual understandings and preferences often result in divisions,

animosities, often resulting in verbal and even physical conflict. As much as we try to order ourselves in a just society, due to these differences and our fallen nature, we will be unsuccessful.

Yet, there is hope. A day, is coming where Amos' urging in Amos 5: 24 " Let just roll on like a river" will be realized. A day where we all will be unified in our understanding and application of justice. A day where the conflicts and divisions which we encounter as we struggle with our differences in attitudes and applications of justice will be forever removed. A day, when our leader, King Jesus, will rule as mere human rulers can only dream. A day when He will reign eternally with justice and righteousness for all mankind. What a wonderful day that will be!

Thank God that one day will experience such a place. Pray for a deeper and more universal understanding of peace here on earth and that justice and righteousness would prevail even now.

## **DECEMBER 6**

JESUS: THE ROD OR STEM OF JESSE

Background Passage: Isaiah 11

Focal Passage: Isaiah 11:1-2

The situation that Isaiah faced was dire. The kingdom was divided and now the southern kingdom was about to fall. What would be left? Would the nation ever be united again? Would it ever be restored to its previous splendor and

prominence? What about the promises of God to establish the Kingdom of David forever?

Traditionally, we think of Jesus as the "Son of David" and trace his lineage back to establish His right to the throne of David. For some reason not definitively known to us, Isaiah, goes one generation back to David's father, Jesse. Some have speculated it was due to Isaiah's prophecy that the David's line would be destroyed by a foreign nation he thus, went back another generation. Other's think Isaiah is trying to remind us that Jesse was the grandson of Ruth and Boaz, showing that the Messiah was from a family line that included Gentiles and that His salvation would be for all people. While both of these are true, we are not certain if they are Isaiah's reason. Personally, I think it may be due to the fact of the moral and spiritual condition of the nation and the current division and coming judgement on the southern kingdom and Isaiah wanted to offer hope from the Lord.

I am not much of a gardener but I know that sometimes one is able to grow a large beautiful plant from just a sprig or stem of another one. From what seemed like almost dead nation, there was coming something wonderful. In verses 2-9, we see how the Spirit will be upon the Shoot and how He will reign and rule with righteousness and faithfulness (11:5) and peace which exist between all creatures. His ultimate rule over a united kingdom again is shown in verses 10-18.

Thank God, that when with Him its never a hopeless situation, and even in those times, something wonderful and beautiful is possible.

## DECEMBER 7

### IN THE BEGINNING

Background Passage: John 1

Focal Passage: John 1:1-2

In their accounts of the birth of Jesus, Matthew and Luke, start with Mary and Joseph. John, however, starts where we need to start—at the very beginning. He goes all the way back to the beginning of time. In John 1:1-2, while he does not mean the name Jesus, as we read the rest of the chapter, we recognize He is one of whom John is speaking. (As an aside John refers to Jesus by name almost as many times as the other three gospels do together).

In this passage John makes three remarkable claims. First, the Word is eternal and second that the Word was God, and thirdly that somehow the Word was also distinct from God.

The focus right now is on the first claim, that the Word, which he later clarifies as Jesus Christ, was eternal. In Genesis we have the account of creation. The first three words are “In the beginning”. The same three John uses. Clearly, John is saying that the Word was there at the start of yet somehow outside of what we call time. This is mind boggling! If He was in there at the start of time yet outside of time, there is only one conclusion—the Word is God. If the Word is God and Jesus is the Word, then Jesus must be God— God incarnate—Immanuel— God with us.

For the early Christians facing challenges to the deity of Christ, John’s words offer some of the most succinct and powerful affirmation of that fact. When

today, we face the same challenges, let us to find comfort in the strong assurance that Jesus, is the eternal God, and that we can trust everything He said and did, most importantly what He did for us on the cross.

Thank Jesus that He did come, not only to die on the cross and be resurrected for our salvation, but through His life here, He understands what we as humans experience.

## DECEMBER 8

### A SAVING GOD

Background Passage: Matt. 1:18–23

Focal Passage: Matt. 1:21 and John 1:10–13

From the beginning of the Christmas story, we see God as a Saving God. This is clearly indicated in the name the angel announced to Mary and Joseph.

The name *Jesus*, means “Yahweh saves” or “Yahweh is salvation.”

Transliterated from Hebrew and Aramaic, the name is *Yeshua*. This word is a combination of *Ya*, an abbreviation for *Yahweh*, the name of Israel’s God (Exodus 3:14); and the verb *yasha*, meaning “rescue,” “deliver,” or “save.”

From the beginning of Scripture, we see God being a God who saves. He saves Adam and Eve from a possible life of eternal sin and separation from Him by expelling them from the Garden. He rescues, Noah and his family. The story of the Exodus is all about the Him delivering His people from bondage. Throughout the book of Judges, we see God repeatedly saving Israel from other nations. The prophets demonstrate God’s love and mercy as He seeks to save His people from His wrath brought on by their own disobedience.

This theme is carried throughout the New Testament. We see where man is in bondage to sin and death and Jesus delivers us from the power of sin and the its ultimate penalty—eternal damnation in Hell. Jesus Himself says that He has come to “seek and to save” (Luke 19:10) and that God gave His only Son so that those who believed on Him would not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16) In Revelation, we see the ultimate deliverance when He returns to defeat

the forces of Satan and to establish His eternal kingdom where there will be no more sorrow nor death (Rev. 21:4).

Thank God that He is not just a God that created us, and then left us to fend for ourselves, but that He is one who takes the initiative to save.

## DECEMBER 9

### A SAVING GOD—PART 2

Background Passage: John 1:1-12

Focal Passage: John 1:11-12

But to all who did receive Him, He gave them the right to be<sup>[h]</sup> children of God, to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood,<sup>[i]</sup> or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man,<sup>[j]</sup> but of God. (John 1:12-13)

One of Frank Sinatra's most famous songs is "I did it My Way". For many, especially modern Americans, we like to think that we are the captain of our own ship, we make the decisions, and we achieve things in and of ourselves. Most don't like to share credit with anyone. If do give credit for the actual accomplishment, we want to say "it was my idea". But when it comes to our salvation, that's not the way it is. In fact, John clear that it was God's idea.

In this passage, John clearly says that all the credit is due God. John, mentions three ways that man seeks the right to be called "children of God".

- ❖ Not human descent (not of blood)- They are not children of God because they were born into the right nationality or family. Unlike the legal system, it matters not the status of one's parents or grandparents. It's an individual matter.

- ❖ Not human desire (not of will of the flesh)-The plan of salvation did not start with man. There is in our flesh which seeks God. In fact, we naturally rebel and reject God and His ways. Scripture is clear that man is dead in his trespasses and does not seek God. It is only through the drawing of His Spirit that we even begin to see our need for Him. We don't wake up one morning and say, I think I am going to get saved today.
- ❖ Not human design (will of man)- Man did not, would not and could not design or even desire to create a suitable plan of salvation. Throughout history, we see when people try to reach God and be restored to Him by their plans and under their terms, they fail.

There is only one way to be given the title "child of God". It can only be achieved through a free gift from God Himself. But that gift is conditional, there is only one way to receive it. One must believe in the name of Him (the Word, Jesus). This doesn't mean simply believe that He existed, but believe or trust in His finished work at Calvary. Trust that His death, burial and resurrection paid the price for your sins, restored your relationship with God, and gives you the right to eternal life as an adopted child of God the Father.

If you have never accepted that gift you can do it today, right now. Simply confess to God that you are a sinner, and that you know that separates you from Him. Ask Him to forgive you. Tell Him you trust in Jesus's finished work to pay the penalty for all your sins, those in the past and those in the future. Ask Him to save you and He will!!!

If you have already accepted that gift, spend a few minutes thanking Him that He is indeed a Saving God.

## DECEMBER 10

### CHILDREN OF GOD

Background Passage: John 1:1-18

Focal Passage: John 1:1-12

Throughout the Old Testament, the primary way God refers to His relationship with the nation of Israel, is their God. He is their God and they are His people. Yet this changes when we move to the New Testament. There we see a more intimate picture of the relationship. The church is called the Bride of Christ and we are often referred to as the children of God.

In John 1: 11 John explains that Jesus' own people, the children of Israel, as a whole did not believe that He was the promised Messiah. However, verse 12 begins with a wonderful word-But. John says that the majority did not accept Jesus. Imagine how hurt that must have hurt the Savior. His own people, the ones with whom the Father had a special relationship, the ones that was His chosen people, the ones that He had been preparing for this day for thousands of years, rejected Him. "But" for the small group who did, they got a fantastic reward. For those who received Him, "He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name."

Think about that for a moment- "children of God". We have a "daddy" who has all the riches, power, and knowledge in the world. Our Father is love, full of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. We have a Father who gives good gifts and who makes everything work for the good of His children. Our Father never sleeps, never leaves us or forsakes us. Our Father rejoices when we come

home. We don't have to fear because our Father guides, protects and provides for us. We have a Father from whose love we can never be separated and through whose power we can conquer and temptation and stronghold and through whose grace we can stand strong in times of difficulty and trouble.

All this and more are because of Jesus-the saving God, not only are we saved from the power and penalty of sin, but we have so much more.

Thank Him that He is a God that rescues and delivers us from the bondage of sin.

## DECEMBER 11

GOD OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

Background Passage: Luke 1:1-38

Focal Passage: Luke 1:7-13; 28-31, 34-35

While, Scripture gives us relatively little information about Elizabeth we know two important points. She could not have children and she was up in age. We know that 65 was considered the commencement of old age and when one turned 80 they were often referred to as “well stricken” with age, so we can guess that she was around 80 or perhaps even older.

Likewise, Scripture tells us little about Mary. Based in large part of the normal age of marriage at that time, most scholars place Mary as a young teenager. For her, its not a matter, of not being able to have a child, but she had not yet known a man.

In both cases, we see women who medically could not have a child. They join a short list of other godly women, Sara, Hannah, and Samson’s mother, all of whom were barren and to whom mercifully and miraculous God allowed to give birth. In each instance, their sons, Isaac, Samuel, and Samson respectively, would go on to be greatly used by God.

Sometimes we feel like we are faced with overwhelming odds, unsolvable problems, unscalable mountains or charged by God with what to us seems like unreasonable and unattainable tasks and goals. In our own ability, knowledge and strength, this is the case. However, thankfully, we don’t have to go it alone. We serve a God who specializes in doing the humanly impossible.

We serve a God whose strength and wisdom is unmatched and unending. We serve a God who does delights in answering the cry for help from His children.

What issues are you facing in your life which seems impossible to solve? What has He called you to do, which to your mind seems unobtainable? Take it to Him. Lean and trust on Him. Step out on faith and do what He has called you to and wait for Him to do the impossible.

## **DECEMBER 12**

### A SPEAKING GOD

Background Passage: Luke 1:5-25

Focal Passage: Luke 1:8-11

Out of the blue it comes. You get a text, an email, a call or perhaps an old-fashioned letter from someone you were once close to but with whom you have not heard from in sometime, may be even years. Most of us can relate to this. We are excited, surprised and full of joy to reconnect with a loved one.

Imagine how the people of Israel felt when God finally broke His 400 year silence. Through the prophets He had spoken to them for centuries and then silence. But now, once again He speaks. As we read the accounts of Jesus birth, we see God speaking in several ways. He uses an angel to speak to Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds. He speaks to the wise men through a star. Dreams are used for communicate with Joseph (Matt. 1:20; 2:13, 19, 22) and the wise men (Matt. 2:12). The Holy Spirit was on and guided Simeon to the baby Jesus (Luke 2: 25-27) and most likely Anna as she testified of Jesus (Luke 2:36-38).

Today, God still speaks. His primary method is through His Word and His Spirit. The Spirit speaks to us as we read His Word. He speaks to us as we daily yield ourselves to Him and seek His guidance. He speaks to us through answered prayers. Sometimes, God uses others to speak truth, wisdom, encouragement and even conviction into our lives.

God is still speaking. The question is are we listening?

Thank God that He does still speak, showing us His way, will and purpose for our lives. Think of specific times He has spoken to you and provided an answer for your question, doubt, need or direction. Thank Him specifically for speaking during those times.

## **DECEMBER 13**

ZECHARIAH- DEVOTED, DOUBTED, DUMBED, DELIVERED, DECLARED

Background Passage: Luke 1

Focal Passage: Luke 1: 5-23; 57-64

One of my favorite Christmas characters is Zechariah. If we are honest, many of us can truly relate to him. To some extent, we can see our story in His.

Devoted- Zechariah was a priest who had devoted his whole life to serving Christ. In God's timing, He caused Zechariah to be chosen at this moment to finally serve in the temple tending to the incense (the only time in his entire life). Most of us are like Zechariah, serving faithfully, seldom if ever called upon to perform the "highest" of duties.

Doubted-To some extent, his response to the angel's announcement about Elizabeth's pregnancy was normal. They were well passed the normal child-bearing years and had no children. The announcement was a tremendous shock. In Luke 1:18, Zechariah questioned this possibility. Are we not like Him, questioning when God says He is going to do something extraordinary?

Dumbed-Because of his doubt, Gabriel stated he would be unable to speak until the child's birth. Thankfully, we generally do not receive such a punishment, but are disbelief does have its consequences.

Delivered-In Luke 1: 61-64 we see John being delivered from his punishment. Notice, however, two important points. First, it didn't occur until after the prophecy was fulfilled. Most importantly, Zechariah deliverance came only after he gave in, saw the fulfillment and obeyed the naming instructions.

Declared-Upon witnessing all this, Zechariah, he declared he praises to the Lord, the purposes for which John had been born, and Lord's provision for deliverance. We are good at imitating Zechariah in our doubt are we good at imitating him in his praise?

As we consider this account, let us remember several appointment points.

- Nothing is impossible with God
- Our unbelief has consequences
- God does fulfill His promises

- Our true deliverance comes only after we have repented, trusted and obeyed

As you pray, ask God if there is any promise He has made which you are doubting. If there is, repent of that doubt and ask Him to help you believe and act upon that belief. Thank Him that He is faithful to keep His promises, no matter how difficult or unusual they may seem to us.

## **DECEMBER 14**

A GOD OF PERFECT TIMING

Background Passage: Luke 1:11-20

Focal Passage: Luke 1: 20

“Timing is everything” is a familiar quote that we often have a hard time living by. We want to jump in, make decisions, respond to a situation right then. Seldom do we take time to consider when is best time to act, to speak, to decide. If we did, our lives would be so much better. That’s not an issue with one person- God.

In this passage, Gabriel assures Zechariah that God’s plan would be fulfilled in His timing. I am sure Zechariah was excited about finally having a son. But why now? I can imagine the questions he had? Why after all these decades of waiting, hoping, dreaming, and praying? Why, when he had lost the youthfulness that was needed to care for and rear a child? Why, when he may never see him become a man himself?

There is only one answer. That was God's timing. To him, and most likely us if we were in his situation, the timing would seem odd, perhaps a little too late. But for God it was right on time—just as it always is.

Thank God that although we don't always understand, His timing is always best to achieve His plan for our good and His glory.

## **DECEMBER 15**

### A GOD OF HIS WORD

Background passage: Luke 1:26–37

Focal Passage: Luke 1:37, 45

We tell our children that we will be home early tonight and will spend the evening with them. Something comes up at work and they are in bed when we get home. We promise our spouse that things will be different from now on, but they're not. Or perhaps it's our boss, employees, our friends or even ourselves. We have good intentions, but we fail, sometimes because we choose to and sometimes because of circumstances beyond our control. Either way, the damage is done. Hurt, disappointment, distrust, and perhaps even anger result, and sometimes relationships are damaged beyond repair.

Thankfully, we with God we never have to worry. He always keeps His word. What He says He will do, He will do. What He says He will never do, He never does. He says what He means and means what He says. He is faithful to His word, you can bet everything you have on it!

Thank God that when others may fail and disappoint us with their promises, He never has, does or will. What promises of God do you need to cling to right now? Claim them and thank Him that they are sure.

## **DECEMBER 16**

JESUS: OUR HORN OF SALVATION

Background Passage: Luke 1:57-80

Focal Passage: Luke 1:69-71

This seems to be an unusual term. To better understand, we have to look back at the Old Testament time for our clues. We are reminded of the shofar, the Jewish instrument which was blown for special days. Usually made of ram's horns, the it recalls Abraham's faith and obedience and the ram God Himself provided instead of Isaac for the sacrifice. Later, it would be used in the fall of Jericho. Subsequently, kings were anointed with oil poured from a horn. Finally, we see in Ps. 18:2, David says that the Lord is his, strength, rock, fortress, deliverer, mountain of refuge, shield and "horn of my salvation". In this context, we see the horn symbolizing strength, power and security.

Putting this together, we have a beautiful picture of Jesus and what He did for us. God set out in the Old Testament, that only a blood sacrifice can atone for sin. Instead of requiring us to pay the penalty for our own sin, God Himself provided the sacrifice in His Son, Jesus. Like the battle of Jericho, our victory over our enemy, sin, is completely of God, not of our own strength or doing. (Eph. 2:8-9) It is through His death, burial and resurrection that Jesus is crowned King of Kings. Notice in Ps. 18:2, David says that it is God who is all

these things. By using the same terminology, Zechariah is equating Jesus with God and unequivocally applying all David's descriptions of God to Jesus.

Take a moment and reflect on the many times and ways that Jesus was your strength, rock, fortress, deliverer, mountain of refuge, and shield. Thank Him for those and most importantly for being your "horn of salvation".

## **DECEMBER 17**

### A SURPRISING GOD

Background Passage: Is. 55:8-9

Focal Passage: Is. 55:8-9

For those who are or have been married, you know can attest that through experiencing numerous aspects of life together, one can often "read" their spouses mind. Most of the time, we can anticipate with great accuracy what they are thinking, how they feel or how they are going to act in a given situation. This is also the case at times among close friends. However, there is one person for which we cannot say that- God. We know that whatever He does, will be right, just, holy and done with love. However, we are often caught off-guard by the way He chooses to fulfill His will. We think that's not the way I would have handled it. Of course, not! He is God and we are not. He knows all the circumstances, knows what He wants to accomplish and the best way to do it.

All of us have accounts where God has surprised us. It may be in how He answered a specific prayer. It could be in how he worked to bring us through a difficult time or meet a need. Because He is a faithful and loving Father, we weren't taken back that He acted for us, but in the method He used. We don't understand and we never will, and that's okay. We just need to stand back, be amazed at and praise Him for His power and love which results in the wonderful and often unexpected ways He decides to act.

## **DECEMBER 18**

### A SURPRISING GOD- IN THE PEOPLE HE USES

Background Passage: Matt. 1:1-16; Luke 1:26-27. 2: 25, 2:36-37

Focal Passage: I Cor. 1:25-29

Each year in high school, the senior class voted on the "Superlatives". These were the best looking, most athletic, most talented, best dressed, smartest, and more. The one I have most fascinated to look back on was probably the most likely to succeed. This was the boy and girl that everyone thought would be a great success. Many had "all the right stuff". They had looks, smarts, drive, personality and often from the families higher on the social ladder. Sometimes, the votes were right, but sometimes they were abject failures.

Thankfully, when God chooses someone that He is going to use, He seldom picks the "superlatives". Look at virtually every character in the account of Christ's birth. Mary was a young peasant girl, probably 12-14 and most probably fairly illiterate. Joseph was a simple carpenter. Jesus's ancestors included 4 women, including 3 Gentiles, one of which had been a prostitute

(Matthew 1). Not the lineage one would expect from an earthly king, let alone, the Son of God. First ones to hear and share the Good News were the shepherds, among the lowest in the community. Neither Anna nor Simeon, seemed to be people of importance in the community.

Unlike, us, when God chooses someone, He looks at the heart (consider King David). He looks for someone who He can trust. Someone who is devoted and faithful. He seeks those who are true to Him. It is through them He most oft works. It is through them the world stays in amazement and allows God, not the individual to receive the glory and praise.

Thank God that He chooses to use ordinary everyday people for His purpose. Ask Him to help make you one that He can use for His glory.

## **DECEMBER 19**

A SURPRISING GOD- HE WORKS IN UNEXPECTED WAYS

Background Passage: Isaiah 55:8-9

Focal Passage: Matthew 1-2; Luke 1-2

I enjoy planning, especially events and trips. When doing so there are hundreds of little details one has to remember and take care of an event to go smoothly and be a success. In the initial planning, several factors are considered. You don't want anything else taking place around the time which will draw attention and attendance away. You want to be able to get as much publicity as possible. For most things, especially if it's strictly a secular event, you want it to big, fancy and almost over-the-top. You consider location,

timing, potential attendees and so much more. If the birth of Jesus was planned by man, or if God thought like us, it probably would have been totally different. Consider:

- Location–It wouldn't have been in a small secluded town, among animals no less. It would have been in one of the finest hospitals in the world.
- Timing–It wouldn't have been during the middle of the night. It wouldn't have been during a time (think census) when everyone's attention was focused on something else. It would have been during a "dead" time where there was no competition.
- Publicity–To go along with the timing, it would have been at a time where the most people could be reached with the news (say now with Facetime, TikTok and everything)
- Headliners: A carpenter, a young girl. That's not going to draw a crowd or much attention.
- Attendees–Those who were invited would be different. The social, financial and political upper crust would be invited, not those dregs of society.

Its wonderful that God doesn't think like us. The story He wrote is more beautiful. Its more amazing. Because its so different, maybe even radical from what man would right, its more fitting to Him. Only He would consider using the people and places He chose. In His story, He gets the glory, as it should be.

Consider other times in Scripture or maybe your own life where God work in unusual ways to accomplish His plan and purpose. Thank Him, that He knows best and His way is always the right one, even when we don't see it completely.

## **DECEMBER 20**

A SURPRISING GOD: HE ACTS DURING ORDINARY LIFE

Background Passage: Luke 1-2

Focal Passage: Luke 1-2

Imagine a quite simple day. A day just like yesterday, the day before, and so many more. A day where you were expecting anything extraordinary to happen. For those in the account of Jesus birth, it was just another ho-hum day filled with ordinary chores and activities. Just simple, ordinary people, going about their simple ordinary lives in a simple non-descript town.

Mary, a young girl, going about her daily duties as she prepared for the big day. Joseph, tending to his business, fulfilling orders in his carpenter shop and perhaps making something for he and Mary in anticipation of their life together. Elizabeth another day of household chores, filled with the loneliness of being barren and anxiety for the future when her husband died. The shepherds another lonely night in the fields guarding these smelly, dumb sheep.

But then it happened. An angel. He didn't just appear, but he spoke. Each time, he spoke of something wonderful. The long-awaited Messiah was here. It

was too good to be true. And they were to have a part in His story, often in miraculous ways.

An ordinary day, became extraordinary when God showed up and spoke. Chances are we will never encounter an angel in this way. But God does speak and when He does, it can be just as life changing. In his book, *How to Listen to God*, Dr. Charles Stanley writes, "We must learn to live for the presence of God of God in every circumstance of life. A child of God walking in the Spirit is to look for the handiwork, the footprint, and the handprint of almighty God in every single situation in life. God is sovereign and we are His children. There is no such thing as an accident in the life of a child of God. There are some things that God may allow. There are some things that God sends. There are attention-getters that God brings into our lives, but there are no accidents." Every day, but especially as we are celebrating Christmas, notice, see God speaking in the ordinary days of life.

## **DECEMBER 21**

JESUS: SWADDLED TO BE OUR SACRIFICE

Background Passage: Luke 2:1-20

Focal Passage: Luke 1:7, 12

Growing up I always had a question about this part of the story. I wondered why the detail about the swaddling clothes, what was its significance. Not to be disrespectful, but I thought with Bethlehem being so small, why did the shepherds need that information—there certainly couldn't be that many

newborns, especially ones laying in a manger. Recently, I learned an interesting fact which shed new light on the question.

Among the fields between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, there was one special shepherd's field. There, priestly shepherds kept watch over the sheep destined as temple sacrifices. One of their practices has a great connection and foreshadowing of Jesus birth and death.

When a new lamb was born, the shepherd would carefully wrap it in swaddling clothes to protect its limbs. Once the lamb calmed down, the swaddling would be removed. The fear was the lamb's normal post-birth thrashing about would result in injury, rendering it blemished and thus disqualifying it as a sacrificial lamb.

Jesus, the "lamb slain before the foundations of the world". The ultimate sacrifice, the one the sacrificial system foretold, was likewise swaddled at birth. I wonder if the shepherds that night made the connection? If, as some believe, it was to these priestly shepherds to whom the angels appeared, it is highly possible. If, as I had heard growing up these were the "ordinary" shepherds, perhaps not. We don't know.

This was a sign to the shepherds and it's a sign to us. It's a demonstration that every word in Scripture is important. It's another sign pointing to and confirming Jesus as our Sacrifice. It's a clear reminder that as even as we celebrate His birth, we can never forget the reason for it.

Thank God for the love that gave us the creche and the cross.

## DECEMBER 22

### A SWEETER SONG THAN THE ANGELS

Background Passage: Luke 2:8-14

Focal Passage: Luke 2:13-14; I Peter 1:12

I have often wondered what it must have been like for the shepherds to see an angel. I can understand why Luke says they were “terrified”. For me, I think that would be an understatement! But, then to have the good news of the birth of the Messiah told to them must have been amazing. And the sound of the heavenly host praising God, undoubtedly was the most beautiful thing they had ever heard.

And why shouldn't they praise God. That's in part what for what they were created. First hand they had seen His beauty, majesty and holiness. They had witnessed creation of the world. They were spectators for all the amazing Old Testament events such as the flood, the parting of the Red Sea and so much more. They knew who this baby was and the purpose for which He had come.

But, like The Temptations in “My Girl”, Christians have a sweeter song to sing. They never received their sight back after being blinded by the darkness. They were never set free after being held captive by sin. They were never given new life after being dead. Although they were with God, they would never experience Him living inside them.

This Christmas, reflect upon for all the reasons we have to praise Him. Let your heart sing with great joy and thankfulness for the great gifts He has given.

## DECEMBER 23

JESUS: HOW FAR ARE WE WILLING TO GO MEET HIM?

Background Passage: Luke 2:1-12

Focal Passage: Luke 2:1

Sunday morning comes. The alarm goes off and we roll out of bed and check the weather. Its cold, windy, or rainy, or even worse, all three. Maybe the weather is fine, but we are simply tired from staying up too late last night watching the movie or the ballgame. Either way, as we slump into our recliner to sip our coffee, we think it's no big deal. I mean, does God really expect me to go through all that, especially with the kids, to come to church today? Its only one day. Is going to worship the Creator of the Universe, the Savior of the World and the true King of Kings really that important?

While we would never ask that out loud, and may not even think, but how often do we live it? In our western world of ease and comfort, the oft too reaction to God, His house and His Word is as long as it doesn't cost me too much. I will go to church, I will even volunteer as long as its convenient, or doesn't require too much time, effort or money. But is that the way should approach finding and worshipping Christ? Consider the Wise Men.

Although we are not certain of the distance they traveled, it is estimated that they may have traveled as far as 1000 miles each way. Such a trip would have required around a four-month round trip. Consider the supplies they would have needed, especially considering their probable social and economic

standing. A long, hard, expensive journey not knowing exactly who they would find. Yet they went. They went with great anticipation, ready to worship Him.

This side of Christmas, we know the exact identity of the one born King of the Jews. We know to whom that star pointed. We are well aware of what He has done for mankind and us specifically. Yet, too often, are unwilling to be “put out” or inconvenienced any to worship, serve and draw closer to Him. We will do so, only when it costs us little.

It cost the Wise Men quite a lot to discover and worship Him. It cost Him more than we can imagine to come to this earth and die on the cross. May we be willing to sacrifice just a little more this year to worship Him in all areas of our lives.

With a new year starting soon, how much more are you willing to sacrifice in terms of time, energy, talents, or money to serve and worship Him this year?

## DECEMBER 24

SURPRISE- A GOD YOU MAY NOT EXPECT!!!

Background Passage: Luke 2:1-12

Focal Passage: Luke 2:9-11

One of my episodes of the Andy Griffith Show is about Aunt Bee's birthday. One can see the surprise, shock and disappointment on her face when she opens her present from Andy. Instead of the beautiful delicate bed jacket she had hoped for and had been led to believe was purchased for her, she finds two dozen canning jars. Thankfully, Andy learns the truth and through some horse trading he ends up with the coveted bed jacket.

We all can relate to this story. Whether it was an actual present, a trip or an experience, we all have stories of expecting one thing and getting something else. With just a little imagination, we can see this play out in the Christmas story.

While not positive of their identity, number, or origin, we know that the Wise Men were learned men of science. They were intrigued by the unusual star they saw, as it was believed that such occurrences were signs of the birth of a royalty. Perhaps having heard of the coming Jewish Messiah from materials remaining from the Babylon exile, they set out to find the one born "King of the Jews."

With this statement, I can imagine what they were expecting to find. They would arrive at a magnificent ornate palace full of servants and treasures. A baby wrapped in beautiful, expensive linens, perhaps lying in a gold and jewel

studded crib of some sort, surrounded by care-givers and guards would be waiting. The country would be aglow with the news of the future king. But surprise!!!

Instead, what they found was a small child, living in a small, non-descript home. No regal king and queen. No servants, no gold, no precious jewels and treasures, except the ones they had. The country-side wasn't abuzz with excitement about His birth. He was an ordinary child, with ordinary parents, living a dull ordinary life.

The world hasn't changed. Like the Wise Men and the disciples who followed, we too often find a Jesus we are not expecting. We find a man who was both gentle and stern. We find a man with tenderness and harshness. We see a man who both loved and hated. We see a man who spoke both of peace, grace and mercy yet also of judgement, punishment and wrath. We see both completely God and fully human. When we truly look at Him, we see a man, a Savior, that we can't fully understand but one that we can't ignore.

Like the Wise Men, when we set out to find Jesus, we have our own ideas of what we will find. But when we encounter Him, we too share their surprise. Our expectations are too small and our words too inadequate to describe who we discover. Like them, when we do, we see the only One who is truly worship of our best and all our adoration.

Thank Jesus that He is too big to fully comprehend. Thank Him that He surprises you daily with His love, grace, forgiveness and mercy.

## DECEMBER 25

ENCOUNTERING GOD LEADS US NOW A DIFFERENT PATH

Background Passage: Matthew 2:1-12

Focal Passage: Matthew 2:12

Debra and I love to hike. Most of the time, we follow the well-established trail. Depending on a number of factors, we may turn around retrace our path to the car, we may follow the trail until it loops back around or sometimes we take an entirely different one and work our way back to the vehicle. Our preference is the latter-taking a different path and exploring something new.

We are familiar with the story of the Wise Men being warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Instead, after seeing Jesus, they returned home a different way. In one sense, this is a metaphor for the Christian life.

In Matthew 7, Jesus speaks of two ways. The first, the wide gate with the broad way leads to destruction while the other, with its narrow gate and difficult way leads to life. Unfortunately, He states the majority take the former with only few taking the latter.

Mankind likes the easy, broad way and naturally chooses it. Being the one most chosen, it seems easy, beautiful and full of company. We travel along thinking everything is okay oblivious to our destiny with destruction. Then it happens. Like the Wise Men, we encounter Jesus. But we see Him not as a helpless baby, but as the crucified and risen Savior of the world and coming Conquering King. Everything, including our destination, changes. As such, we are set on a new course. We are now headed down the difficult way and into the narrow gate.

The road isn't easy but our destination is much better. Not only has our route and our journey's end been altered, but so have we. We are new creatures (2 Chron. 5:17). When one truly encounters Jesus, this is the only result.

Thank God you have encountered Jesus and He has put you on a new course—down the difficult road, which ultimately ends as you enter the narrow gate into your final stop—heaven.