

5 RISKY WEEKS
ADVENT STUDY

Join us for 5 RISKY WEEKS as we discover ordinary people willing to take extraordinary risks for Jesus. Joseph risked his reputation, Mary risked her life, the shepherds risked their time, and the wise men risked their resources.

WHAT IS HE WORTH RISKING FOR YOU?



WISE MEN

Week 1 | Risk Your Resources | Matthew 2:1-12

Matthew 2:11

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.

Risky Christmas

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- What resources has God entrusted to me in this season?
- What is the hardest for me to surrender? (Ex: time, money, energy, abilities, control)
- Do my priorities reflect what I claim to worship?

RISK IT:

Consider one resource that you tend to protect or hold tightly to, and offer it to God this week in a practical way.

PRAY:

Lord, help me to see that everything I have comes from you. Instead of possessions to protect, help me to worship you with everything I have.

Day 1 - Give your resources

What if worshipping Jesus required you to risk everything you have, your time, your resources, your priorities, and your future? When we read about the Wise Men, or the Magi, they traveled far (most likely 2 years after Jesus' birth), followed a completely unfamiliar path, sought a king they had never met, brought him gifts of great value, and risked everything just to worship Him. These magi should remind us all to consider what it might look like to risk it all in order to worship Him.

This first week of Advent, what might God be inviting YOU to risk in order to worship Him more fully?

We know that the magi's journey would have cost their time, money, supplies, planning, and considerable effort to find Jesus. The precious gifts that they brought to Him would have been symbolic, as well as, extraordinarily costly. The gold symbolized His status as a king, the frankincense signified His divinity as God and man, and the myrrh was a symbol of death and mortality foreshadowing the death He would experience on the cross. These gifts, and their willingness to risk all their other resources, reveal the incredible faith these men had. They knew the scriptures and prophecies, recognized Jesus' worthiness, and humbled themselves to risk everything to be obedient in worshipping Him. They were called "wise" due to their intellect as scholars and well respected men, however, they were also wise in their faith and trust in God.

While we may not have gifts of gold to offer, we have many resources that God has entrusted us with. We can offer our time, abilities, energy, finances, influence, relationships, opportunities, and our possessions. **The question isn't whether we have enough to give, it's whether we are willing to risk what we have in order to worship the KING.** Instead of waiting until life slows down, or until we get our finances in order, or our schedules become more clear, what if we worshipped Him right NOW with what He has entrusted to our hands?

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- Where do I feel most comfortable giving my time, attention, or care?
- Who is God calling me to reach outside of my circle?
- Are there certain people or situations I avoid because I feel uncomfortable or scared?
- What would it look like for me to risk my comfort to follow Jesus without needing to know the outcome?

RISK IT:

Consider one way that you can step outside of your comfort zone this week. Ask God where He might be calling you to serve, and take one step towards what He's leading you to do (ex: Invite someone you normally wouldn't, serve someone with a different background or circumstance than yourself, look at those "interruptions" in your routine as an opportunity to serve Him joyfully and generously).

PRAY:

Lord, help me to see beyond where giving is easy. Give me the courage to notice people I might overlook, and the humility to love those who are different than me. Help me to trust you even when the next steps are unfamiliar.

Day 2 - Give where we are not

READ: Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 6:32-36; Matthew 28:19-20

These wise men were not from Israel, they were not Jewish, and they certainly would have been considered outsiders in Judea. Their journey required them to leave the life that they knew, and travel to a place they had never been before. Yet it says they followed the star "joyfully". **What if worshipping Jesus called you WAY outside of your comfort zone, sent you on an epic journey, & guided you into unfamiliar territory with only enough light to guide your next steps?** Would you be "joyful" in your act of obedience & worship?

Most scholars agree that the men traveled from Arabia or Persia, which would be modern day Iran. This would have been a long and risky journey of over *800 miles* to worship Jesus! They had most likely read the writings of Daniel (Daniel 9:24-27) and Balaam (Numbers 24:17) who prophesied about the birth of the Messiah. Despite not growing up in the Jewish faith, they knew and had read about who Jesus was. Of course, their actions proved that they had more than just head knowledge, they had an authentic faith. Their faith & desire to worship God caused them to risk traveling long distances with precious resources in order to bless a family far outside of their own community to worship the ONE true King.

God may not ask you to travel over 800 miles with precious gifts for strangers, however, He calls ALL of us to serve those both inside & outside of our familiar circles & comfort zones. Serving God with those that think like us, understand us, and that we know will reciprocate is good. However, as it says in **Luke 6:32-36**, "*even sinners do that*". When we step outside of those familiar circles, cross over socioeconomic boundaries, place ourselves in uncomfortable circumstances, and serve in situations well outside of our realm of understanding, we have to rely on our faith in God. This type of **risky giving** might not always be a "physically" long journey. It might be a street corner near our house or the simple distance between our normal routines and the God given "interruption" He's placed right in front of us. It could also be a journey 1/2 way around the world.

Whatever it is that God is calling you to do, prayerfully ask Him to give you the strength and the courage to give and serve Him "joyfully" in those risky places in your life.

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- Where do I give freely and where do I tend to hold back?
- Am I truly giving others what is meaningful or matters most to them, or simply giving what is easiest for me?
- Is there something that God is nudging me to give that would require intentionality, understanding someone's needs relationally, or a significant sacrifice? Am I holding back, or fearful of giving what matters in this area?

RISK IT:

Consider one way that you can give meaningfully and sacrificially this week. It could be simply giving someone your undivided attention on a lunch date, following through on a much needed commitment, sharing a skill or talent, or providing a gift that requires true faith in God's provision or resources.

PRAY:

Lord, help me to see what truly matters to those around me. Instead of giving from what's easy or convenient, teach me to give what is relational, thoughtful, meaningful, and done through your strength & guidance.

Day 3 - Give what matters

READ: Matthew 2:1-12; Matthew 7:9-12; Mark 12:41-44

As we discussed on Day 1, the Magi gave precious gifts to Jesus as an act of worship. Their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh recognized and honored who Jesus was. They also carried a great financial cost and sacrifice. Of course, the cost of the gifts wasn't what was important to God. It was instead their incredible faith to give such costly resources to a child they had never met, because of their faith in who He was. The gifts the magi gave Jesus should invite us all to consider the difference between giving what is easy, convenient, or out of leftover abundance, verses giving what is valuable, meaningful, and sacrificial. **When we give what matters, it should be intentional, relational, and require us to understand & know the needs of the receiver.**

In **Mark 12:41-44** Jesus notices a poor widow giving intentionally and sacrificially, just as the magi did. Even though she only gave a few coins in the temple, while the rich put in large amounts, He tells His disciples - *"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."* Jesus isn't concerned the the monetary amount. He cares about the faith that their gifts required, and the sacrificial significance of the gift in their hearts.

Of course, if we follow Jesus' example as the ultimate giver of good gifts, He gave His life as a gift of grace & love so that we could pour out that same love and grace to others as we serve Him with our lives. In **Matthew 7:9-12** Jesus compares the good gifts of His Father with our own earthly fathers when He says *"If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"*

God is the ultimate giver of good gifts that matter. We could never "out give" God. We can't earn anything from God by our giving. Instead, giving should be an act of worship, BECAUSE of the good and perfect gifts that God gives to us (**James 1:17** *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights"*).

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- When I give or serve others, do I secretly hope for their appreciation, approval, recognition, or reciprocity?
- How do I respond when my giving is unnoticed?
- Do I ever find myself overextended because I'm afraid of disappointing or not receiving approval?
- What areas do I feel able to give freely, verses feeling obligated?

RISK IT:

Consider one way that you can give quietly this week, without keeping score, seeking recognition, or trying to influence the response. It could be an act of service, a secret "santa" gift, or simply a word of encouragement towards someone you know won't be able to give you anything in return.

PRAY:

Lord, free me from giving or serving others in order to receive their love, approval, or security. Help me to give to others without feeling responsible for the response. Teach me to give from a place of receiving your love and worshipping you faithfully.

Day 4 - Give without return

READ: Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 2:4-10; Mark 1:33-38

Reciprocity is a fundamental aspect of our human nature. We are biologically wired to build relationships through giving and receiving gifts such as time, support, friendship, kindness, cooperation, and even physical gifts such as food and material possessions. God created us this way, therefore, reciprocal giving isn't a bad thing. In fact, it's one of the ways that God designed to build strong community and relationships. He absolutely wants us to be generous in a reciprocal way with those around us. However, God doesn't want the "return on investment" (ROI) to be our *motivation* or reason for giving. Giving in order to receive, as we read about in Day 2 - **Luke 6:32-35**, is something that anyone, even sinners, do.

Of course, the other extreme is also true. God doesn't want us to be in unhealthy relationships, to be exploited, or to take responsibility for everyone else's needs while ignoring our own. We can give generously and freely, while still saying "no" when a request is unwise or is outside of God's will for our lives. Jesus certainly didn't say "yes" to every request during His time on earth (example in **Mark 1:33-38**). Jesus gave in obedience & accordance with God's will. Once again, we need to examine our motivation behind our giving. Just as Jesus did, our motivation should be from a place of worship & obedience to God, and not as a means to receive self righteousness, praise or approval from God or others. **We are called to give freely, in response to God freely giving to us.**

When we consider giving *without* the expectation of receiving anything in return, it can feel risky. The wise men brought precious gifts to Jesus to worship Him. They didn't negotiate with Mary and Joseph some type of protection, repayment plan, future recognition, or a "special" role in God's kingdom. They simply gave out of their faith & worship, without a promise or reassurance of something to come. This non-reciprocal giving can be one of the hardest forms of generosity for us to do, and to receive. It takes faith and humility to give and receive as freely as God calls us to. Receiving or giving something that we didn't earn, and can never repay goes against our human nature. It can only be done in God's strength, BECAUSE of His unearned grace, love, forgiveness & goodness in our lives. This gives us the strength to give to others in the same way.

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- What does extravagant generosity look like in my current season of life?
- Where is fear keeping my hands closed?
- How has God's generosity changed the way I view my possessions, time, and relationships?
- How could I begin to make generosity a way of life, verses an occasional act?

RISK IT:

Consider one way that you could make generosity a part of your regular rhythm, and not just something for the Christmas season. Is God calling you to invest in a relationship, open your home in hospitality, offer a skill or talent to someone in need, or begin to give financially out of the resources God has given to you.

PRAY:

Lord, thank you for the extravagant gift of your son Jesus. Help me to learn to live with open hands and a willing heart to live in obedience to you. Show me how to give from the grace I have already received, and not in an effort to earn your approval or love. May my life be a reflection of extravagant worship & joy.

Day 5 - Give extravagantly

READ: Matthew 2:1-12; Romans 11:29; Proverbs 18:16

The Christmas story doesn't begin with the wise men giving extravagant gifts to God, it begins with God's extravagant gift of His son to all of us. We are not called to give in order to earn God's love, we are called to give because He first gave His love to us (**Read: John 3:16 & 1 John 4:19**).

Extravagant generosity can look like remarkable sacrifice in our lives, but it can also look like simple consistent faithfulness each and every day. There will be times that God calls us to give our physical resources, our forgiveness, compassion, time, friendship, or willingness to serve others. However, God will never calls us to give until we are depleted, overextended, and burned out. Just as He says in Matthew "His burden is easy and light". We are called to "yoke" ourselves to Him, and to give in accordance to His will through His strength and guidance. He wants us to live our lives openhanded, allowing Him to pour into us, and out of, us. What if we held our reputations, time, possessions, or personal comforts with open hands to God?

The wise men are good examples of holding all of these faithfully with open hands. They traveled far, followed God despite the risks and sacrifices, and in the end they offered their worship & gifts with great joy. Their response was genuine, and their faith was pure. They had found the ONE worthy of their worship. Even on their way home, they continued following God instead of seeking favor or safety from a powerful earthy king. Worshipping Jesus literally changed their trajectory of their journey, just as it should for each of us. **The most extravagant gift we can bring to Jesus isn't trying to earn His favor, it's living a life that is transformed by the gift of grace we have already received.**

As we end this first week of advent, consider what God is calling you to give as an act of risky worship this Christmas season.

- **Give your resources:** *What has God placed in my hands?*
- **Give where you are not:** *Where is God inviting me beyond my comfort zone?*
- **Give what matters:** *What would be meaningful rather than easy?*
- **Give without return:** *Can I give without controlling the response?*
- **Give extravagantly:** *How does God's generosity shape how I live?*

SHEPHERDS

Week 2 | Risk Your Time | Luke 2:8-20

Luke 2:17-18

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.

Risky Christmas

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- What fills my time & attention during the day?
- When do I find myself too busy to experience God?
- Do I allow productivity to become more important than worship?

RISK IT:

Pause for 5min today - put away your phone, to-do list, & work. Spend time worshipping God for who He is - not just for what He has done for you.

PRAY:

Lord, help me to see that worshipping you is never a waste of time. Teach me to pause, listen, pay attention, and praise you in the middle of my ordinary daily life.

Day 1 - Stop working to start praising

What if worshipping Jesus required you to risk your time, comfort, occupation, routine, and life as you know it to respond to God? The shepherds in Luke 2 were just ordinary people, doing ordinary work, on an ordinary night, when suddenly God interrupted with extraordinary news! **What if the greatest risk you could take is to give your time to something that matters WAY more than what's already filling it?** We can get so busy managing our time and controlling our calendars that we can easily miss the extraordinary opportunities that God puts right in front of us. Sometimes those "divine interruptions" are invitations for us to stop and witness God doing something miraculously far greater than any of our daily responsibilities or self made plans in our lives.

The shepherds were the first to receive the heavenly birth announcement of Jesus. When we pause to think about this, it should encourage us all. God chose to reveal Himself *first* to lowly shepherds on a hillside doing a humble job in the middle of the night. They weren't part of the religious elite, influential leaders, or even considered to be "skilled" tradesmen at the time. Yet, God came first to those that other's may have seen as the least. Despite their low position, shepherds worked hard! They had to protect their flocks, feed, and lead them 24/7. However, when God interrupted their hard work, they immediately stopped, listened, and "hurried" to obey Him. It would have been easy to be consumed by their responsibilities, and decide to go find Jesus on their next day off, or in the morning when they had more time. Instead, it says they literally "hurried" to do what God had asked.

Unlike the shepherds, do we let our schedules & responsibilities leave little time for us to be interrupted by God? How often do we miss opportunities to worship or to simply be present with God due to our own agendas & overly packed schedules? What would it take for us to stop working & start praising Him with our daily lives this Christmas season?

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- Is God inviting me to do something that I've been putting off?
- What is keeping me from moving forward in obedience? Is it fear, uncertainty, busyness, or comfort?
- Am I waiting on the "perfect" timing or my circumstances to change before I take a step of faith?

RISK IT:

Consider one area that you are justifying waiting, over-thinking, over planning, or frozen in fear instead of moving towards what God has called you to do. Prayerfully consider a first step that you could take this week towards obedience. Stop standing and MOVE towards where He's calling you to trust Him in faith.

PRAY:

Lord, help me not to be so comfortable with where I am that I miss where you are leading me. Give me the courage and strength to move when you call me. Even if I don't have all the details figured out yet, help me to move forward in faithful action.

Day 2 - Stop standing to start moving

READ: Luke 2:8-20; Hebrews 11-12:3

Just as we discussed yesterday, the shepherds immediately "hurried" to follow God. They didn't send one shepherd to go ahead of them to scope it out first. They didn't stand around discussing what they had seen, or debate about what to do next. Instead, they were willing to have their work routine interrupted, go immediately on an unfamiliar journey, and MOVE in obedience towards what God had called them to do.

Of course, taking the time to seek discernment, wisdom, and confirmation from God are good practices. However, there are times when we can use those practices to justify our reluctancy or hesitancy to follow God. We can claim to be waiting to "discern" something, when we already know deep down inside what He has called us to do. We can waste time anxiously planning, over thinking, attempting to control, or trying to find the "perfect moment" that we get stuck standing instead of moving. Sometimes we allow our fears of the unknown take control. Instead of discernment, we are actually seeking some type of guarantee, control, or knowledge of God's full plan before we take a step of faith toward what He's calling us to do.

In these moments, it's good for us to examine the Biblical definition of faith. In **Hebrews 11:1** it says, *"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."* Faith has 2 parts: intellectual assent and trust. If we look at the simple example of a chair, the intellectual part is seeing the chair and being in agreement that it's designed for someone to sit on it. The trust comes when we sit on the chair. Many people believe in the intellectual aspects of faith, and will agree that the facts about the Bible are true. Remember, even the demons believe this (see **James 2:19**). However, true faith requires us to trust Him enough to *move*. Faith requires action! We have to be willing to "sit on the chair".

Of course, our faith in action is not in order to earn the chair, it's already been given to us. True faith causes us to move toward what God is calling us to do in active obedience to Him. True faith trusts Him even when we don't know all the details or the outcome just yet. **Just like the shepherds, we have to stop standing, waiting, attempting to control, over thinking, and have the faith to actually MOVE!**

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- What makes me hesitate to share about my faith?
- Where am I missing opportunities to share, encourage, or invite others to a life with Jesus?
- Who in my life is God nudging me to share my faith story with? Who is God encouraging me to invite to church, or to my small group?

RISK IT:

Intentionally make time for one person today. Either send them a note of encouragement, share something God has been teaching you in your life, or have a conversation that points them towards the hope of Jesus. Prayerfully consider inviting them to church for the Blue Christmas service, one of the Christmas Eve candlelight services, or to join your small group in the upcoming new year.

PRAY:

Lord, thank you for the Good News of Jesus. Forgive me for the times that I've kept it to myself out of fear, busyness, or concern about what other's may think. Give me eyes to see the opportunities to share what you've done for me, and ears to hear your voice as you speak through me to those around me.

Day 3 - Stop stalling to start spreading

READ: Luke 2:17-18; Matt 28:19-20; Romans 1:16; Matt 5:13-16

The shepherds didn't initially go back to their normal lives after their encounter with Jesus. They also didn't wait to process or fully understand what they had experienced. Instead, they immediately shared their story and started spreading the Good News. The result was everyone who heard it was "amazed". Not only were these lowly shepherds the first to receive the heavenly birth announcement, they were also the very first messengers God sent to deliver the greatest message the world would ever hear!

For many of us, the idea of sharing our faith makes us immediately uncomfortable. Maybe we feel like we are unqualified, unprepared, or we fear not having all the answers. We can easily convince ourselves that we won't know what to say, or how to say it correctly. We can fear changing a relationship, or facing an uncomfortable situation. We can even feel like our own lives have to be perfect before we can become God's messengers, or that our imperfections will somehow make our faith less believable to others.

If we look at the shepherds, they didn't have perfect presentation skills, perfect lives, influence or leadership skills, nor were they qualified religious teachers of their day. These were simple people, living simple lives, doing simple jobs that had a powerful experience with a loving God. **God doesn't ask us to be qualified or perfect, He only asks us to be willing & obedient to Him.** He doesn't just call pastors, small group leaders, or church staff members to spread the gospel. It's clear throughout scripture that God calls ALL of us who believe in Him to share His good news. **Sharing the Good News of what God has done in our lives, inviting others to experience in His goodness, and encouraging everyone with the hope we have in Him is our God given purpose on this earth.**

As Jesus says, in **Matthew 9:35-38** *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few"* We are ALL called to be laborers to His harvest and to spread the Good News, no matter what the risks might be, no matter how long (or short) we've known Jesus, no matter how skilled we are at Bible knowledge, and no matter how many mistakes we've made in our lives. **Just like the shepherds, we are called to go and share the Good News to everyone we meet.**

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- What fears or distractions are keeping me from hearing from God?
- Am I spending more time talking to God or asking Him for things, verses taking the time to listen & hear from Him?
- Am I quick to respond in fear or anxiety to my circumstances, or do I pause to seek God's guidance & wisdom?
- What is God trying to teach me, or speak to me, through the difficult situations in my life?

RISK IT:

Read over Luke 2:8-20 again very slowly. Take a moment to pause over the words, consider what God might be inviting you to hear, understand, trust, or change in your life. What is God calling you to risk in faith & obedience to Him? Whatever God reveals, don't delay - take a step towards obedience today.

PRAY:

Lord, help me to move beyond fear, distraction, and rushed reactions. Give me a heart that listens, a mind that reflects on Your truth, and a willingness to respond to what You say in faith.

Day 4 - Stop being afraid to start listening

Many times in scripture God says "do not fear". However, there are other times in scripture where it says to "fear God". At first glance this may seem contradictory or at best confusing. Who am I supposed to fear, or not fear, and why?

Fearing God - *(READ: Proverbs 1:9; Ecclesiastes 12:13; Psalm 111:10)* - The "fear" of God in these verses, is describing the worship & acknowledgement of His great power and authority over our lives. Fearing God in this way should lead us to honor God with our lives, our choices, and encourage us to follow Him. Much like a child's relationship with their parents, this "fear" is out of honor & respect for who God is.

Don't fear man (or life's circumstances) - (*READ: Proverbs 29:25; Isaiah 41:10; 2 Timothy 1:7; Hebrews 13:6; Romans 8; John 16:33; Joshua 1:9*) - The fear of man (or of our circumstances) will always lead us towards sin. God tells us over and over not to fear anything here on this earth. He promises that even though we will have struggles, He is always victorious and will continually be our strength & refuge through it all.

Don't fear God's presence - *(READ: Luke 2: 9-10; Luke 1:11-20, 30; Matthew 28:5; Daniel 8:16)* Experiencing the sudden physical presence of God, or of His heavenly messengers, would naturally evoke awe, fear, and amazement. Our natural human response is to be fearful of things that we can't fully understand or explain. Therefore, it's not surprising that almost every time in scripture when heavenly beings encounter earthly beings, God says, "fear not". It's important to note that this is always the FIRST thing He says. This is because in order to hear God's instructions we have to let go of our fears and listen with faith towards what He calls us to do. For example, in Luke 1:11-20, Gabriel's message to Zachariah required faith, not fear. When Zachariah doubted God in fear, God delayed the fulfillment of His message until his faith was restored. The shepherds, on the other hand, let go of their fears immediately and heard God's instructions with faithfulness. They were able to receive God's message, and obey His commands right away.

Listening and hearing instructions from God can be scary, whether it's through an angel, or through prayer and time in God's word. We fear the unknown, the risks He might be asking us to take, or the things of this world He might ask us to give over to Him. However, if we truly have faith in who He says He is, and in His good plans for us, then we have nothing to fear except for living in disobedience to Him.

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- Am I simply trying to get through the day, or am I truly living intentionally with Jesus?
- What habits, distractions, priorities, or fears are keeping me from living fully in the light of Christ?
- How could my daily ordinary responsibilities become opportunities to worship & share Jesus?
- When I look at my calendar and reflect on how I spend my time, what does it reveal about who or what matters most? Is God wanting to transform this? Am I willing to risk my time for Him?

RISK IT:

Consider one way to make Jesus a bigger priority in your everyday life for this upcoming New Year. Maybe it's creating a day/time for daily scripture reading, joining a small group, increasing your worship attendance, or even just inviting friends to join you.

PRAY:

Jesus, I don't want to just fit you into my schedule. Take my life, my time, my priorities, and my everyday choices and help me to allow my life to be truly transformed by you.

Day 5 - Stop working at night to start living in the light

READ: Luke 2:20; Proverbs 3:5-6; Matthew 5:14-16

The shepherd's story ends a bit differently than it started. Even though they returned to their same ole' jobs, THEY were changed. Luke 2:20 tells us that they returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen. They didn't go back to their simple ordinary lives the same way that they left. They had encountered Jesus! Their ordinary lives now had an extraordinary purpose.

We can spend our whole lives working in our ordinary daily busyness, striving, worry, fear, and distractions, OR we can accept Jesus' invitation to a life of extraordinary. Jesus invites us to live differently, to be transformed by His presence, and to live our lives in the light of His truth and goodness. We have a choice. We can stay as we are, working & striving alone in the night, OR we can choose Jesus and live in His extraordinary light. **Christmas doesn't have to be a single moment in time where we pause to reflect on God. We can allow this divine encounter to transform how we spend ALL of our time, ALL year round.**

The shepherds remind us that Christmas wasn't just about what they saw, it was about how they responded to it:

- They stopped working to **praise HIM**
- They stopped standing to **move in obedience to HIM**
- They stopped stalling to **spread the GOOD news**
- They stopped being afraid to **listen to HIM**
- They stopped working in the night, and **returned to LIVING in the LIGHT**

We often think we don't have enough time, energy, finances, or talents & abilities to do what God is calling us to do. What if following Jesus required us to ask ourselves if we are truly spending all of those things doing what matters most to *HIM*? We give up our time, energy, and finances to do what we value most. An honest quick look at our calendars, or our bank accounts, will reveal what we are truly valuing the most this Christmas season.

The shepherds didn't just take a moment to go see Jesus, like we might take a moment to go to a Christmas service once a year. Instead, they allowed their encounter with Jesus to change their lives, and to give them the faith to risk everything!

JOSEPH

Week 3 | Risk Your Reputation | Matthew 1:18-25

Matthew 1:24

"When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife."

Risky Christmas

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- When have I had to choose what was right, over what was easy or expected of me to do?
- Where is God calling me to be faithful right now, even if others might not agree or understand?

RISK IT:

Choose one act of faithfulness today, even if it risks others misunderstanding, or it goes unnoticed. Choose to follow God BEFORE you know the full outcome.

PRAY:

Lord, help me to follow you no matter what. Even if others don't understand, disagree with my choices, or don't notice my quiet obedience.

Day 1 - Begin with faithfulness

What if being faithful required you to risk your reputation? What if it meant facing judgement and disgrace from your family, friends, and basically everyone you know? This is exactly what Joseph was facing when he found out his fiancé had become pregnant.

Historically, an engaged Jewish couple would spend an entire year between their engagement and being married. During this time the couple would spend very little time together, and would have married as virgins. Therefore, we can only imagine the hard conversations, hurt, and confusion Joseph must have felt when it says Mary "was found to be pregnant" (Matt 1:18).

In this moment, Joseph could only assume that he had been betrayed. By Jewish law, this was considered adultery during the betrothal period. Therefore, if he was following God's laws, he wasn't supposed to marry an unfaithful spouse. Most men would have brought her to the religious authorities, where she would have been publicly shamed, punished, and even stoned to death. Joseph would have retrieved the endowment he paid to her father and had the opportunity to betroth a new bride.

Joseph chose grace and mercy instead of what would have served himself. It says in Matthew 1:19 that he planned "to divorce her quietly." Even though he had to assume she had sinned against him, he planned to treat her in the most compassionate way that he could. We may not know a lot about Joseph from the scriptures, but this initial act of grace shows that he was not only faithful & obedient to God's laws, but also filled with love, grace & compassion for those around him. He would have undoubtedly faced scrutiny from family, friends, and his community for taking this more compassionate route.

Joseph was willing to risk his reputation in order to faithfully follow God, even BEFORE he had any assurance of what the outcome would eventually be.

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- When am I most tempted to react before pausing, listening, or spending time in prayer?
- How could slowing down and taking the time to consider help me better discern and hear God's voice and direction?
- Am I sometimes more concerned with defending my reputation, or protecting myself, than discerning what God is calling me to do?

RISK IT:

Consider one area that you have been tempted to react based on your assumptions or emotions instead of asking questions, or pausing to allow God time to reveal His plans to you. Spend time in prayer over that situation today and ask God to show you how to respond with His wisdom and grace. Once God reveals that next right step - MOVE and do it without delay!

PRAY:

Lord, help me to pause instead of reacting out of self-defense, hurt, or fear. Help me to trust and have faith in your wisdom, protection, and good plans for my life. Guide me towards your wisdom and truth in those moments when I feel emotionally insecure.

Day 2 - Take time to consider

READ: Matt 1:19-20; Isaiah 55:8-9; Lam 3:25-26; Micah 7:7

Joseph had planned to divorce Mary quietly with compassion and grace, however, he didn't act on this idea immediately. He took time to pause and consider his decision. Many times our immediate response is not the best response, especially when we've been hurt or betrayed. It can be easy to act out of anger because of our hurt & fears. We try to remedy our situation quickly through control, defend our reputations, or seek revenge without even knowing the full story just yet. Thankfully, Joseph displayed a steady mature faithful spirit when he took the time to pause and consider what God would want him to do. **He was willing to risk his own reputation because he trusted in God's wisdom, timing, and plans for his life.**

During this time, God spoke to Joseph through an angel in a dream. It was only after this direct message from God that Joseph moved forward. He changed his course of action to obey God and wed Mary, despite her pregnancy. Of course, not many of us will experience an angelic message from God like Joseph. Instead, we may hear God's voice through reading in His word, through His Spirit in prayer, or even through wise counsel of other believers in our life. Taking the time to pause and consider before we move forward gives God the space to respond with His wisdom, discernment, and guidance. As it says in Isaiah 55 "His ways are higher than our ways". God lives in the present, past and future. Therefore, He knows what is best for us, even if it doesn't make sense just yet. We can trust and have faith that God's plans are worth ANY risk.

A good test when we feel the pressure to react is to ask ourselves is, *"Am I responding to what I know, or reacting to what I assume?"* Joseph's pause wasn't because he wanted to delay a hard conversation, or procrastinate what God had called him to do. Instead, it was about not reacting emotionally, or rushing to judgement. As soon as Joseph heard from God, he *immediately* acted in obedience. *Think about the last time something happened to you that initially felt like betrayal. Ask yourself these questions as you revisit that situation:*

- Did you give yourself time to understand the situation before deciding how you felt about it?
- Did you make assumptions about someone's intentions before asking questions, or knowing all the facts?
- Did you consider how your response would affect others, or were you more focused on how you felt in the moment?

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- Am I more afraid of disappointing others than disappointing God?
- Do I compromise my morals, convictions, or God's truths to keep the peace or maintain others approval of me?
- Am I willing to allow someone to have the wrong opinion about me, rather than compromising what I know is right or true?
- Do I trust in God's character enough to obey Him when I cannot control what the outcome or response from others will be?

RISK IT:

Consider one area where the fear of other's opinions has been influencing your decisions or actions. Take one step towards obedience to God today, even if there is a risk you'll be misunderstood. Remember that we are only responsible for our obedience, not managing other's perceptions of our obedience.

PRAY:

Lord, sometimes I care way too much about what other's think. Forgive me for allowing my fears to become more important than following you. Give me the courage of Joseph to trust you, be faithful, and act in obedience no matter what.

Day 3 - Don't be afraid

READ: Matthew 1:20-21; Galatians 1:10; Proverbs 29:25

What happens when your obedience to God goes against the thoughts and opinions of everyone around you? What if it will risk your reputation, status, or even your relationships with family and friends? This is exactly what Joseph was facing when God said "do not be afraid" to take Mary as your wife.

One of the greatest obstacles in our obedience to God isn't that we don't know what God wants us to do. Instead, it's the fear of what that obedience may cost us.

Think about the last time you were seeking God's will about a decision in your life. Did you worry that…

- Someone might misunderstand my intentions
- Doing the right thing, actually might look like I'm doing the wrong thing to others
- I might disappoint, lose approval, or upset someone else

Of course, it's not bad to be concerned about our reputations. In fact, God calls us to be a people who live with integrity, and to be seen as those with good character (**1 Tim 3:7**). The goal isn't to completely stop caring about what other think. Instead, the goal is to stop allowing what others think to *control* our thoughts and actions more than God. Nothing should ever be more important than following God's Will for our lives.

Sometimes obedience to Him will look like…

- Saying "yes", or "no", when others aren't going to understand
- Speaking truth in love, even when it's unpopular
- Choosing compassion or grace when others would choose judgement or criticism
- Doing the right thing, even when no one understands your intentions, and you won't be able to explain them fully

Joseph couldn't control what other's thought about his decision to take Mary as his wife after she became pregnant. Some people probably assumed he was actually the father and they had consummated their marriage early. Others may have assumed he was foolish for marrying someone that had betrayed him and was no longer a virgin. Joseph knew all of the potential rumors and how his reputation would be affected. Still, he faithfully chose obedience to God over his fears of what other's thought of him. Just like Joseph, we all have to ask ourselves - *If I knew someone might not understand, or would disagree with me, or would think less of me, would I still be willing to do what I believe God is calling me to do?*

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- Do I need to know how things will work out before I can be obedient?
- Am I more concerned with making sure others understand my decisions, than trusting God with their opinions?
- Can I remain faithful when I don't have the answers, the reassurance, or the approval I want from others?
- Am I only trusting God to give me the outcome I want, or am I trusting Him regardless of the outcome?

RISK IT:

Consider an area of your life that God may be asking you to surrender in obedience to Him. Instead of trying to figure out every option, detail, or scenario, take a next step towards obedience today. Trust God with what you cannot control, surrender what you cannot understand, and allow Him to guide you through what happens next.

PRAY:

Lord, help me to trust you even when I can't see the whole picture. Teach me to surrender my need to control outcomes, circumstances, and other's opinions. Give me the courage to obey even when I don't have all the answers.

Day 4 - Trust God

Read: Matthew 1:20-24; Romans 8:28; Matthew 17:20

When Joseph received the angel's message about Mary's child being conceived by the Holy Spirit, and that her child would be the Messiah, he didn't know the full story just yet. He couldn't have imagined all that God had planned, and what he was hearing must have seemed impossible. Despite any doubts he may have had, he trusted God and he faithfully obeyed.

In order for us to trust God, we don't need to fully understand every detail. It also doesn't mean that we don't have questions. We can be sure that Joseph had some unanswered questions in this moment, as most of us would. However, many questions he had, Joseph still trusted in God enough to surrender his plans, expectations, and reputation to act in obedience to what God had called him to do. He had to trust that doing God's Will was worth risking the questions he couldn't answer, the uncertainty of what would come, and his reputation among his family & friends. He certainly couldn't guarantee that others would believe an angel came to him in a dream, or that God miraculously conceived a child with Mary. **Joseph had to decide that God's word could be trusted more than what he himself could see, understand, or even explain to others.**

Often, trusting God means that we believe in His goodness and faithfulness even when we don't know how things will turn out. **Matthew 1:24** says *"When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife".* Joseph's trust led to immediate obedience. Trust requires us to fully surrender our control of the outcome, and recognize that God's ways are always greater than our own. Thankfully, God's faithfulness doesn't depend on our ability to understand His plans.

There can be a difference in *saying* we trust God, and *actually* trusting Him. Especially when it comes to the things in our lives that we are afraid to lose.

Have you said that you trust God, BUT still…

- Try to control the outcome, or how others might perceive it
- Need to know all the answers before you move forward
- Struggle to let go of your plans when they don't match God's
- Seek reassurance from others, over wisdom from God
- Feel anxious when you can't explain/defend what God's doing
- Obey only when you feel at "peace" or a sense of comfort

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- Do I need to be liked, needed, appreciated, or understood in order to feel valuable or worthy?
- Do I change my behavior or compromise my beliefs because I want to avoid upsetting others?
- Can others disagree with me without needing to explain my point of view?
- Do I define myself by how dependable, reliable, or responsible others perceive me to be?
- Am I secure enough in God's love for me that I can let go of trying to manage my reputation?

RISK IT:

Consider one area you are allowing someone else's expectations influence you. Take one step in this area that let's go of managing your reputation. Maybe it's letting go of a responsibility that isn't yours to carry, or speaking truth without over explaining or feeling guilty.

PRAY:

Jesus, thank you that my identity is in you. Forgive me for loosing sight of who you created me to be. Give me the courage to live faithfully reflecting who You are, rather than what other's think of me.

Day 5 - Identity rooted in God

READ: Matt 1:21-25; Ephesians 2:10; John 1:12; 1 Peter 2:9

We live in a world where much of our identity can be wrapped up in how others perceive us. We want to be known as the dependable friend, the responsible parent, the helpful co-worker, the person who always shows up, or the one that has it all together. One quick glance at our curated social media pages will reveal exactly how "put together" or successful we desire other's to perceive us. While some of those things may describe parts of who we are, they shouldn't determine our worth. When we get this backwards, we will find ourselves exhausted trying to maintain our reputations by…

- Saying "yes", when we need to say "no"
- Avoiding difficult conversations just to keep the peace
- Over explaining because we need others to agree
- Taking responsibility for other's feelings or reactions
- Measuring our worth by how dependable, approved of, or how appreciated we are

If our identity is rooted truly in who God says we are, like it was for Joseph, then we don't have to compromise to be everything to everyone. **Having our identities rooted in Christ allows us to live from a place of security instead of constant striving.**

There is a difference in desiring to have a good reputation in order to point others to God, and *needing* to protect it at all cost. God calls us to live a life of good character, but how other's perceive us is ultimately out of our control. Just like there was for Joseph, there will be times when people will make assumptions without knowing the whole story, when people misunderstand our intentions, or when they don't agree with our decisions. We can't control that, and God doesn't expect us to. **God calls us to be responsible for our character, not for other's perception of it.**

When our identity is rooted in Christ, we can…

- Be kind without people pleasing
- Be filled with grace without abandoning or compromising truth, protecting others from consequences, allowing our boundaries to be crossed, or ignoring accountability
- Be secure without needing to control or know the outcome
- Be loving without needing others to reciprocate or validate us
- Be generous without needing recognition
- Be obedient to God no matter the cost

MARY

Week 4 | Risk Yourself | Luke 1:26-56; Luke 2:1-24

Luke 1:37-38

"For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."

Risky Christmas

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- Have I ever avoided doing what God asked due to potential fears, risks or loss?
- Is there somewhere God calling me to respond now?
- What is holding me back from responding faithfully, & immediately to God?

RISK IT:

Identify one area where the risks are keeping you from being obedient to God. Consider one step you could take in the New Year towards faithful obedience in this area.

PRAY:

Lord, help me to follow you no matter the risks. Give me the courage to take the next step towards obedience to you.

Day 1 - Risky response

What if responding in faithful obedience to God meant risking your WHOLE life? This is exactly what Mary was facing when the angel came to her in Luke 1. God told her that she was going to conceive a child by supernatural means, and that He would be the Messiah. She knew that many would assume she had been unfaithfulness to her husband. She knew that being obedient would risk losing her husband, her reputation, and potentially her life if they decided she was guilty of adultery. Despite the risks, Mary proved to be faithful, available, and ready to respond in faithfulness to God. She doesn't question, hesitate, or bargain with God. Instead, she simply says "yes" to this profoundly life-altering calling.

What can we can learn from Mary's courageously risky response in Luke 1:38? Which part of her response is hardest for you?

- ***"I am the Lord's servant"*** - Mary began by stating her true identity. She accepts and knows that she is under God's authority. Just like Moses (Exodus 3:4-12), and Samuel (1 Sam 3:10), Mary reacts to God's calling by humbly stating her availability & willingness to obey Him. Our *availability* and willingness to surrender is **much** more important than our earthly *abilities* or skills we think we need to do what God has called us to do. Mary surrendered her life to God's plan, and faithfully placed his desires over her own.
- ***"Mary answered"*** - Mary didn't hesitate, become trapped in fear, or even question God's instructions. She didn't ask for another sign, or gather friends and family to gain their approval first. Instead, she already had faith in God's plans, power, and goodness in her life. She trusted that saying "yes" to God was worth any risk she may face because of it.
- "***May your word to me be fulfilled"*** - Mary fully submits to God's *word*, and trusts in His promises. She consents to God's plans for her life no matter the cost. She has faith in God's power to accomplish this impossible miracle of conception, and fully cooperates with God's Spirit in His plans for her life as the mother of the Messiah.

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- How attached am I to the way I think my life SHOULD look?
- Have I been interpreting my discomfort as a sign that something isn't from God?
- Where am I choosing personal comfort, ease, or convenience over faithfulness?
- Am I waiting for the perfect circumstances before I take a step of faith?
- Is my desire for control or security keeping me from experiencing the freedom of dependency on God?

RISK IT:

Consider one area that you are choosing comfort over calling. Is there a step that you could take in the New Year that would place your calling over your comfort? Write a resolution today to do one thing (even if it's small) that God is calling you to do. Do one thing that moves you beyond your routine, familiarity, or comfort zone. Serve, give, or obey Him in a way that seeks His purpose rather than safety or comfort.

PRAY:

Lord, help me to see the areas that I am holding my plans, desires, and goals too tightly. Help me to trust that Your purpose for my life is much greater than my comfort.

Day 2 - Risking comfort

READ: Luke 1:26-38; Ephesians 5:17; James 1:22; Heb 11:8

Sometimes we can mistake our convenience, ease, or comfort for confirmation of following God. We can falsely associate our personal comfort with achieving God's plans or His peace in our lives. However, if we read God's Word, He never promises us ease or comfort if we follow Him. Throughout scripture, God calls His people WAY beyond what is familiar, comfortable, convenient, or easy. Often, when we place our comfort over God's calling it's because of our desire to control our circumstances. When we take the risk to place God's calling over our comfort, then we can trust God no matter the circumstances. "Comfort" calls us to protect what we know, while "calling" invites us to trust in the ONE who knows best. *When you look at the difference between seeking your comfort verses seeking God's calling for your life, which of these do you struggle with the most?*

COMFORT	CALLING
Stay here	Go where God leads
Play it safe	Step out in faith
Lord, help me achieve my goals & plans	*"Here I am Lord, send me"* - align my desires with yours
Seeking predictability	Seeking purpose
I shouldn't be struggling if I'm doing the right thing	Struggles don't determine my path, God does

Of course, experiencing comfort and ease in our lives isn't automatically bad. God loves us and certainly wants the best for us. He isn't telling us to intentionally seek out the most difficult path just for the sake of being difficult. Instead, God is calling us to notice when our desire to remain comfortable becomes *more important* than our desire to be obedient to Him. Mary wasn't pursuing an uncomfortable life, however, she was obedient when God's calling was going to risk her comfort. Mary knew that her peace came from following God, and not from the ease of her circumstances.

Sometimes we tell ourselves that we will obey God once we "feel" at peace, or ease, about a situation or a circumstance. In reality, God calls us to obedience and surrender, despite how we "feel" emotionally in the moment. He calls us to trust in Him even when we can't see the full plan just yet.

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- Do I compromise my beliefs in order to keep my relationships comfortable?
- Can I love others without needing them to agree, or understand my decisions?
- Am I surrounded by those that encourage me in my faith, or by those I feel the need to earn their approval?
- Is there someone in my life that God is calling me to encourage in their faith?

RISK IT:

Consider a relationship where you may be allowing the fears of disagreement or misunderstanding to influence your decisions. How could you practice loving them without compromising what you believe God is calling you to do? Take one small act of obedience this week without making someone else's approval the deciding factor.

PRAY:

Lord, help me to recognize when my desire to be accepted, understood, or approved competes with my desire to follow you. Teach me to love others without living for their approval, and help me to be the kind of friend who encourages others to do the same.

Day 3 - Risking relationships

READ: Luke 1:39-56; Galatians 1:10; Romans 12:18, 15:5

What happens when your obedience to God has the potential to change your relationships with others, and with your circumstances in life? Mary knew that accepting God's calling on her life could risk changing her relationship with Joseph, her family, friends, church, and even her community. She knew that being faithful to God meant accepting that not everyone would understand or agree with her. Naturally, we want those we are closest with to understand our intentions, support our decisions, and affirm our choices. Sometimes we allow our fear of someone else's reaction dictate our willingness to obey.

Ask yourself if you have ever struggled with any of these:

- Staying silent when God is prompting you to speak in truth because you don't want to offend, or to be challenged
- Compromising your convictions because you don't want to be the only one who disagrees
- Avoiding healthy boundaries, or people pleasing
- Allowing others expectations to determine our path
- Ignoring God's promptings to give, serve, or step out in faith because others might disagree, or think differently of us

Of course, this doesn't mean that we are to be uncaring, or dismissive of other's feelings. We are called to live at peace with others if at all possible (Romans 12:18). God wants us to make every effort in this area, while remembering that we aren't in control of someone else's feelings. **We can love and consider others without being controlled by their approval or expectations. Acceptance should never be more important than our obedience to God (Galatians 1:10).**

While God doesn't want our relationships to be more important than our obedience, He also doesn't want us to be alone. He created us to desire community, and He knows we need people in our lives to encourage us along the way. Mary received this much needed encouragement through her relationship with Elizabeth. God knew Mary needed a loving and tangible reminder that she wasn't alone during her most vulnerable time. When we risk everything in obedience to God, He doesn't say that it will be easy, but He promises to never leave us. He provides us with the strength, ability, and encouragement we need to accomplish what He has planned for us.

Elizabeth is a good example of how we too can encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ as they follow God's plans, even when we don't fully understand.

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- Where am I confusing being responsible with attempting to be in control?
- What would it look like for me to do my part and truly leave the outcome in God's hands?
- Am I asking God for control over something in my life that He is actually asking me to surrender to Him?

RISK IT:

Consider an area of your life that you might be trying to control the outcome. It could be a relationship, a decision, a difficult conversation, or an uncertain future. *Ask yourself these two questions in your prayer time today:*

1. *What is God asking ME to be responsible for?*
2. *What am I trying to control that God is asking me to surrender into His hands?*

PRAY:

Lord, forgive me for spending so much time trying to anticipate, manage, and control my circumstances. Give me the courage and wisdom to know what things you have entrusted to me, and what things I need to surrender into your hands. Help me to trust you regardless of knowing the details, timeline, or what the outcome will be.

Day 4 - Risking control

Read: Luke 1:38; Proverbs 3:5-6; Isaiah 55:8-9; 2 Cor 12:9

Mary doesn't say "yes" because she has it all figured out, she says "yes" because she trusts the ONE who does! Her response is a picture of true faith and surrender. If we are honest, most of us prefer to have a few more details before we hop out of the drivers seat, right? Without realizing it, we often can make our obedience to God conditional.

When we have conditional obedience, we say things like:

- I trust you, **BUT** I need to know how things will work out first
- I'll take a step, **BUT** I need to feel "at peace" or more confident about my decision first
- I'll surrender, **BUT** I need to be sure the outcome matches my expectations first
- I'll say "yes", **BUT** I need to know whether things will get easier or how long this will take first
- I have faith, **BUT** I need to know if the outcome will be worth my sacrifice first
- I want to follow you, **BUT** I need to be sure I've got the strength, ability, resources, and support I need first

One of the hardest parts of surrendering our control is learning the difference between our responsibility and God's. We are responsible for our choices, attitudes, and the way we treat others. However, we are not responsible for controlling the outcome, our circumstances, or other's reactions. Mary's responsibility was to say "yes", and to act in accordance with God's will for her life. She wasn't responsible for everyone's response to her decision, or what those outcomes would be. Therefore, she doesn't respond by asking God for a guarantee that Joseph will understand, or that her reputation won't be damaged, or for a detailed timeline of events. She doesn't ask about the outcome, instead, she trusts that God's purpose for her life was worth surrendering for.

Of course, our surrendering doesn't mean that we get stuck in passivity, avoid responsibility, or simply accept everything that happens as God's will for our lives. We shouldn't confuse surrender with abandoning our God given responsibilities. God calls us to make our own choices, to step out in faith, and to actively follow Him. Mary didn't give up on her life when she said "yes" to God. Instead, she chose to purposely surrender her life into God's hands, and to actively follow what He had called her to do with it.

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- Do I view my life as something that belongs to me, or as something God has entrusted to me?
- Am I giving God the best of me, or the leftovers?
- What am I struggling to surrender the most: time, resources, reputation, gifts, or my future?
- What would change if I stopped trying to ask God to join me in my plans, and looked for ways to begin to participate in His?

RISK IT:

Consider one area of your life that you have been holding on tightly to. Make Mary's words your own and prayerfully say to God today, "I am the Lord's servant". Humbly take a step towards surrendering this area to Him.

PRAY:

Lord, thank you for inviting me into your story. Help me not to only give you what is convenient or comfortable. Help me to surrender my whole self, and trust you with my reputation, comfort, relationships, and my need to control. Use my life for your purposes, and help me to focus on who you are, instead of what I am giving up for myself.

Day 5 - Risking your life

READ: Luke 1:39-56; Romans 12:1; 1 Thess 5:16-18; Matt 6:24

Mary's response to surrendering her life, future plans, relationships, reputation, and even her physical body was to worship God. Her circumstances hadn't changed, her future was still vulnerable and full of challenges. However, instead of focusing on what she was "risking", she focused on WHO she was "risking" it for. Her song of worship describes God's character and His promises. She knew that she was serving God-given purpose that was much bigger and greater than herself.

Many times we give God "parts" of ourselves, because we are more focused on what we are giving up verses the ONE we are giving it to. We tend to surrender the convenient areas, while holding tightly to others. We give God our Sundays, but we hold tightly to the rest of the week. We serve him when we are available, but we hesitate when we have to sacrifice our routines. We don't mind writing a check from abundance, but we hold back when it comes to sacrificing something for ourselves. We follow God as long as we understand where we are going and it doesn't disrupt too many of the plans we've already made.

This isn't what God wants for us. God isn't interested in being a small part of our lives, His invitation is for us to surrender our WHOLE lives to Him. Matthew 6:24 clearly tells us we can't serve God *and* ourselves. *Consider wholehearted surrender in your:*

TIME	Do I let God interrupt my routine, or redirect my future? Do my priorities reflect what matters most?
RESOURCES	Am I generous, or protective over what I have?
RELATIONSHIP	Am I sacrificially loving others, even when it's hard?
REPUTATION	Am I more concerned with how other's perceive me, or my heart and desire to live faithfully?
GIFTS	Am I using what God has given me for His purposes?

If we follow Mary's example this Christmas, we will spend less time protecting the life *we planned*, so that we don't miss the life *God has planned* for us.

Mary shows us how to choose faithfulness over approval, calling over comfort, obedience over acceptance, surrender over certainty, and God's plans over our own. This is our invitation to true wholehearted surrender.

JESUS

Week 5 | Worth the Risk | Philippians 2:1-18; John 1:1-18

Philippians 2:6-7

"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

Risky Christmas

CONSIDER:

- How has your life changed since you met Jesus?
- Have you truly allowed His extravagant sacrificial love to change and transform you?
- Is there something you need to surrender, or a risk you need to take, in order to live the life He died to give you?

RISK IT:

Consider any areas that are keeping you from fully experiencing the love that Jesus came to give you. Take one step in surrendering that area to Him today.

PRAY:

Lord, give me the courage to fully surrender my life to you BECAUSE of your great love for me. Make me new!

Day 1 - He became flesh

READ: John 1:1-18; Philippians 2:1-18; John 3:16-17

Jesus existed WAY before the manger - Jesus IS God!

Although, we celebrate His "birth" at Christmas, Jesus has no beginning or end. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. He was present before creation, spoke the earth into motion, walked this earth as fully God AND fully man, died and rose again, and He is already living in the present AND in the future. Jesus fully possesses all the power, majesty, and authority of both heaven and earth. He is not half human, and therefore, only half God. Jesus is FULLY God, and yet He chose to humbly come to earth as also fully man. This concept of being fully God AND fully man is what John is talking about when he says "the Word became flesh" in **John 1:14**. Jesus wasn't just a good person, or a prophet who came to teach us how to live, Jesus is God Himself, in the flesh!

When we stop to think about the concept of God Himself willingly choosing to come to earth, not as a grown man or a powerful king, but as a helpless infant, it doesn't make sense. It's hard to imagine a more risky Christmas than the creator of the universe, becoming part of His creation. The ONE who holds all things in His hands, became a tiny baby held in the arms of a young teenage mother. Why would God choose to give up the glory of heaven for the all the limitations of humanity? The answer can be found in one of the most memorized scriptures of the Bible, **John 3:16-17**. Jesus didn't come because it was easy or convenient. He fully experienced hunger, thirst, exhaustion, pain, sickness, rejection, temptation, grief, and even death. He "made Himself nothing" (**Phil 2:6-7**), BECAUSE…as John 3:16 says, He LOVES us!

Our response to His extravagant love for us, and how far He was willing to go to express it, should forever shape & change the way we live our lives. Not because we have to earn His love, but because we've *already experienced it*. Jesus did much more than just *risk* His life, He *gave* it, so that we could live.

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- What areas do I struggle with humility, and/or with pride?
- How can I become more secure in who God says I am?

RISK IT:

Risk your pride - *"Test" yourself this week and honestly assess where you may need to surrender your pride:*

1. **Recognition Test:** How do I respond when no one notices what I've done?
2. **Correction Test:** Am I teachable or defensive when I'm corrected?
3. **Comparison Test:** How do I respond when someone else gets the opportunity or attention I wanted?
4. **Control Test:** Can I allow someone else to lead differently than I would?
5. **Service Test:** Am I willing to do something when I know I'll get nothing in return?
6. **Relationship Test:** Am I more concerned with being understood than understanding?
7. **Credit Test:** Can I celebrate others without pointing to my own contribution?

PRAY:

Lord, help me to see the areas that I am holding onto pride. Help me to be secure in who you say I am, so that I can humbly serve & love others.

Day 2 - He humbled Himself to serve

READ: Philippians 2:5-8; John 13:1-17; Mark 10:42-45

Jesus came, not to *be served*, but *to serve*. The King of Kings came as a servant to ALL, not just those that liked Him, were kind to Him, or worshiped Him. In John 13 when Jesus washes His disciples feet, and humbly takes on the role of the lowest servant of the household, He washes EVERYONE'S feet. He even washed the feet of those that He knew would betray Him, would run away and scatter when He needed them most, and that would deny even knowing Him in the coming days.

Jesus shows us that greatness in God's Kingdom looks very different than here on earth. It looks like *humility*. A well-known explanation is "humility isn't thinking less of yourself, it's thinking ABOUT yourself less". God doesn't want us to grovel, become self-loathing, put everyone else's needs first, or identify with being a slave. God loves us, calls us His children, and Jesus His son. **Humility is being secure enough in who God says you are that you don't need recognition, attention, credit, status, or appreciation to serve others.**

Jesus live His entire life in the framework of humility. He was born into a family of humble means, lived His life humbly serving those that were of lower status, marginalized or seen as outcasts. He courageously taught others to humble themselves through His ministry. Finally, He humbly submitted to death on a cross as a living sacrifice for us ALL.

Of course, living humbly doesn't mean that we enable mistreatment, or that we live without healthy boundaries. Jesus certainly had some "flipping table" moments in His life, and held others accountable. Humility isn't weakness, it's the absence of pride in ourselves. When we live humbly, we have to sacrifice our pride to serve & love others well. Sometimes our pride is obvious, and other times it can be hard for us to see it because we live in a world that worships pride. *Are there any of these areas where you struggle with living humbly in your life?*

Pride	Humility
Becoming defensive, offended, needing to prove you are right	Listening, considering feedback, remaining teachable, honestly examining yourself
Comparing, keeping score, making everything personal	Contentment, serving without reciprocity, considering others needs
Refusing to ask for help	Recognizing our need for others

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- Are there areas of my life that I haven't fully surrendered to God? Or that I'm still trying to control if I'm really honest?
- Is there an attitude, habit, relationship, or desire that God is asking me to sacrifice in order to follow Him?
- Does my daily life reflect that I belong to Jesus, or does it look like I'm really just living for myself? What needs to change in the New Year?

RISK IT:

If you have accepting Jesus' invitation to a life with Him today we want to celebrate with you! Please reach out and let us know, we would love to come alongside you with encouragement and support!

If you have accepted Jesus' saving grace in the past, but are struggling with the life long surrendering process, you are not alone. Prayerfully ask God what you need to surrender to Him in the New Year, and make one concrete step towards that this week.

PRAY:

Jesus, thank you for loving me enough to give your life for me. Help me to stop living like my life belongs to me. Teach me the joy of living a life fully surrendered to you.

Day 3 - He came to die

READ: Romans 5:6-8; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; Galatians 2:20

The Christmas story doesn't end with a baby in a manger. **Jesus came with a purpose - He came to die, so that we might live!** Jesus came to serve as the sacrificial Lamb of God. He lived a perfect life, fulfilled every requirement of the law, and then sacrificed His life on the alter of the cross to pay the ransom for our sins. Jesus is our REDEEMER! He has already redeemed each and every one of us. It's already done!! All Jesus calls us to do is believe in what He's done for us, accept His grace and forgiveness, and love God with all our hearts and all our lives.

The cross reminds us that love isn't just something we say, but it's something we must be willing to demonstrate through our sacrifice & surrender. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross demands a response. We have a choice to accept His gift of redemption and reconciliation, or to go our own way. Accepting His gift should lead us towards a life of following Him. His sacrifice for us, should lead us to the "risky" life of surrender and sacrifice for Him. Of course, most of us won't need to physically sacrifice our lives in order to follow Jesus, like those in the early church and many around the world today are called to do. Instead, He calls us to die to ourselves, our earthly desires, selfishness, pride, dishonesty, control, bitterness, and basically *anything* in our lives that we place above Him. This process of surrendering our WHOLE lives to Him is life long. This is the the process of sanctification, or simply our life long faith journey.

If you've never accepted Jesus' sacrifice & gift of forgiveness and grace, *pause here and prayerfully walk through these steps*. Then, be sure to tell someone! Either a pastor, friends & family, & seek out a church home if you don't already have one.
If you have questions or need support walking through these steps - meloniep@gumchruch.com I bensonm@gumchurch.com

1. **ADMIT** - (Romans 3:23, 6:23) Acknowledge that you aren't perfect, that you've made mistakes, and that the sin and brokenness in your life means you need a savior.
2. **BELIEVE** - (John 3:16) Have faith that God is who He says He is, that Jesus died for you because He loves you, and that His gift of forgiveness and grace is freely given to you.
3. **CONFESS** - (Romans 10:9-10) Declare that Jesus is Lord of your life, that HE is your savior, and that you are choosing to follow God with your whole heart as you surrender your life into His hands.

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- In what ways am I resisting the changes that Jesus wants for my life?
- What needs to change about my daily habits, relationships, decisions, and priorities to fully surrender to having a new life in Christ?
- Is there someone in my life that I need to encourage in their new life with Christ? Am I guilty for clinging to their past mistakes in un-forgiveness, instead of celebrating the new person that God wants them to be?

RISK IT:

Consider an area of your life that you need to let go of so that you can become who God created you to be. Sometimes these are strongholds, serious habits, or addictions. You may need support from a therapist, pastor, or friends and family. Take a step, even if it's small, towards letting go of your old identity, and accepting being made new!

PRAY:

Lord, forgive me for clinging to my old life. Help me to see the new life that you have for me. Guide me as I surrender more of my "old" self to you, and continue to make me more and more like you!

Day 4 - He changed everything

Read: 2 Cor 5:17, 3:16-18; Romans 6:4-11; Ephesians 2:1-10

That quiet night in Bethlehem changed the course of history. Jesus' life and ministry changed the way we understand living out God's character, grace, and promises. His submission to that unbearable day on the cross tipped the scales of eternity. Then, when He rose from the empty tomb, He made new life possible for ALL of humanity. Jesus' life literally changed EVERYTHING! He is our savior, rescuer, redeemer, and God's saving grace. Because of Jesus, we no longer have to remain who we once were, our past doesn't have to define us, our mistakes don't have to determine our future, and our identity is continually being made new as a child of God.

The words used for "made new" in scripture can be translated to the greek root word for metamorphosis. If we look at the definition of metamorphosis, it says, "*a complete change in appearance, character, or circumstance*", or "*a dramatic change in the form and habits of an animal during its development*". Just like a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly, this is how dramatically God wants to transform us as we spend our lives following Him. As it says in **2 Corinthians 5:17**, we are a "new creation". Caterpillars, and the butterflies they become, look NOTHING like each other. In fact, unless you are a scientist it would be impossible to know what that caterpillar has the capability of turning into. Of course, God knows exactly what it can become, because He knows what He created that caterpillar to be. This is just like us in our lives. God knows exactly what he created each of us to be, and He can't wait to make us new! We just have to trust Him with the process.

Sometimes the hardest thing about accepting something new, is letting go of the old. We can get comfortable with our old sins, unhealthily habits, patterns, and selfish desires, even when we know they are destructive to us. It's like a butterfly emerging from the chrysalis, beautifully made new, but refusing to spread their wings and fly into a whole new life of freedom.

Ask yourself if you are resisting change in any of these areas:

1. **New Identity** - Do I spend more time thinking about who I've been, or who I'm becoming in Christ?
2. **New Life** - Am I confusing God's grace with permission to remain unchanged?
3. **New Freedom** - Am I still trying to earn something that Jesus has already freely given me?

Risky Christmas:

Putting it into practice

CONSIDER:

- Which of the 4 risks is the hardest for me? Why?
- Am I more focused on protecting the life I've built, or pursuing the life God is calling me to live?
- What am I most afraid of when I think about taking risks to follow God?

RISK IT:

Consider your place in the Christmas story. What are you willing to risk to follow Jesus? Instead of asking yourself what goals you want to accomplish for this New Year, ask God what He wants to accomplish in and through you for this New Year. On the next page, write down a VERY different & risky New Year resolution for 2027!

PRAY:

Lord, thank you for sacrificing everything because of your great love for me. Teach me to be willing to risk my time, reputation, plans, resources, and life for you. Give me the faith of Mary, the obedience of Joseph, the generosity of the wise men, and the willingness of the shepherds when you call me. Help my life to be completely made new, as a reflection of your love and grace.

Day 5 - Your place in the story

READ: Matthew 16:24-26; Romans 12:1-2; Proverbs 3:5-6

We have spent this Christmas season focusing on what those in the days of Jesus' birth were willing to risk to follow, surrender, and worship God. The wise men risked their resources, traveled great distances, and even thwarted a powerful kings evil plans to generously honor Jesus. The shepherds left their work and earthly responsibilities to go and immediately to worship Jesus. Then, they proclaimed it to everyone they knew. Joseph risked his reputation, assumptions, and judgement from others when he took Mary to be his wife. Mary risked herself, surrendered her plans, comfort, and future to say YES to God's calling over her life. They all risked different parts of their lives, but they all had ONE thing in common: **Jesus was worth the risk!**

Jesus left heaven, humbly became flesh, served, gave his life, and promised to make all things new. He did ALL of this because we are *worth His risk*. We are worthy of His risk, not because of anything we have done or could ever do, but because of His great love for us.

Our place in the Christmas story is answering a simple question, "Is Jesus worth the risk?" As you read over the risks we've studied, prayerfully ask God where He is calling you to live risky in the New Year. On the next page, we invite you to join us as we get ready for the riskiest year of our lives in 2027! We don't have to know what the year holds, as long as we trust the one who is holding the future.

Consider each of these risks as you ask yourself, "Is HE worth it?":

1. **Risk your time:** Making Jesus a priority instead of fitting Him into whatever time is leftover in your schedule. *Is God calling you to serve on a ministry team, join a small group, or to simply schedule a regular time to spend with Him each day?*
2. **Risk your reputation:** Caring more about being faithful to God, than being liked and accepted by others. *Is God calling you to share your faith with someone, chose integrity over compromise, or maybe speak truth to someone close to you?*
3. **Risk your resources:** Holding your possessions, finances, gifts, and opportunities with open hands. *Is God calling you to give generously, use your talents to serve Him, or invest in something He is calling you towards in the New Year?*
4. **Risk yourself:** Surrendering your plans, desires, and future to God's plans for your life. *Is God calling you to let go of control, trust Him with the unknowns, take a step of faith, or completely change course or direction in your life?*

WORTH THE RISK | 2027

RISKY NEW YEAR

The greatest risk isn't following Jesus, only to find out He isn't worth it. The greatest risk is spending our lives holding onto what we need to surrender, only to miss the life He came to give us. Jesus is worth EVERY risk! Let's get ready for the riskiest YEAR of our lives in 2027! *Take time to pray, reflect, listen, and write your responses.*
(Remove this page and place it somewhere as a daily reminder)

Because Jesus is worth the risk...

I CAN LET GO OF:

What am I trying to control through my own plans, desires, and efforts that God wants me to surrender to Him in 2027?

_____

_____

_____

I CAN STEP INTO:

Where is God inviting me to take a step of faith?

_____

_____

_____

I NEED TO STOP:

What sin, unhealthy habit(s), or brokenness is keeping me from following Jesus wholeheartedly? Write your commitment to give this over to Him in 2027:

_____

_____

_____

I CAN START:

What is a practical first step God is asking me to take in the New Year?

_____

_____

_____

Who can I share this with to hold me accountable? _____