

**FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS**  
**Advent Worship Series – Week 1**  
*How Will I Know?*  
*Zechariah’s Journey from Mistrust to Conviction*  
**December 3, 2017**

**WORSHIP SERVICE OUTLINES**

Each worship outline contains all elements needed for your worship service. The order of each service presented is only a *suggestion*. No doubt changes will be needed to accommodate the flow and worship style of your corps. The outlines are flexible and allow opportunities to “cut and paste” as needed. If you are blessed with instrumental or vocal music resources, you may find there is more structured material here than needed. It is recommended that the headings of each section of the service be included in the bulletin.

**Call to Worship:**

<sup>68</sup> “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.  
<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a mighty savior for us  
in the house of his servant David,  
<sup>70</sup> as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,  
<sup>71</sup> that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.  
<sup>72</sup> Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,  
<sup>73</sup> the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,  
to grant us <sup>74</sup> that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness  
before him all our days. (Luke 1:68-75, NRSV)

<b>SB#104 – Come, Thou long expected Jesus</b> (sing 2 verses together; no chorus)	TB-370 – Hyfrydol	HTD1-T14 (3 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>SB#100 – Angels, from the realms of glory</b>	TB-407 – Regent Square	HTD4-T12 (4 vs.)
<b>SB#108 – Hark! the herald angels sing</b>	TB-270 – same	HTD4-T5 (3 vs.)
<b>SB#113 – Joy to the world!</b>	TB-87 – same	HTD4-T9 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#140 – O Come, All Ye Faithful</b> <b>SB#116</b>	HC-140 TB-496 – Adeste Fideles	HCD12-T20 HTD3-T1 (3 vs.)

**Announcements and Offering**

**Leader:** The Gospel writers Luke and Matthew recount five questions in the stories surrounding Christ’s birth. This Advent, we will study these questions which open the door to some of life’s great mysteries. What if we can truly satisfy our deepest longings? What if there is someone we can wholeheartedly believe in?

What if suffering and tragedy aren't just painful and meaningless experiences, but the raw material of a rich, beautiful, and well-lived life? What if we could face the future with the bright hope of real joy? What if the Christmas story really brought peace on earth and goodwill to all?

(Adapted from Five Questions of Christmas, pp. 6, 10-11)

<p><b>Song – Mighty God</b>          (Sung to “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”)          Words by Geron Davis, Dave Clark and Tony Wood          ©2016 Word Music, Woodspring Music, Tony Wood Songs</p> <p>1) God of glory, King of Heaven,          For this moment robed in flesh.          Prince of power, strength and honor,          Now contained in tenderness.</p> <p><i>CHORUS:</i>  <i>Hear the shouts from Heaven’s hallways,</i>  <i>Saints and angels all applaud!</i>  <i>Praise the Infant in the manger;</i>  <i>Glory to our mighty God.</i></p> <p>2) Here to break the bonds of evil,          Here to set the captives free.          He will triumph; He will conquer,          And deliver you and me.</p> <p>3) Let us live with hope and courage          Through the trials we face in life.          He will be our Strength in weakness,          Our Defender in each fight.</p>	<p>HC-189          TB-374 – Nettleton</p>	<p>HCD17-T19</p>
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### *The Candle of Hope*

#### **Lighting of Advent Candle**

**Reader 1:** Advent is a word that means “coming” or “visit.” In the Christian season of Advent, we prepare for the “advent” of Christ at Christmas. Our preparation includes many things:

- We remember Israel’s hope for the coming of God’s Messiah to save, to forgive, and to restore.
- We remember our hope for the second coming of Jesus.
- We remember our need for a Savior to save us from our sins.
- We prepare to welcome Christ at Christmas into our world . . . and into our hearts.

By lighting one candle each week of Advent, we help ourselves get ready for the birth of Jesus. The candles have different meanings, each based upon the Bible. These meanings help us understand how special the birth of Jesus is for us.

Today we focus on the expectation of **hope**.

**Reader 2:** “‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.

“‘In those days and at that time

I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line;  
he will do what is just and right in the land.

In those days Judah will be saved  
and Jerusalem will live in safety.

This is the name by which it will be called:

The LORD Our Righteous Savior.’” (Jeremiah 33:14-16, NIV)

[Light 1<sup>st</sup> (purple) candle]

**Reader 1:** Today, we light the candle of expectation and hope. Hope is our assurance that God will finish all He has started. Hope is our confidence that He will do all He has promised. All the promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is our hope, today and forever! (2 Corinthians 1:20)

**Reader 2:** Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 9:15, NIV)

**Prayer:** Father, during the Advent season may we be reminded of your promises to us and your fulfillment of them. Help us to prepare our lives for His Advent within us. In the precious name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

<b>SB#117 – O come, Immanuel</b>	TB-444 – same	HTD11-T8 (3 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#45 – While We Are Waiting, Come</b>	HC-45	HCD3-T15
<b>HC#72 – Emmanuel</b>	HC-72	HCD6-T12
<b>HC#82 – Jesus, Name above All Names</b>	HC-82	HCD7-T12
<b>SB#82</b>	TB-714 – same	
<b>HC#123 – Shine on Us</b>	HC-123	HCD11-T13

<p><b>HC#168 – Christmas Offering</b>  (Christmas lyrics for “Offering”—HC#168)  Words by Paul Baloche  Christmas Offering lyrics © Capitol Cmg Genesis</p> <p>1) Over the skies of Bethlehem appeared a star  While angels sang to lowly shepherds.  Three wisemen seeking truth, they traveled from afar  Hoping to find the Child from Heaven.  Falling on their knees,  They bow before the humble Prince of peace.</p> <p><i>CHORUS</i>  <i>I bring an offering of worship to my King.</i>  <i>No one on earth deserves the praises that I sing.</i>  <i>Jesus, may you receive the honor that you’re due.</i>  <i>Oh Lord, I bring an offering to you.</i></p> <p>2) The sun cannot compare to the glory of your love.  There is no shadow in your presence.  No mortal man would dare to stand before your throne,  Before the Holy One of heaven.  It’s only by your blood,  And it’s only through your mercy. Lord, I come.</p>	<p>HC-168</p>	<p>HCD15-T18</p>
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**Pastoral Prayer**

**Children’s Moment: Who Do You Trust?**

*How Will I Know?*

**Responsive Reading:** Luke 1:5-20 (NRSV)

**Leader:** Each of the four Gospels tells the story of Jesus, but only Matthew and Luke mention his birth. The most detailed Nativity story is in the Gospel of Luke 1 and 2. Luke begins his Gospel account with two of Jesus’ relatives, a priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth.

**All:** <sup>5</sup> In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

**Leader:** <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. <sup>7</sup> But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

**All:** <sup>8</sup> Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.

**Leader:** <sup>10</sup> Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.

**All:** <sup>11</sup> Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him.

**Leader:** Zechariah is in the midst of this extremely important assignment in the most sacred part of the temple. A crowd of people are praying and waiting outside. Suddenly an angel appears. Zechariah is absolutely terrified. After all, he knows the stories of priest who were struck dead for doing their job incorrectly. But instead of judgement, the angel Gabriel delivers a special message from God:

**All:** <sup>13</sup>“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup> You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup> He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.”

**Leader:** It was a truly unanticipated announcement. Why would God answer their prayers with a miracle child now? Given all this, Zechariah’s skepticism of both the messenger and the message seems warranted, even justified. Surely Zechariah is allowed a moment of doubt or a question for clarification. Zechariah gathers his courage and finds his voice.

**All:** <sup>18</sup> Zechariah said to the angel, “**How will I know that this is so?** For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” <sup>19</sup> The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. <sup>20</sup> But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

**Leader:** Gabriel doesn’t appreciate having his integrity questioned. He was sent from the presence of God to deliver this message of good news. Mission accomplished. But Zechariah’s parental pronouncement comes to a screeching halt. Gabriel leaves. Zechariah’s situation crystallizes the questions everyone asks: **How will I know that this is so? How can I be sure? Whom can I trust?**

(Adapted from Five Questions of Christmas, pp. 13, 15-18)

*Whom Shall I Trust?*

<b>Drama – Trust Me</b>
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**Message – *Zechariah’s Journey from Mistrust to Conviction***

<b>HC#65 – God Will Make a Way SB#492</b>	HC-65 TB-639 – same	HCD5-T15
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#120 – In the Manger</b>	HC-120	HCD10-T20
<b>HC#123 – Shine on Us</b>	HC-123	HCD11-T13
<b>HC#139 – There Is a Message SB#439</b>	HC-139 TB-879 – same	HCD12-T19
<b>HC#169 – Hallelujah</b>	HC-169	HCD15-T19
<b>HC#220 – Incarnate</b>	HC-220	HCD20-T20
<b>HC#226 – I Worship You</b>	HC-226	HCD21-T16

**Benediction**

<b>HC#180 – A Starry Night SB#112</b>	HC-180 TB-535 – same	HCD16-T20
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#140 – O Come, All Ye Faithful SB#116</b>	HC-140 TB-496 – Adeste Fideles	HCD12-T20 HTD3-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#151 – Fairest Lord Jesus SB#77</b>	HC-151 TB-206 – Ascalon	HCD14-T11 HTD5-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#260 – Go, Tell It on the Mountain SB#106</b>	HC-260 TB-631 – same	HCD24-T20 HTD11-T4 (2 vs., start w/chorus)

<b>Advent 2017 – Week #1</b>	
<b>DRAMA</b>	
<b>Trust Me</b>	
<b>By Martyn Scott Thomas</b>	
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<b>Topic:</b>	God's promises
<b>Scripture:</b>	Luke 1:5-25
<b>Synopsis:</b>	Three experts give good advice.
<b>Characters:</b>	Doctor Accountant Parent
<b>Props/Costumes:</b>	Lab coat and stethoscope for Doctor. Business dress and a file folder of papers for Accountant. Casual dress for Parent.
<b>Setting:</b>	Bare stage.
<b>Running time:</b>	2 minutes

*[All characters face forward and talk to unseen characters. They should step forward when speaking, and step back when done.]*

**Doctor:** Well, Mr. Smith, I have your test results back and I have some good news and I have some bad news.

**Accountant:** Well, Mrs. Johnson, I have your income taxes prepared and I have some good news and I have some bad news.

**Parent:** Well, Billy, that was your teacher on the phone and she has some good news and she has some bad news.

**Doctor:** It looks like that spot on your x-ray is nothing to worry about.

**Accountant:** It looks like this year's return is nothing to worry about.

**Parent:** It looks like your math grade is nothing to worry about.

**Doctor:** However, you're going to have to make some changes in your diet and exercise.

**Accountant:** However, you're going to have to make some changes in your finances before next year.

**Parent:** However, you're going to have to make some changes in your classroom behavior.

**Doctor:** You're not as young as you used to be and those extra snacks really stick with you.

**Accountant:** You're not as young as you used to be and you really need to start preparing for retirement.

**Parent:** You're not in Kindergarten anymore and you need to learn not to talk when the teacher is talking.

**Doctor:** I'm going to put you on a lower calorie diet and a light exercise regimen.

**Accountant:** I'm going to put you on a fixed budget and set you up in an IRA.

**Parent:** Your teacher is going to move your desk to the front of the classroom and give you worksheets to help keep you on task.

**Doctor:** Even if they're small, you should see some positive results in just a few months.

**Accountant:** Even if they're small, you should see some increases in your portfolio in just a few months.

**Parent:** Even if it's hard to sit up front, you should do better without the distractions in the back of the room.

**Doctor:** In the long run, you'll be happy that you made these changes. Trust me, I'm your doctor.

**Accountant:** In the long run, you'll be happy that you made these changes. Trust me, I'm your accountant.

**Parent:** In the long run, you'll be happy that you made these changes. Trust me, I'm your mother (father).

[*Blackout*]

# ***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***

## **Children's Moment – Week 1**

### ***How Will I Know?***

#### ***Zechariah's Journey from Mistrust to Conviction***

**December 3, 2017**

### **Who Do You Trust?**

**Adapted by Martyn Scott Thomas**

*[The Narrator should call the children of the congregation forward and have them sit around his chair.]*

**Narrator:** Today is the first week of Advent – the four weeks before Christmas. Many of the people in the Christmas story had to trust God to perform miracles in their lives. A long, long time ago before any of you were born there was a television show called “Who Do You Trust?” Today, we are going to play our own version of the “Who Do You Trust?” game. Here’s how the game is played. First, I will tell you what type of question I am going to ask. For example, I might tell you that I am going to ask a Bible question. Then I will say to one of you, “Who do you trust?” You must then choose another person you trust to answer the question correctly.

Are you ready to play? Okay, let's play! I have a Bible question. *[choose a child]* **Johnny**, “Who do you trust?” *[Johnny then chooses a person to answer the question.]*

Here’s the question: “What person in the Bible was swallowed by a great big fish?” *[Answer: Jonah]*

Great job! **Johnny** knew that he could trust (*name*) to answer that question.

Let's try that again. This time I have a question about television. **Mary**, “Who do you trust?” *[Mary chooses someone that she trusts to answer the question correctly.]*

The question is: “Who is green and lives in a trash can on Sesame Street?” *[Answer: Oscar the Grouch]*

Wow! You guys are really smart! Playing the “Who Do You Trust?” game can be a lot of fun, but in real life, it is very important to know whom we can trust. I know where to find the answer. We can find the answer to that question in the Bible. Psalm 23 is one of the best-loved passages in the whole Bible. When we read the 23rd Psalm, it sounds as if someone may have just asked David the question, “Who do you trust?” What was his answer? His answer was, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

David was himself a shepherd and he knew that sheep can trust the shepherd in every situation. When the sheep are hungry, the shepherd takes them to green pastures where they have plenty to eat. When the sheep are thirsty, he leads them to a quiet stream where they can drink. When the sheep are in danger of being eaten by wild animals, the shepherd is their protector. The sheep can trust the shepherd in every situation.

Each day we find ourselves facing difficult situations and we have difficult choices to make. We often ask ourselves, "Who can I trust?" The answer is, "Jesus." The Bible tells us that Jesus is the Good Shepherd and we are his sheep. Just like David, we can say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." We can trust him in every situation.

Let's pray. Dear Jesus, you are the Good Shepherd and we are your sheep. We put our trust in you. Amen.

I'll see you back here next week. [*dismiss the children*]

# ***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***

## **Sermon – Week 1**

### ***How Will I Know?***

#### ***Zechariah's Journey from Mistrust to Conviction***

**December 3, 2017**

**Title: How Will I Know?**

**Scripture: Luke 1:8-20**

[Intro to series – Five Questions of Christmas – a way of exploring some of the mysteries of life through looking at the story of Christmas]

There are lots of different kinds of questions:

- Simple yes/no questions – “Did you clean your room?” or “Did you do your homework?”
- Factual (the kind Google or Siri can answer) – “Where is the nearest Starbucks?” or “What is the square root of a number?” “How long should I cook the turkey?” or “What are the symptoms of salmonella?”
- Rhetorical (the kind the speaker doesn't really want you to answer ... but there's always that one person who does)
- Theoretical – “What would happen if I did this ...?” (A lot of inventions started this way!) A lot of accidents also start this way ...
- There are trick questions (like riddles: how many times can you subtract 10 from 100 – once because after that you would be subtracting from 90, then 80 ...), and diversionary questions (Yeah, but what about that?)

In this scripture passage, Zechariah has a **big** question for the angel: “How will I know this is true?” (Luke 1:18)

### **Background to this narrative**

There are four gospels, but only two tell the story of Jesus' birth.

- Mark doesn't give any introduction. He just starts right in with, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”
- John takes a long poetic approach: “In the beginning was the Word ...”
- Matthew starts with a long genealogy that situates Jesus within a family and the nation of Israel.
- Luke takes the historical approach – situating this narrative
  - in a specific time (In the time of Herod king of Judea – v. 3),
  - in a specific location (Judea and Jerusalem) and
  - with specific people (“there was a priest named Zechariah ...”).

If you had never read or heard this story before, it might be a little confusing – who are Zechariah and Elizabeth and why are we even talking about them?

### **Biographical info on Zechariah and Elizabeth**

Both came from priestly families, their faithfulness is mentioned, but also their childlessness. Elizabeth a relative of Mary, etc. Zechariah appears to be a country priest (not from Jerusalem, but the hill country) who would only go to the Temple when his division was on duty. This particular time, his name was drawn by lot to be the one who offered the incense offering.

Incense offerings represented prayers ascending to God, symbolically praying for the nation – people prayed outside while the priest went inside to make the offering. It was a holy moment, and one to be taken seriously.

Zechariah is in the midst of this extremely important assignment in the most sacred part of the temple. A crowd of people are praying and waiting outside. Suddenly an angel appears. Zechariah is absolutely terrified. After all, he knows the stories of priests who were struck dead for doing their job incorrectly (Leviticus 10, Numbers 16). But instead of judgement, the angel Gabriel delivers a special message from God.

*<sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. <sup>16</sup> He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:13-17, NIV)*

It was a truly unanticipated announcement. Although there was, as we have seen, precedent in earlier biblical stories for just this kind of miracle, there had been no prophets or prophesies for four hundred years.

Zechariah had no expectation of miraculous offspring. He and Elizabeth had prayed for children since they were newlyweds. Each month their hopes soared and then soured. Their youth and middle age were gone, and now it was too late. They were elderly and childless. Why would God answer their prayer with a miracle child now?

But this announcement is much bigger than Zechariah and Elizabeth. The angel said this miracle son would be a great prophet like Elijah who would prepare God’s people for the coming of the Messiah. That was even more unbelievable news! On that day Zechariah may have been afraid to get his hopes up. Maybe he couldn’t face another steep drop on his emotional roller coaster. Maybe he was afraid to believe his dream could come true. But Zechariah wasn’t prepared to trust his future or his hopes and dreams to anyone, not even an angel.

Given all this, Zechariah’s skepticism of both the messenger and the message seems warranted, even justified. The angel’s prediction impacted his own family and all the Jewish people. Surely Zechariah is allowed a moment of doubt or a question for clarification. Zechariah gathers his courage and finds his voice.

<sup>18</sup> Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

<sup>19</sup> The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. <sup>20</sup> And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.” (Luke 1:18-20, NIV)

### **A Matter of Trust**

Zechariah’s situation crystallizes the questions everyone ask

- “How will I know this is true?”
- “How can I be sure of this? “
- “Whom can I trust?”

And ... that’s the last question he asked for a long time because (vv. 19-20, NIV): *The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not be able to speak until the day this happens because you did not believe my words, which will come true at the proper time.”*

Zechariah and Elizabeth’s lives progressed just as the angel foretold (vv. 24-25, CEB): *After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”*

What can we learn about trust from Zechariah’s journey?

1. Trust is possible. Trust cannot be earned but it can be given. We can find the courage and strength to choose trust and triumph over our fear, to risk and reap the rewards, and to experience the joy of living beyond the limits of our experience.
2. Trust is precious. As a priest, Zechariah knew God’s copious laws and how hard it was to follow them. But this wasn’t a human standing in front of him, it was an angelic messenger sent from heaven. Zechariah was face to face with perfection, and that made his trepidation unnecessary and unwarranted. Zechariah withheld his absolute trust from Gabriel and he paid a high price for his doubt.

Now, you might think Zechariah’s question was reasonable – but he really should have known better – Israel’s history is full of miraculous births, starting with Abraham, Sarah and Isaac.

I wonder if this is a case where there is more to Zechariah’s question ... or to ours.

The **three questions** (or maybe, **objections** ...)

1. *Who am I?* Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know all about Abraham and Sarah, but I’m just a country priest ... Miracles are for other people. I’m not important enough.

2. *It's too late.* Time is really important for Luke – he tells us the political time (the reign of Herod), the religious time (time for Zechariah to go to the Temple, etc.), and the physical time (Elizabeth's time had run out ...).
3. *The world is too messed up.* Israel was under Roman rule, we find out later that one of John's roles would be to “turn the hearts of the people” back to God, and bring back the disobedient and make ready the people for the Lord. So, clearly, there were some problems—people of faith were divided over how to “do” religion... they had been waiting for **so long... sound familiar?**

Zechariah's questions were really his fears. And they might be familiar to some of us too. You may have voiced (or hidden) some very similar thoughts. [*Examples of these kinds of objections/questions today ...*]

### **The Triumph of Trust**

In the turmoil of modern life, finding a solid place to stand isn't easy. But we all have to stand somewhere. The challenge is to rightly trust and then act rightly on that trust.

Zechariah believed God's promises with conviction and confidence. When his long months of silence were finally broken, his first words were full of praise and thanksgiving to God.

### **Zechariah's Song** (Luke 1:67-75, NIV)

<sup>67</sup> *His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:*

<sup>68</sup> *“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.*

<sup>69</sup> *He has raised up a horn of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David*

<sup>70</sup> *(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),*

<sup>71</sup> *salvation from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us—*

<sup>72</sup> *to show mercy to our ancestors  
and to remember his holy covenant,*

<sup>73</sup> *the oath he swore to our father Abraham:*

<sup>74</sup> *to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,  
and to enable us to serve him without fear*

<sup>75</sup> *in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

There are moments we are sure of God's great love and care. We are able to rest in challenging and difficult times because we feel deeply God's trustworthiness. At other times we wonder whether or not He is truly trustworthy. There are pieces of life we joyfully trust God with and others we guard jealously, afraid of surrendering even to Him. As it turns out, God shows Himself trustworthy in all those times through His word. He knows us and loves us when we rest in His care and when we question Him. When our wondering selves, our uncertain selves, come back to this story each Christmas, we discover that we have a companion in Zechariah, someone who asks one of the deepest questions of life with us: Whom shall I trust?

Are you interested in the answer?

- The answer for Zechariah was to *stop talking* ... for a long, long time.
- To sit with the questions.
- To pray.
- To wait and see what happened and when.

The answer was: You will **know** as you **live** it.

That is not to say your questions are not important. Or that you shouldn't ask them. Or that God doesn't care. Or that they aren't good questions. It's not to give a pat answer.

But it does point us to something really important: Advent is an invitation to live in the mystery of God breaking into the world once again. It looks backward at the first Christmas and forward to the future at the same time. It tells us **again** that God didn't forget His people ... and still hasn't forgotten. It asks us to **wait** (active waiting, not passively accepting whatever happens). It asks us to **believe**. It asks us to **look** and **listen** for God in places no one expects Him to be.

It draws us to **salvation** – the fullness of all the blessings of God now – not just mere forgiveness of sins, but full, total, free **life** in Christ ... which we can only **know** as we **live** it.

And that requires **faith**. Faith asks the questions ... and waits for the answers. So ...

Who am I ... Who are you? Children of God.

Is it too late? I think the Christmas story reminds us every single year that it's not too late. Not for you. Not for anyone. Not for any situation you're facing.

Is the world messed up? Of course it is. It always has been. That's why we need a Savior. That's why we need salvation – in its fullest sense of living **now** in the full blessing of God. That's why we need faith.

[SASB#492: “God Will Make a Way”]

Do you believe it? Are you willing to take the first step of faith, to say “All right, I have a lot of questions, but I think the answer is in Jesus”?

(Sermon adapted from *Five Questions of Christmas* – pp. 18-36)

# ***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***

## **Advent Worship Series – Week 2**

### ***How Can This Be?***

*Mary's Journey from Tragedy to Resilience*

December 10, 2017

#### **WORSHIP SERVICE OUTLINES**

Each worship outline contains all elements needed for your worship service. The order of each service presented is only a *suggestion*. No doubt changes will be needed to accommodate the flow and worship style of your corps. The outlines are flexible and allow opportunities to “cut and paste” as needed. If you are blessed with instrumental or vocal music resources, you may find there is more structured material here than needed. It is recommended that the headings of each section of the service be included in the bulletin.

### ***How Can This Be?***

#### **Drama – Mom: Take 2**

#### **Call to Worship:**

Tragedy is an inescapable part of life. It hits us broadside when we least expect it—an accident, diagnosis, natural disaster, health epidemic, or a scandal. Tragedy is never a welcome visitor. Tragedy creates turmoil. We wonder what went wrong, what we could have done differently, how it could have been prevented. The issue isn't whether or not we or others deserve to suffer. We may or may not have done things that contribute to our pain. Deserved or underserved, pain is pain, loss is loss, and a tragedy hurts just as bad. Ultimately, explanations, blame, or guilt can't roll back the clock. What's done is done and our pain is all too real. What we find in the second question of Advent is not a recipe for avoiding tragedy, but a way of converting it—or allowing God to convert it—into goodness.

(Adapted from *Five Questions of Christmas*, pp. 40-41)

<b>HC#121 – Joyful, Joyful SB#39</b>	HC-121 TB-367 – Europe	HCD11-T11 HTD3-T11 (4 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>SB#113 – Joy to the world!</b>	TB-87 – same	HTD4-T9 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#146 – Here I Am to Worship SB#114</b>	HC-146 TB-653 – same	HCD13-T16
<b>SB#103 – Christians awake</b>	TB-476 – same	HTD10-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#140 – O Come, All Ye Faithful SB#116</b>	HC-140 TB-496 – Adeste Fideles	HCD12-T20 HTD3-T1 (3 vs.)

### ***The Candle of Peace***

#### **Lighting of Advent Candle**

**Reader 1:** Advent is a word that means “coming” or “visit”. In the Christian season of Advent, we prepare for the “advent” of Christ at Christmas. Our preparation includes many things:

- We remember Israel’s hope for the coming of God’s Messiah to save, to forgive, and to restore.
- We remember our hope for the second coming of Jesus.
- We remember our need for a Savior to save us from our sins.
- We prepare to welcome Christ at Christmas into our world . . . and into our hearts.

By lighting one candle each week of Advent, we help ourselves get ready for the birth of Jesus. The candles have different meanings, each based upon the Bible. These meanings help us understand how special the birth of Jesus is for us.

Today we focus on the expectation of **peace**.

**Reader 2:** <sup>6</sup>For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:6-7)

[Light 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> (purple) candles]

**Reader 1:** Today we relight the candle of Hope. Let this candle remind us of the great hope we have in Christ the Messiah and in God’s promises. As we light the candle of Peace let it remind us to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ. Jesus Christ is our peace. He is the Prince of Peace, and the fruit of His presence is peace. Christ comes to bring justice, wholeness, and harmony to every relationship throughout all creation. He wants to continually grant us peace in every situation.

**Prayer:** Jesus, may your light and peace radiate about us and within us as we worship you today. Guide our feet into the path of peace. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

<b>HC#220 – Incarnate</b>	HC-220	HCD20-T20
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>SB#117 – O come, Immanuel</b> <b>CF#20</b>	TB-444 – same CF-20	HTD11-T8 (3 vs.)
<b>SB#118 – O little town of Bethlehem</b>	TB-136 – same	HTD3-T5 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#10 – The Light Has Come</b> <b>SB#133</b>	HC-10 TB-859 – same	HCD1A-T20
<b>HC#169 – Hallelujah</b>	HC-169	HCD15-T19
<b>HC#120 – In the Manger</b>	HC-120	HCD10-T20

<p><b>HC#168 – Christmas Offering</b>  (Christmas lyrics for vs. 1 of HC#168)  Words by Paul Baloche  Christmas Offering lyrics © Capitol Cmg Genesis</p> <p>1) Over the skies of Bethlehem appeared a star  While angels sang to lowly shepherds.  Three wisemen seeking truth, they traveled from afar  Hoping to find the Child from Heaven.  Falling on their knees,  They bow before the humble Prince of peace.</p> <p><i>CHORUS</i>  <i>I bring an offering of worship to my King.</i>  <i>No one on earth deserves the praises that I sing.</i>  <i>Jesus, may you receive the honor that you're due.</i>  <i>Oh Lord, I bring an offering to you.</i></p> <p>2) The sun cannot compare to the glory of your love.  There is no shadow in your presence.  No mortal man would dare to stand before your throne,  Before the Holy One of heaven.  It's only by your blood,  And it's only through your mercy. Lord, I come.</p>	<p>HC-168</p>	<p>HCD15-T18</p>
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**Children’s Moment: Good or Bad?**

**Announcements and Offering**

*How Can This Be?*

[Use the Video OR the Responsive Reading—not both]

**Video:** Mary – Unexpected with Teaching by Margaret Feinberg | 3:41  
<https://rightnowmedia.org/Content/illustration/98054>

**Responsive Reading:** Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:22-23 (NRSV)

**Leader:** <sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said,

**All:** “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

**Leader:** <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her,

**All:** “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will

conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

**Leader:** Mary was an ordinary girl. She wasn’t wealthy and nothing distinguished her from other peasant girls of her time. Until the angel showed up, nothing about Mary’s life was worthy of history’s attention. That’s the point. She was an ordinary young woman getting ready for her wedding. Mary’s response to the angel’s pronouncement is remarkable!

**All:** <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, “**How can this be**, since I am a virgin?” <sup>35</sup> The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”

**Leader:** Like most people facing something unexpected and potentially tragic, Mary asked, “How can this be?” In Mary’s time and culture, being pregnant and unmarried was more than tragic; it was potentially a death sentence. An unexplainable pregnancy threatened Mary’s impending marriage, her physical safety, and her family’s reputation.

**All:** <sup>36</sup> “And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God.” <sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

**Leader:** The angel’s message may have thrown Mary’s life into turmoil but God was with her the whole time. Mary was never truly alone and neither are we. God was with her. At the very heart of the Christmas stories is *Emmanuel*, God with us.

**All:** <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

(Adapted from Five Questions of Christmas, pp. 41-43, 46)

<b>HC#82 – Jesus, Name above All Names SB#82</b>	HC-82 TB-714 – same	HCD7-T12
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#65 – God Will Make a Way SB#492</b>	HC-65 TB-639 – same	HCD5-T15
<b>HC#72 – Emmanuel</b>	HC-72	HCD6-T12
<b>SB#117 – O come, Immanuel CF#20</b>	TB-444 – same CF-20	HTD11-T8 (3 vs.)
<b>SB#118 – O little town of Bethlehem</b>	TB-136 – same	HTD3-T5 (3 vs.)

## Pastoral Prayer

### *The Right Heart*

#### Message – *Mary’s Journey from Tragedy to Resilience*

<b>HC#123 – Shine on Us</b>	HC-123	HCD11-T13
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#136 – We All Bow Down</b>	HC-136	HCD12-T16
<b>SB#118 – O little town of Bethlehem</b>	TB-136 – same	HTD3-T5 (3 vs.)
<b>SB#158 – Who is he in yonder stall</b>	TB-287 – Who is He?	HTD10-T19 (6 vs.)
<b>HC#120 – In the Manger</b>	HC-120	HCD10-T20

#### Benediction

<b>HC#140 – O Come, All Ye Faithful</b> <b>SB#116</b>	HC-140 TB-496 – Adeste Fideles	HCD12-T20 HTD3-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#151 – Fairest Lord Jesus</b> <b>SB#77</b>	HC-151 TB-206 – Ascalon	HCD14-T11 HTD5-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#180 – A Starry Night</b> <b>SB#112</b>	HC-180 TB-535 – same	HCD16-T20
<b>HC#260 – Go, Tell It on the Mountain</b> <b>SB#106</b>	HC-260 TB-631 – same	HCD24-T20 HTD11-T4 (2 vs., start w/chorus)

<b>Advent 2017 – Week #2</b>	
<b>DRAMA</b>	
<b>Mom: Take 2</b>	
<b>By Martyn Scott Thomas</b>	
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<b>Topic:</b>	Tragedy
<b>Scripture:</b>	Luke 1:26-38
<b>Synopsis:</b>	A woman prepares to meet the daughter she gave up for adoption years earlier.
<b>Characters:</b>	Charlene Doug
<b>Props/Costumes:</b>	Shirt and tie for Doug. Dress for Charlene.
<b>Setting:</b>	Bare stage.
<b>Running time:</b>	4 minutes

[*Doug is pacing anxiously, checking his watch.*]

**Charlene:** [*enters nervously*] Does this dress look okay?

**Doug:** [*without looking*] It's fine.

**Charlene:** You didn't even look.

**Doug:** [*glances at her*] I take that back. It's fabulous.

**Charlene:** Are you being honest, or are you just trying to get out of here?

**Doug:** Yes.

**Charlene:** Well, which is it? Because I have four more outfits laid out on the bed.

**Doug:** [*taking her by the arms*] Char, you look fantastic.

**Charlene:** [*pulling away*] But the blue one is a little more conservative. I think this one might be a bit flashy.

**Doug:** If we don't leave soon, we're going to miss our reservations.

**Charlene:** Well, if we're going to be late, maybe we shouldn't go.

**Doug:** Honey, I know you're nervous, but we can't stay home. We need to go.

**Charlene:** I didn't say we had to stay home, I just thought we could go someplace else . . . like Europe.

**Doug:** Charlene, we are not going to Europe.

**Charlene:** Okay, how about France?

**Doug:** Still Europe.

**Charlene:** Doug, you can't make me do this.

**Doug:** I'm not making you do anything. This is something that you put together. You wanted this.

**Charlene:** And now I don't. So, I guess I can put my sweats back on.

**Doug:** [*takes hold of her hands*] Listen, I know this is hard, but you can do this. I'll be with you.

**Charlene:** [*pulling away*] You're right, it's hard. I didn't think this would ever happen. I thought I was done with this a long time ago.

**Doug:** Well, things change.

**Charlene:** [*dismissing*] Things change. What is that supposed to mean? You weren't there. You have no idea what I went through.

**Doug:** No I don't, but . . .

**Charlene:** It wasn't supposed to happen like that. [*almost crying*] It wasn't supposed to happen at all.

**Doug:** [*hugging her*] I'm so sorry.

**Charlene:** [*pulling away*] I was sixteen, [*emphasizing*] sixteen! And he was a Senior. He told me he loved me, and I believed him.

**Doug:** It's not your fault.

**Charlene:** [*arguing*] Yes, it is. I could've said no. I could've made sure we were safe. But I was just a love-struck teenager who thought she was proving herself to the man she loved.

**Doug:** That's understandable. You've always been very trusting – and that's a good thing.

**Charlene:** [*defending*] He wasn't horrible. I think he may have genuinely loved me. But he wasn't ready to be a father. And I certainly wasn't ready to be a mother.

**Doug:** Not many teenagers are.

**Charlene:** But the worst part was telling my parents. It took me weeks to do it, but I had to say something before it became obvious.

**Doug:** Your dad has been pretty hard-nosed as long as I've known him. I can't imagine what he was like then.

**Charlene:** Actually, he was the quiet one. He was definitely disappointed, but it was mom who freaked out. She cried, [*pause*] then she yelled, [*pause*] then she cried some more. Nobody slept that night.

**Doug:** At least your brothers were too young to know what was going on.

**Charlene:** Yeah, they didn't find out about it until years later.

**Doug:** Well, that's one good thing, I guess.

**Charlene:** There was nothing good about it. I was sixteen and pregnant. We had some very serious choices to make. I was too young to keep the baby and my parents already had four kids to take care of. We talked about abortion, but there was no way I could go through with that. Adoption was the only thing we seriously considered.

**Doug:** I know that wasn't easy.

**Charlene:** The agency we worked with helped get me through it. They were very supportive and let me know about the adoptive parents without letting me know who they were. I knew my daughter would be in a good home, but that's all I wanted to know. When she was born, I held her once, told her she'd be better off, and kissed her good-bye. That was the end of it – or so I thought.

**Doug:** Until that phone call last month.

**Charlene:** I never thought she'd track me down. I never thought she would want to.

**Doug:** And yet, she did.

**Charlene:** Doug, it's been eighteen years.

**Doug:** Char, she wants to meet you. She wants to know her mother. And you want to know her. That's why you agreed to this.

**Charlene:** But I gave her away.

**Doug:** She knows that – she understands that you had no choice.

**Charlene:** What kind of mother gives her child away?

**Doug:** A sixteen-year-old mother who wanted what was best for her baby.

**Charlene:** I don't know if I can do this.

**Doug:** You can – and I'll be right next to you the whole time.

**Charlene:** Promise?

**Doug:** I promise. Now, let's go meet your daughter. [*he takes her hand and they exit*]

[*Blackout*]

# ***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***

## **Children's Moment – Week 2**

### ***How Can This Be?***

#### ***Mary's Journey from Tragedy to Resilience***

**December 10, 2017**

### **Good or Bad?**

**by Martyn Scott Thomas**

*[The Narrator should call the children of the congregation forward and have them sit around his chair.]*

**Narrator:** Today is the second Sunday in Advent. Last week we learned about who you can trust. Today we're going to talk about good things and bad things. Sometimes good things happen to us and sometimes bad things happen to us. But a lot of times the bad things that happen can turn into good things. So I'm going to give you some situations and I want you to tell me if they're good things or bad things. Do you think you can do that?

Okay. The first thing is your mother tells you that you can have an extra scoop of ice cream. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? [*good thing*] But what if the ice cream is dog food flavored? [*bad thing*]

Okay, next. Your little brother plays with your favorite toy and breaks it. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? [*bad thing*] But then your Grandparents come over and buy you a brand new toy. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? [*good thing*]

One more. What if your best friend moves away? Is that a good thing or a bad thing? [*bad thing*] But what if they move to Florida and you get to go visit them at the beach? Is that a good thing or a bad thing? [*good thing*]

Well, in the Christmas story in the Bible, someone got some bad news. Mary found out that she was going to have a baby. That might sound like good news, but Mary didn't have a husband and in those days it wasn't seen as a good thing for a young girl to have a baby on her own. She could be forced to move to another town or something else bad.

But an angel told her not to be afraid because the baby was going to be God's son. He told her that she was chosen by God for this special honor and that the whole world would be blessed because of her son. So what could've been a bad thing was really a very good thing.

So next time something bad happens to you, just wait and see how God will turn it into something good.

Let's pray. Dear Jesus, we thank you that when bad things happen to us that you can make them God. Thank you for loving us so much. Amen.

I'll see you back here next week. [*dismiss the children*]

# ***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***

## **Sermon – Week 2**

### ***How Can This Be?***

#### ***Mary's Journey from Tragedy to Resilience***

**December 10, 2017**

**Title: How Can This Be?**

**Scripture: Luke 1:26-38**

#### **Mary's Journey from Tragedy to Resilience**

Tragedy is an inescapable part of life. We wonder why bad things happen and look for meaning in the struggle. We all want to avoid suffering. But no one can. The challenge isn't to explain suffering. There may be no explanation. Even when there is an explanation it may not help much. Nor is the question of who or what to blame. Blaming doesn't change the facts or bring healing and wholeness.

What we find in the second question of Advent is not a recipe for avoiding tragedy, but a way of converting it—or allowing God to convert it—into goodness.

#### **The Birth of Jesus Foretold**

*<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."*

*<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." (Luke 1:26-33, NIV)*

Mary was an ordinary girl. She wasn't wealthy and nothing distinguished her from other peasant girls of her time. Her family is only briefly mentioned in the Gospel genealogies (Matt. 1 and Luke 3). Mary and her fiancé, Joseph, both lived in the village of Nazareth within the province of Galilee on the fringes of the great Roman Empire. The Bible doesn't tell us Mary's exact age, but she was probably in her teens. She probably wasn't well educated. Until the angel showed up, nothing about Mary's life was worthy of history's attention. That's the point.

She was an ordinary young woman getting ready for her wedding. Mary's response to the angel's pronouncement is remarkable!

*<sup>34</sup> "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"*

*<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.*

*<sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was*

*said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail.”*

*<sup>38</sup> “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:34-38, NIV)*

Like most people facing something unexpected and potentially tragic, Mary asked, “How can this be?”

In Mary’s time and culture, being pregnant and unmarried was more than tragic; it was potentially a death sentence. An unexplainable pregnancy threatened Mary’s impending marriage, her physical safety, and her family’s reputation. All her relationships and carefully planned future depended on her chastity.

Pregnancy isn’t easy to hide, no matter how loose fitting the clothes. Mary’s body would change and eventually she would not be able to hide her condition from her parents, family, the people of Nazareth, or her fiancé, Joseph. Who would believe her story about the angel and being history’s only pregnant virgin? No one! Well, maybe her relative Elizabeth, who carried her own miracle.

### **The God Who Is with Us**

Tragedy was not the end of Mary’s story, and it doesn’t need to be the end of ours. When tragedy strikes, we need to remember that we do not face it alone. God is with us in the midst of our suffering. God knows us, loves us, and trusts us.

God knew Mary’s name and where she lived. God knew everything about her and loved her. The angel called Mary honored, favored, blessed. The angel’s message may have thrown Mary’s life into turmoil but God was with her the whole time.

The greatest pain in suffering can be feeling abandoned and alone. Those who suffer understand they are alone in their pain. No matter how sympathetic or empathetic others are, no matter how many similar circumstances others have faced, suffering people know deeply and instinctively that others don’t and can’t truly know other’s pain. But that doesn’t mean we are alone. Mary was never truly alone and neither are we. God was with her. At the very heart of the Christmas stories is *Emmanuel*, God with us.

*“All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Lo, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us’” (Matthew 1:22-23).*

Christian teaching differs from the world’s religions in any ways. But the most striking difference is that God was willing to suffer to save us. Easter, with all of its passion and pain, is the destination of Christmas. Even when other people cannot fathom our pain, God feels it acutely and knows it completely. There is no human tragedy, no suffering, no atrocity, and no disaster that catches God off guard. For the believer this is a great comfort: God knows! God notices! God cares! God is with us! Jesus said,

*<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)*

When facing a tragedy, it's easy to believe God is ignoring or punishing us. But God's love is eternal and is not invalidated by the suffering we endure or the pain we feel. God knew the pain Mary would suffer as Jesus' mother (Luke 1:34-35). How can God's favor and love mingle with sorrow and suffering? It is a mystery. But for Mary and for us, God's constant, dependable love is healing in the midst of hardship.

Our natural inclination is to reject suffering and push it away. We cannot see the good it brings or the possibilities it reveals. Suffering is a summons to trust God for opportunities that are beyond our line of sight. God called Mary to the greatest act of parenting in human history. The price tag of that privilege was suffering. Mary accepted the terms of her call and was rewarded with the honor of being Jesus' mother (Luke 1:31-33) and the most celebrated woman in human history.

In tragedy, we learn who we are at the deepest levels. We forge our character in these fires. God knew Mary was the kind of person who could take on a challenge, face tragedy, and faithfully follow him. God trusted her with history's greatest treasure. God was with her.

*"We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:3-5).*

### **Shocked and Confused**

Even when we know God is with us, tragedy shocks and confuses us. It doesn't make sense. It seems implausible, incomprehensible, and uncontrollable. Mary said to the angel, "*How will this be, since I am a virgin?*" (Luke 1:34)

Tragedy often seems implausible, not because these things can't happen but because we believe they won't happen to us. Mary's circumstances defied all logic: a pregnant virgin carrying a divine child? There are many things we think are not supposed to happen, but they still do. Parents should not have to bury their children. Marriages should last a lifetime, unstained by betrayal and adultery. Childhood should be carefree and fun, not a time of starvation, illness, or peril. But horrible, unthinkable events happen every day.

### **The Arrival of Fear**

Fear and uncertainty storm into our lives with tragedy. The prospect of being pregnant and unmarried must have been terrifying for Mary. Like her, we struggle with the angel's command: "Fear not!"

**We fear because we do not trust what our eyes cannot see.** We look at things with our limited perspective in a changing and uncertain world. We forget to view our challenges in the light of a

sovereign, loving, wise, and powerful God. We fail to take into account God's eternally trustworthy character. God can be trusted.

**We fear because we don't know and can't understand God's greater plan.** God's love, compassion, and concern are not part of our calculations. We only see what is, not what can be. God alone knows the good and glorious future that awaits those who follow him. God has a plan.

**We fear because we want what we want.** We do not always want the plan God is working out in us. We think we know better. The idea that we are better off not getting what we want is inconceivable. It's even more inconceivable that getting what we do not want, what is painful or difficult, is really our greatest good. We'd rather God be part of our plans than us be part of his.

**We fear because we want control.** Something deep within us recoils from knowing our lives are in another's control. We resist the idea that our hopes and aspirations are not the greatest and most important good in the universe. We reject the notion that we might be asked to sacrifice and suffer.

- What we don't realize is that God knows all about our fears.
- God uses the uncertainty in our lives for transformation.
- God catches our attention when we loosen our grip on the things and people we cling to.
- God is at work in circumstance, coincidence, and serendipity.
- God's plan doesn't need our permission or even our cooperation.

With God, things aren't falling apart. They are falling into place.

### **The Right Heart**

Mary had a choice. Would she believe the angel's message? Would she accept this assignment? Mary's answer was decisive and clear. Yes.

*"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"* (Luke 1:38).

Mary could have refused the angel's offer. The Bible is full of stories of people who had equally dramatic encounters with God and refused to be part of God's work in the world.

Mary had good reasons to say no. The pregnancy would destroy her relationship with Joseph, her reputation, and her life. The only way to keep the life she cherished was to say no to the angel.

It was a crucial decision. Nothing indicates that the angel was forceful or coercive. All we know is that Gabriel brought God's message and Mary said yes. Many who face life-changing circumstances feel they don't have a choice. Having no choice or say in the situation is what makes it tragic. No one chooses suffering, but everyone chooses a response.

Mary's response demonstrated three things about her character and relationship with God.

*“Here am I, the servant of the Lord” (Luke 1:38a).*

1. **Mary did not insist on controlling her own destiny.** The foundation of her relationship with God was service. There is no bargaining or quid pro quo in Mary’s answer. She knew who she was and was secure in her relationship with God. She did not say yes out of weakness, insecurity, or gullibility. Despite her youth, Mary was wise enough to completely give herself to God and his great cause. It’s an example worth following. Do we exist to serve or be served? Do we live for our own ends or give ourselves to greater things?

*“Let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38b).*

2. **Mary submitted to God’s will.** In our world, submission is disdained as weakness. But Mary’s submission wasn’t weak. It was a muscular submission that accepts the consequences. She couldn’t have known everything that awaited her in the future, but she gave herself to God anyway. That’s courageous and incredibly strong.

Mary trusted the angel and the God who sent him.

**She knew the risks that came with her decision but believed she was safe in God’s hands.**

Trust is a rare and precious commodity. Most people trust others slowly, one drop at a time, carefully, and within clearly defined limits. Even the people closest to us are capable of inflicting incredible pain. Trust is a struggle for most of us because we aren’t very trustworthy either.

Mary’s God is ultimately and always trustworthy. She trusted God with everything, including her body, her baby, and her future. God is powerful and able to do what is promised. God is all wise and never mistaken. God knew better than Mary what was best for her. When life was difficult, God made a way for her.

For most people, the thought of total trust even in God is beyond comprehension. But those who trust God find great comfort and peace. Generation after generation, Christians have submitted to God’s call and surrendered their lives, their wills, and their dreams, just like Mary, and learned this lesson. Even in tragedy, those who trust God discover they are his beloved children. They know God is with them. He is Emmanuel.

### **The Rest of the Story**

The angel’s visit seemed to smash Mary’s life to pieces. But we know the rest of her story.

- Joseph stood by her side in marriage and parenthood (Matthew 1:24-25).
- Their baby Jesus was born in Bethlehem while they were traveling for a Roman census (Luke 2:4-7)
- When news of a newborn Messiah reached King Herod, he became jealous and wanted to kill the baby (Matthew 2:16-18)
- Warned by an angel in a dream, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt and lived as refugees until it was safe to return to Nazareth with their miracle child (Matt. 12:46; John 7:1-5; Acts 1:14) and spend decades in their hometown with their extended families.

On the surface, Mary's life didn't look very different from the one she imagined before the angel.

And yet everything was different.

- Mary's life was immeasurably richer and fuller as the mother of the Messiah. She participated in the fulfillment of ancient prophecies and God's magnificent kingdom work on earth.
- She lived with Jesus in her home and watched him grow and learn for thirty years.
- Mary witnessed Jesus' first miracle, turning water into wine at a wedding celebration (John 1:1-11).
- Mary was proud of her son as he became respected as a great rabbi and miracle healer.

But not everything went well.

- Her four other boys—James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas (Matt. 13:55)—didn't believe (John 7:5), thought Jesus was insane (Mark 3:31-35), and went to Capernaum to collect him.
- When Jesus preached in Nazareth, his own people turned against him and wanted to kill him for blasphemy (Luke 4:16-29).
- His popularity and opposition both grew over three years until Jesus was arrested in Jerusalem.
- Mary watched God's salvation mission with a front-row perspective, from the dark hour of her son's crucifixion (John 19:25-27), to the surprise of the Resurrection (Mark 16:1), and promise of his ascension (Acts 1:11).

This ordinary woman who led an extraordinary life is admired and honored more than two thousand years later.

No one would envy Mary's life. No one would want the pain and suffering she endured. She had to deal with great challenges and her life was sometimes in danger. But no life is measured only by its challenges. Life is best measured by how well the challenges are met.

### **Something Great to Do**

Mary did great things with her life in the midst of hardship. She was called to carry and nurture in her own body Jesus, who was fully God and fully man. Mary nurtured Jesus as he grew from child to man. Then she released Jesus to the world, future generations, and all of us. Mary gave the greatest Christmas gift ever given—the redeemer of all mankind. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection divided history and opened the doors of heaven.

### **A Challenging Choice**

Like Mary, we have something great to do. Our call is to nurture the grace and beauty of our loving God and display it to the world. That capacity is in us because we are made in God's image. But we must consciously choose to infuse our lives with divine love, mercy, and patience.

Like Mary, we have access to a power beyond our own. Mary turned to God, the ultimate source of grace and reconciliation. God gave her the strength and courage she needed to forgive. We must do the same.

The Bible tells us, Mary “*treasured all these things in her heart*” (Luke 2:51). These ponderings included the suffering, humiliation, and pain of her unexpected and miraculous pregnancy. The treasure was that God was with her in her suffering. She could deal with her pain because she knew God loved and sustained her. God was at work in her life. That is a treasure worth keeping.

Like Mary, we have something great to do with our lives. It is to experience the miraculous alchemy that transforms suffering into beauty, forgiveness, strength, and love. It’s what we need. It’s what our world needs.

### **A Song of Praise**

Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth to see if the angel’s words about her were true. Perhaps Mary needed comfort and guidance from the older woman. Elizabeth had faced her own great challenges and surprises. Perhaps Mary was afraid to go home. Elizabeth’s exuberant greeting put her fears to rest. Like the angel, her cousin told Mary she was blessed and so was her baby. It was just the confirmation and encouragement Mary needed.

Mary spontaneously burst into a glorious exultation of praise known as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-56, NIV):

<sup>46</sup> *And Mary said:*

*“My soul glorifies the Lord  
<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.  
<sup>50</sup> His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup> He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.  
<sup>53</sup> He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful  
<sup>55</sup> to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
just as he promised our ancestors.”*

<sup>56</sup> *Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.*

Where did Mary's majestic words come from? Did she compose them on her way to Elizabeth's house? Did she learn them from a wise teacher and recite them with each weary step through the Judean hills? Whatever their source, they are a window into Mary's soul. When all she hoped for seemed swept away, she found strength in God.

We face the same dilemma. There comes a time when those who suffer find the reservoir of human strength is dry. The support of well-meaning friends crumbles. Even those we love can't journey any further with us and there is nowhere else to go. We feel alone. But we aren't. At the end of human efforts, God waits with divine strength.

Mary began to see her circumstances in a new light (Luke 1:46-49). God had not singled her out for punishment. She was destined for history's greatest blessing. Her situation was cause for celebration, not a disaster. So she rejoiced in God's goodness and provision.

The inevitable questions come:

- Would you do it all again?
- Would you change anything if you could?
- Do you have any regrets?

No one ultimately controls what happens in life. We aren't that powerful. But we can live a life of integrity and be proud of the choices we make when life is at its worst. Everyone would like to live his or her best possible life. Not many do.

The questions that Mary's story poses to us each and every Christmas is, when we face shocking news, potentially tragic news, news that seems to derail—or in fact does derail all our plans—

- Will we move toward resilience?
- Will we listen for, and hear, the Holy that is somehow present in the midst of tragedy?
- Will we discern the word of God that has come to us, and give ourselves over, not to the tragic interpretation, but to the Word?
- Will we allow that word to grow within us, and allow the Word of grace, not the word of tragedy, to shape our course?

**FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS**  
**Advent Worship Series – Week 3**  
*Why Has This Happened to Me?*  
*Elizabeth’s Journey from Unfairness to Gratitude*  
**December 17, 2017**

**WORSHIP SERVICE OUTLINES**

Each worship outline contains all elements needed for your worship service. The order of each service presented is only a *suggestion*. No doubt changes will be needed to accommodate the flow and worship style of your corps. The outlines are flexible and allow opportunities to “cut and paste” as needed. If you are blessed with instrumental or vocal music resources, you may find there is more structured material here than needed. It is recommended that the headings of each section of the service be included in the bulletin.

**Call to Worship:**

Good morning. The Psalmist says:

<sup>1</sup> To You, *Lord*, I give my whole heart, *a heart filled with praise, for I am grateful;*

before the gods, my heart sings praises to You *and You alone*.

<sup>2</sup> I bow *before You*, looking to Your holy temple,

and praise Your name, for Your unfailing love and Your truth;

for You have placed Your name and Your word over all things *and all times*.

<sup>3</sup> On the day *I needed You*, I called, and You responded

and infused my soul with strength. (Psalm 138:1-3, *The Voice*)

<b>SB#113 – Joy to the world!</b>	TB-87 – same	HTD4-T9 (3 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#180 – A Starry Night</b> <b>SB#112</b>	HC-180 TB-535 – same	HCD16-T20
<b>HC#146 – Here I am to Worship</b> <b>SB#114</b>	HC-146 TB-653 – same	HCD13-T16
<b>SB#103 – Christians awake</b>	TB-476 – same	HTD10-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>SB#104 – Come, Thou long expected Jesus</b>	TB-370 – Hyfrydol HC-114	HTD1-T14 (3 vs.) HCD10-T14
<b>SB#107 – Hark the glad sound!</b>	TB-87 – Joy to the world!	HTD4-T9 (3 vs.)
<b>SB#108 – Hark! the herald angels sing</b>	TB-270 – same	HTD4-T5 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#140 – O Come, All Ye Faithful</b> <b>SB#116</b>	HC-140 TB-496 – Adeste Fideles	HCD12-T20 HTD3-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#10 – The Light Has Come</b> <b>SB#133</b>	HC-10 TB-859 – same	HCD1A-T20
<b>HC#141 – All Hail the Power</b> <b>SB#73</b>	HC-141 TB-306 – Coronation	HCD13-T11 HTD5-T5 (4 vs.)

<b>CF#14 – Good Christian Men Rejoice</b>	CF-14	No CD
<b>CF#17 – Angels We Have Heard on High</b>	CF-17	No CD

## Announcements and Offering

### *Why Has This Happened to Me?*

<b>Drama – Fair to Partly Cloudy</b>
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**Leader:** Why can't life be fair? Why do bad things happen? In every generation and culture, people have tried to understand the nature of fairness. We don't know why some people are prosperous and secure while others are impoverished and endangered. We don't know why a tornado hits one house and not another. Life is not fair, never has been, and never will be. But we wish it were.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were first-century Jews descended from the people of the Exodus. Their God heard cries for help and delivered people in times of trial. They trusted God's power, goodness, and wisdom, even when God's ways were mysterious. Zechariah and Elizabeth's childless marriage was heartbreaking. As the descendants of priests, Zechariah and Elizabeth knew what the Psalms and Prophets said about God.

Bless our God, O peoples; let the sound of his praise be heard,  
 Who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip.  
 For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.  
 You brought us into the net;  
 You laid burdens on our backs;  
 You let people ride over our heads;  
 We went through fire and through water;  
 Yet you have brought us out to a spacious place. (Psalm 66:8-12, NRSV)

(Adapted from *Five Questions of Christmas*, pp. 68, 77-79)

<b>HC#65 – God Will Make a Way SB#492</b>	HC-65 TB-639 – same	HCD5-T15
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## Pastoral Prayer

### *The Candle of Joy*

#### Lighting of Advent Candle

**Reader 1:** Advent is a word that means “coming” or “visit”. In the Christian season of Advent, we prepare for the “advent” of Christ at Christmas. Our preparation includes many things:

- We remember Israel’s hope for the coming of God’s Messiah to save, to forgive, and to restore.
- We remember our hope for the second coming of Jesus.
- We remember our need for a Savior to save us from our sins.
- We prepare to welcome Christ at Christmas into our world . . . and into our hearts.

By lighting one candle each week of Advent, we help ourselves get ready for the birth of Jesus. The candles have different meanings, each based upon the Bible. These meanings help us understand how special the birth of Jesus is for us.

Today we focus on the expectation of **joy**.

**Reader 2:** “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” (Luke 2:10-14, NIV)

[Light 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> (purple) candles, then 3<sup>rd</sup> (pink) candle]

**Reader 1:** We relight the candle of Hope, recalling God’s promise to send a Savior. As we relight the candle of Peace, let it remind us to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ. Now we light the candle of Joy. May our hearts be forever filled with the joy of His coming.

**Reader 2:** God sent himself to us to bring us life and never-ending joy. He anoints our hearts with the oil of gladness. When Jesus was born, the angels said that His coming was good news of great joy for all people. Because Christ has come to us, we can live every day in the joy of the Lord. We are delivered! How can we not be joyful?

**Prayer:** Dear God, as we light this candle, we rejoice. We know how the first act of the story ended – with the birth of Jesus the Messiah. And we know that he will come again in glory. So even though the story isn’t over, we rejoice in our hope. We wait for you, rejoicing! Amen!

<b>HC#169 – Hallelujah</b>	HC-169	HCD15-T19
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#187 – Jesus, Messiah</b>	HC-187	HCD17-T17
<b>HC#219 – King of Kings, Majesty SB#376</b>	HC-219 TB-722 – same	HCD20-T19
<b>HC#220 – Incarnate</b>	HC-220	HCD20-T20

<p><b>HC#168 – Christmas Offering</b>  (Christmas lyrics for vs. 1 of HC#168)  Words by Paul Baloche  Christmas Offering lyrics © Capitol Cmg Genesis</p> <p>1) Over the skies of Bethlehem appeared a star  While angels sang to lowly shepherds.  Three wisemen seeking truth, they traveled from afar  Hoping to find the Child from Heaven.  Falling on their knees,  They bow before the humble Prince of peace.</p> <p><i>CHORUS</i>  <i>I bring an offering of worship to my King.</i>  <i>No one on earth deserves the praises that I sing.</i>  <i>Jesus, may you receive the honor that you're due.</i>  <i>Oh Lord, I bring an offering to you.</i></p> <p>2) The sun cannot compare to the glory of your love.  There is no shadow in your presence.  No mortal man would dare to stand before your throne,  Before the Holy One of heaven.  It's only by your blood,  And it's only through your mercy. Lord, I come.</p>	<p>HC-168</p>	<p>HCD15-T18</p>
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### *Count Your Blessings*

#### **Children's Moment – Let's Be Fair**

#### **Responsive Reading:**

**Leader:** Elizabeth was childless in a time and culture that measured a woman's value by her fertility. Barrenness was a disgrace and grounds for divorce because having an heir was imperative. Elizabeth didn't deserve barrenness. It wasn't fair. The Bible is clear in Luke 1:6...

**All:** They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. (Luke 1:6, CEB)

**Leader:** The Old Testament Scriptures consistently equated obedience with fertility, productivity, and blessing. Elizabeth's infertility seems not only unfair, but unjust as well. There was an apparent discrepancy between what God promised and what God delivered.

**Men:** <sup>12</sup>If you listen to these case laws and follow them carefully, the LORD your God will keep the covenant and display the loyalty that he promised your ancestors.

**Leader:** <sup>13</sup> He will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will bless the fruit of your wombs and the fruit of your fertile land—all your grain, your wine, your oil, and the offspring of your cattle and flocks—upon the very fertile land that he swore to your ancestors to give to you.

**Women:** <sup>14</sup> You will be more blessed than any other group of people. No one will be sterile or infertile—not among you or your animals. (Deuteronomy 7:12-14, CEB)

**Leader:** Elizabeth felt the disgrace. It wasn't any better for Zechariah. Zechariah's encounter with Gabriel was a watershed moment that radically altered the course of his life and dramatically impacted everyone in it.

**Men:** They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old. (Luke 1:7, CEB)

**Leader:** Elizabeth's story does not end in pain and deprivation. It ends in joy and delight. God intervened. Their faith was rewarded. Against all odds and despite the obvious reality of their lives, Elizabeth became pregnant.

**Women:** <sup>24</sup> Afterward, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant. She kept to herself for five months, saying, <sup>25</sup> "This is the Lord's doing. He has shown his favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people." (Luke 1:24-25, CEB)

**Leader:** When Mary came to visit, Elizabeth counted her blessings.

**All:** <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. <sup>43</sup> Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:41-43, CEB)

**Leader:** Her questioning, "Why has this happened to me?" now comes from a place of gratitude. Instead of being an old married couple, she and Zechariah were parents. But the biggest change was to their inward condition, not their outward circumstances. They underwent a revolution of perspective, priority, and purpose only God's grace could bring.

(Adapted from *Five Questions of Christmas*, pp. 73-76, 84, 86)

**Message – Elizabeth's Journey from Unfairness to Gratitude**

<b>HC#123 – Shine on Us</b>	HC-123	HCD11-T13
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#120 – In the Manger</b>	HC-120	HCD10-T20
<b>HC#127 – How Deep the Father's Love for Us</b> <b>SB#32</b>	HC-127 TB-663 – same	HCD11-T17

<b>HC#136 – We All Bow Down</b>	HC-136	HCD12-T16
<b>HC#139 – There Is a Message SB#439</b>	HC-139 TB-879 – same	HCD12-T19
<b>HC#169 – Hallelujah</b>	HC-169	HCD15-T19
<b>HC#176 – Holy Is the Lord</b>	HC-176	HCD16-T16
<b>HC#179 – Come to Jesus</b>	HC-179	HCD16-T19
<b>HC#186 – When I Look into Your Holiness SB#402</b>	HC-186  TB-927 – same	HCD17-T16
<b>HC#187 – Jesus, Messiah</b>	HC-187	HCD17-T17
<b>HC#219 – King of Kings, Majesty SB#376</b>	HC-219 TB-722 – same	HCD20-T19
<b>HC#220 – Incarnate</b>	HC-220	HCD20-T20
<b>HC#226 – I Worship You</b>	HC-226	HCD21-T16

### Benediction

<b>HC#140 – O Come, All Ye Faithful SB#116</b>	HC-140 TB-496 – Adeste Fideles	HCD12-T20 HTD3-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#151 – Fairest Lord Jesus SB#77</b>	HC-151 TB-206 – Ascalon	HCD14-T11 HTD5-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#180 – A Starry Night SB#112</b>	HC-180 TB-535 – same	HCD16-T20
<b>HC#260 – Go, Tell It on the Mountain SB#106</b>	HC-260 TB-631 – same	HCD24-T20 HTD11-T4 (2 vs., start w/chorus)

<b>Advent 2017 – Week #3</b>	
<b>DRAMA</b>	
<b>Fair to Partly Cloudy</b>	
<b>By Martyn Scott Thomas</b>	
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<b>Topic:</b>	Fairness
<b>Scripture:</b>	Luke 1:5-25
<b>Synopsis:</b>	Four people tell about the “unfairness” of life.
<b>Characters:</b>	Athlete Student Worker Elizabeth
<b>Props/Costumes:</b>	Athlete should have shorts and tank top or warm-ups and a basketball. Student should have a backpack. Worker should wear shirt and tie or a dress and have a briefcase. Elizabeth can be dress in Biblical or casual attire.
<b>Setting:</b>	Bare stage.
<b>Running time:</b>	4 minutes

[The actors are standing across the front of the stage. Each should step forward when speaking.]

**Athlete:** [stepping forward] It was the state championship game. We’d worked hard all year and were playing our best at the most important time. It was a hard-fought, back-and-forth game, with neither team taking control. The game was tied with 10 seconds left and there was a loose ball. We all dived for the ball, and so did the other team. The ref quickly blew his whistle and ruled a jump ball.

Now, back when my father played, when there was a jump ball, that’s what it was. One player for both teams would square off, the ref would toss the ball between them, and they would jump and try to get possession of the ball. But for the longest time, high schools and colleges have used a possession arrow. Basically, the teams alternate possession after a jump ball situation. This is meant to prevent a team with a taller lineup from having an unfair advantage. And for the most part, it works well – that is, as long as the time keeper remembers to change the arrow after each possession. But for some reason, in our case, that didn’t happen.

It had been almost an entire half since there had been a jump ball, but I know for a fact that the other team had gotten the ball then. It was our turn. We should’ve had the ball with 10 seconds left and a chance to win the game. Instead, they got the ball and their point guard made a jump shot at the buzzer to win the game.

Our coaches challenged the call immediately, but the refs stood by their decision. All of our hard work and the championship wasn’t decided by our play, but by an off court official who wasn’t paying attention. It wasn’t fair. It just wasn’t fair.

[stepping back]

**Student:** [*stepping forward*] Economics was never my best subject. It's not even in my top three; or top ten for that matter. It just never made sense. So, I was pretty happy going into the final exam with a C average.

The test was pretty hard, but I thought I was doing okay, until I got to the final question. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't make the numbers work. I must've erased and rewritten my work a dozen times and still wasn't any closer to an answer. And then, time was up. I ended up with a bunch of scribbles, but nothing to put for an answer, so I left that one blank.

Well, it turns out that there was an error on the test on the final question and there was no way that it could be solved. So the professor decided to give full credit as long as you had an answer. But since I ended up leaving it blank, I got zero points. So much for my C average.

It just doesn't seem fair. I did all the work and got no credit and it ended up costing me a letter grade. Now I may have to take that class over again, and it really isn't my fault. [*stepping back*]

**Worker:** [*stepping forward*] Twenty-two years. That's how long I've been with this company. Twenty-two years. You would think that counts for something, but apparently it doesn't. They don't seem to reward loyalty anymore.

Things have been going well at work lately; so well that we're expanding, opening a new office. And with that new office comes a new office manager position. Now, to me, it seems like a no-brainer – go with the one with the most experience [*pointing to self*] – especially if (s)he's already the assistant office manager. Who else knows all the ins and outs of the position? Who else has basically been doing the job anyway?

So, who do they hire? Jerry. Really? Jerry, who's been with us all of two years? What does he know? Yeah, he has that college degree, but does that really compare to twenty-two years working for this same company? Each and every year I've gotten an outstanding employee evaluation. I've taken a total of three sick days during that time and one of those was because my kid was sick and I had to stay home. I even hired Jerry. [*disgusted*] I guess that was a mistake.

It's just not fair. I've earned that position. I've worked hard for years for this company and this is the thanks I get. I just don't get it. [*stepping back*]

**Elizabeth:** [*stepping forward*] Sometimes life isn't fair. All you have to do is look around you to see that truth played out. Liars and cheaters rule over those that play by the rules. The rich oppress the poor rather than helping them. Rain falls on the just and the unjust. Why even bother being good?

But my husband and I can live no other way. We are both descended from priestly lines, and Zechariah serves as a priest. We have tried all our lives to obey all the Lord's commandments, even when friends and family lived their lives in whatever way they saw fit. But that's not how God calls us to live. We must be obedient.

So why don't we have any children? God promised that if we, his people, followed his commands, we would be blessed more than any other people. He would love us, bless us and multiply our families. And yet, I am barren.

Please don't think that I'm complaining, because God has blessed our marriage in other ways. It's just that when I see other families with their little ones, I wonder, why not us? It's not that they're bad people, but what more does God require from us? What more can we do?

[*pause*] Still, we are faithful. We will be obedient to God's commands. We can live no other way. But the days can get lonely, especially when Zechariah is away. You see, his order is on duty at the Temple this week. I miss him so much when he's away. I can't wait for him to come home.

[*Blackout*]

***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***  
**Children's Moment – Week 3**  
***Why Has This Happened to Me?***  
***Elizabeth's Journey from Unfairness to Gratitude***  
**December 17, 2017**

**Let's Be Fair**  
**by Martyn Scott Thomas**

*[The Narrator should call the children of the congregation forward and have them sit around his chair. The narrator should have a length of rope long enough for a Tug of War. The narrator also should have a bag of candy to award to the winners.]*

**Narrator:** Today is the third Sunday in Advent. Last week we learned about good and bad things that happen to us. Today we're going to talk about being fair.

We're going to play a game this morning called "Tug of War," so let's split up into two teams. *[divide the children into two teams, with one team being made up of only the smallest child.]* Okay, I need you over here *[smallest child]* and the rest of you over here. *[pulls out the rope]* Now, let's line you up on each side of the rope and when I say go, you pull on the rope. The team that is able to pull the other team is the winner. Does that sound fair? *[hopefully the children will see the inequity]* All of you against just one? *[No!]*

Well, since this team would be the winner, they win this bag of candy. *[Hand the bag to just one child of the winning team]* Since you were on the winning team, this prize is just for you. You get the whole thing all to yourself. *[to the other children]* Does that sound fair to you? *[No!]*

Things aren't always fair. It would be fair if our teams were divided equally. It would also be fair if all the winners got part of the prize. *[take the candy back and give some to each child]*

In our Christmas story, we learn about Zechariah and Elizabeth, two people who were faithful to God. All their lives they tried to do what was right, but now they were very old and never had any children. It didn't seem fair to them. Was God mad at them?

But then, at just the right time, God promised them a son. He would be John the Baptist and would prepare the way for Jesus.

So even when life seems to be unfair, we just need to wait for God's perfect timing.

Let's pray. Dear Jesus, we thank you that when life seems unfair, we can wait on you to make things right. Amen.

I'll see you back here next week. [*dismiss the children*]

# ***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***

## **Sermon – Week 3**

### ***Why Has This Happened to Me?***

#### ***Elizabeth's Journey from Unfairness to Gratitude***

**December 17, 2017**

**Title: Why Has This Happened to Me?**

**Scripture: Luke 1:43**

#### **It's Not Fair**

We wish we could fix what's wrong with the world. We are horrified by atrocities and tragedies across the world and in our own neighborhoods. We are outraged when our loved ones are mistreated or abused. We are angry when something unfair and unexpected happens to us. We see inequality on the playground, at our jobs, in the union meeting, and in the halls of government.

Sometimes laws are passed, speeches given, sacrifices made, and wars fought to make the world a fairer and better place. But unfairness and injustice are still as persistent and predictable as the sun rising in the east.

Luke introduces us to Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. She is dealing with the unfair burden of infertility.

*<sup>5</sup> In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. <sup>7</sup> But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. (Luke 1:5-7, NIV)*

A little later in the narrative, Mary visited Elizabeth's home (Luke 1:41-43). Upon seeing Mary, Elizabeth questions, "Why has this happened to me?" In the context of Elizabeth's greeting, the question is positive—it is a blessing and pleasant surprise to see Mary. But the question "Why has this happened to me?" can also be negative—why do bad things happen? Why is life unfair?

#### **Fairness and Justice**

Fairness and justice are not synonyms. Justice means people get what they deserve or what society demands. Justice holds people accountable for their actions and rewards or punishes accordingly. Society, the family, and employers have standards for which behaviors are acceptable. Justice maintains those standards and issues punishment when behavior is unacceptable and rewards when standards are met.

Fairness is different. Fairness is more fundamental and objective. Fairness demands that everyone play by the same rules and that the playing field is level. For instance, the handicap system in golf enables golfers of all skill levels to compete on an equitable basis. The distance from tee to hole on a golf course is adjusted to accommodate men, women, and youth. Golf has a lot of rules and guidelines to make it fair and enjoyable for everyone.

Some societies and governments strive to make life as fair as possible. They enforce equal access and affirmative action laws to reduce discrimination. They adhere to building codes that allow accessibility regardless of physical handicap. They have regulatory agencies, watchdog groups, and consumer advocates to monitor the safety and quality of goods and services. But fairness is not always the norm. In every corner of the world there are people who are treated differently because of religion, nationality, gender, race, caste, or tribe.

The world is not fair. Justice is not universal. Some suffer terrible accidents or diseases while others grow healthy and strong. Some people are born with high intelligence and able bodies while others are born with mental impairments and physical deformities. We don't know why. Life isn't fair.

### **The Curious Case of Elizabeth: Before the Angel**

Elizabeth experiences both sides of the fairness question. She was both victim and victor, cursed and blessed, sufferer and survivor. Her experience with unfair suffering and miraculous good fortune can be divided into two distinct periods: before and after the angel's visit.

The Bible is clear. She and Zechariah were "*righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord*" (Luke 1:6). The Old Testament Scriptures consistently equated obedience with fertility, productivity, and blessing. Elizabeth' infertility seems not only unfair, but unjust as well. There was an apparent discrepancy between what God promised and what God delivered. (Deuteronomy 7:12-14)

Zechariah and Elizabeth were steeped in the beliefs and traditions of their people. Their understanding of the situation centered on one belief: Children are from the Lord, a reward and blessing. A man with many children can be proud. Those without children were not blessed and had every reason to feel ashamed.

<sup>3</sup> *Children are a heritage from the LORD,  
offspring a reward from him.*

<sup>4</sup> *Like arrows in the hands of a warrior  
are children born in one's youth.*

<sup>5</sup> *Blessed is the man  
whose quiver is full of them.*

*They will not be put to shame  
when they contend with their opponents in court. (Psalm 127:3-5, NIV)*

Elizabeth felt the disgrace. Perhaps her heart ached every time she heard of another pregnancy in the village or the cries of joy when a baby was born. It wasn't any better for Zechariah. How many times had the men of the village slapped one another on the back at the news of a coming child? How many times had he circumcised another man's son? How many boys had he taught the Torah and watched grow into manhood?

It must have seemed that God had abandoned them. Perhaps there were periods of significant soul-searching, trying to understand why God ignored their plight and their prayers. It's one

thing to think you're the victim of bad luck, happenstance, or evil. It's quite another to believe you've been singled out by the almighty Creator of the universe for punishment and live every day under His angry glare.

None of it was true. God wasn't punishing them, hadn't failed them and hadn't abandoned them. God had a different plan and a different timetable. It wasn't Zechariah's fault or Elizabeth's fault. I wasn't a fault, misfortune, or even bad luck. It just wasn't what they expected or wanted.

### **After the Angel**

Elizabeth's story doesn't end in pain and deprivation. It ends in joy and delight. God intervened. Their faith was rewarded. Against all odds and despite the obvious reality of their lives, Elizabeth became pregnant (Luke 1:24-25)

Elizabeth's blessings were no fairer than her sufferings. Unfairness isn't found only in struggle or pain. Blessings and joys blithely accepted as if deserved are also unfair. Why are some tear-stained prayers to the heavens answered, and others not?

People living in comfort enjoy the blessings they have and give little thought to others who suffer. They accept their privileged state as an entitlement they deserve. Meanwhile, people living in poverty and suffering wonder why their misfortune means their children starve and endure preventable diseases. Neither deserves their lot.

### **The Harvest**

Elizabeth chose another way. She refused the poison of anger, despair, and doubt. The secret lay in the faith that sustained her hope and gave meaning to her pain. Her steadfastness led to a happy life and a miracle.

What happens to us in life matters. But what matters more is what we do with what happens. Wealth can be hoarded or shared. Power can be used to abuse or protect. Influence can be used to corrupt or inspire. Our response to the circumstances of life depends on the mental, emotional, moral, psychological, and spiritual paradigms we apply.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were first-century Jews descended from the people of the Exodus. Their God heard cries for help and delivered people in times of trial. They trusted God's power, goodness, and wisdom, even when God's ways were mysterious. As the descendants of priests, Zechariah and Elizabeth knew what the Psalms and Prophets said about God.

1. They believed in **God's power**. Beginning with the Genesis stories of creation and Exodus stories of deliverance, the God of the Israelites was mighty and powerful. Their situation may have seemed hopeless and they may have felt helpless. But God had delivered their ancestors from Egyptian slavery, sustained them in the wilderness, and led them to the Promised Land. God could and would deliver them. Even in dark times, they offered praise and gratitude to God.

2. They believed in **God's wisdom**. They knew countless stories of people who faced impossible circumstances, like young David taking on the giant Goliath. In those unfair and unlikely situations, God displayed greater wisdom beyond what human eyes could see. Even

when the Israelites were captured and exiled to faraway countries, God had a plan for restoration. Zechariah and Elizabeth believed that God was at work for their good, even when things looked bad and the road got hard.

3. They believed in **God's goodness**. Zechariah and Elizabeth's childless marriage was heartbreaking. But the rock-solid foundation of their faith secured them to a loving God who could redeem the worst of situations. Their faith gave them the strength to live with confidence in the face of great disappointment, personal pain, and injustice.

4. They believed in **God's justice**. It was woven into their faith: the unrighteous faced God's judgment and the righteous were vindicated. Zechariah and Elizabeth trusted God's justice. It wasn't easy, but they looked beyond their plight with the eyes of faith and grasped a deeper and truer reality.

*<sup>6</sup> Seek the LORD while he may be found;  
call on him while he is near.*

*<sup>7</sup> Let the wicked forsake their ways  
and the unrighteous their thoughts.*

*Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them,  
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.*

*<sup>8</sup> "For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways,"  
declares the LORD.*

*<sup>9</sup> "As the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

Isaiah 55:6-9, NIV

Why does this matter to us today? It matters because Zechariah and Elizabeth lived out of this radically different paradigm. They did not sink into fatalistic despair, and they were not oblivious to or naïve about their circumstances. They responded to their pain with courage, to their uncertainty with faith, and to their unfairness with confidence. They were exactly the kind of people God wanted them to be.

### **Count Your Blessings**

When Mary came to visit, Elizabeth counted her blessings (Luke 1:39-45). Her question, "Why has this happened to me?" now comes from a place of gratitude. Elizabeth and Mary were blessed that the prayers were heard by God, blessed to participate in God's plan for redemption, and blessed to have an opportunity to encourage one another. Like Elizabeth, we can count our blessings and express our gratitude to God.

1. Elizabeth had the **blessing of answered prayer**. A child was the one thing that could end her lifelong disappointment. She and Zechariah prayed and waited patiently. God responds to our greatest needs and deepest pleas, but they're probably not what we had in mind. God acts in our best interest in wonderful ways, but we don't dictate the timetable. Even when we don't like or understand it, God's plan is perfect.

2. Elizabeth had the **blessing of exoneration**. With each passing day of her pregnancy, God's grace removed her shame and she never looked back. Sometimes we let failures, mistakes, and tragedies cast long, dark shadows on our lives. A bad decision, a hasty word, or a careless act keeps us chained to a heavy anchor of guilt. Elizabeth learned how to release the burdens of the past. Our sins can be erased, and we have a clean slate because Jesus came to give people a life of freedom, forgiveness, and grace.

3. Elizabeth had the **blessing of God's presence**. Times of pain and trial can be isolating and overwhelming. But during their years of infertility and shame Elizabeth and Zechariah were not alone. God never leaves us or abandons his creation. It might not be easy to see the divine hand moving in our lives, but God is always there. The greatest joy of the Christmas story is that God came to be with us. Jesus is our Emmanuel, God with us. Always.

4. Elizabeth had the **blessing of a heavenly vision**. When Mary arrived, Elizabeth felt the presence of God, and her unborn son leaped for joy. Through their two miracle babies, Elizabeth and Mary experienced God in a new and profound way. The greatest longing of the human soul is for God. When God is revealed, we experience deep satisfaction and joy.

5. Elizabeth had the **blessing of a new life**. John's birth changed everything. Elizabeth's priorities, interactions, and routines now revolved around the small, helpless infant who woke her up in the middle of the night. Nothing was ever the same again. Instead of being an old married couple, she and Zechariah were parents. Instead of being quiet, anonymous believers, they were active participants in God's great redemption story. But the biggest change was to their inward condition, not their outward circumstances. They underwent a revolution of perspective, priority, and purpose only God's grace could bring.

### **Blessing's Purpose**

Zechariah's encounter with the angel and Elizabeth's pregnancy were great joys and blessings. But their blessing had a purpose. John was their pride and joy, their hearts' great desire and delight. But their blessing was part of a greater plan and bigger story. Their miracle child became a blessing to the whole world.

*<sup>4</sup> And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup> John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

### **The Baptism and Testing of Jesus**

*<sup>9</sup> At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John<sup>(K)</sup> in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:4-11, NIV)*

When John baptized Jesus in the muddy Jordan River, God spoke from heaven and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. John was a part of political and religious history as a dissident, protestor, and preacher who called a nation to repentance. John suffered a heartbreaking, awful death as a martyr for his faith.

Elizabeth and Zechariah's answered prayers had very unexpected consequences and a tragic ending. But blessings given by God remain under God's domain. Blessings are not to be squandered on greater comfort, more possessions, or personal pleasures. Blessings are to ultimately give glory to God. So what does God expect from those who are blessed?

**1. We recognize and rejoice in the source of blessing.** A gracious and generous God gave a miracle child to Zechariah and Elizabeth. John was a gift that they didn't earn or deserve and they knew it. Deep gratitude was the only possible response. People can work hard at being good, but none of us truly deserve blessing. We have been given much more than we deserve. Such grace cannot be repaid, but we can respond with joyful gratitude to the Giver of all good things.

**2. We are responsible for our blessings.** Zechariah and Elizabeth were entrusted with a child who was a marvelous joy, a miraculous gift, and a magnificent responsibility. John's parents provided for him, loved him, taught him, and cared for him. Blessings are not to be abused, hoarded, neglected, or squandered. The worked measures success by what we achieve, acquire, or accumulate, but that is not God's way. When we use our blessings in a way that honors God and serves others, we discover true satisfaction and deep contentment.

**3. We eventually release our blessings.** The infant sleeping in Elizabeth's arms grew into a toddler, a boy, and a man. Elizabeth and Zechariah released their blessing as he left home for his prophetic ministry in the wilderness. Sometimes we fear that our gifts will be misused or wasted, but when we are selfish with our blessings they only rot and decay. Letting go sets off a surprised chain reaction as others create new, beautiful things we never could have imagined. Like children, blessings, should be held lovingly and lightly—treasured, celebrated, and released to do great and wonderful things in the world.

**4. We remain righteous once we have our blessing.** When they finally got their heart's desire, Zechariah and Elizabeth continued to live with faithful obedience. They served God with grateful hearts in both adversity and prosperity. Sadly, not everyone manages to steer clear of selfishness and sin when lives are blessed and their prayers are answered. Their blessings become trinkets to squander on small and petty pursuits. They settle for small lives of shallow pleasures and material comfort. They numb themselves from suffering and pain with indulgences and anesthetics. Whatever lessons they might have learned are lost. This kind of life lacks the passion and joy that righteousness and faithfulness bring.

Elizabeth's gratitude was not limited to getting what she wanted. John did not always bring her happiness. He brought her pain, too. But John was part of God's greater plan for salvation, and even when it brought her sorrow, Elizabeth was grateful for the blessing of being John's mother.

Why do people experience unfair suffering or receive underserved blessings? We may never know. But in good times and bad times, we have the assurance the God has a plan beyond what we can see. Accepting our blessings and our trials with equal measures of gratitude frees us from worrying about the question, “Why has this happened to me?” Remaining faithful as we wait for God’s promises will eventually bring tidings of great joy for us, for those we love, and all those we touch.

Will you follow Elizabeth’s example and take the journey from unfairness to gratitude?

Sermon – *Five Questions of Christmas* – pages 68-91

# ***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***

## **Advent Worship Series – Week 4**

### ***Where Is the Child?***

***The Magi's Journey from Disappointment to True Treasure***

**December 24, 2017**

#### **WORSHIP SERVICE OUTLINES**

Each worship outline contains all elements needed for your worship service. The order of each service presented is only a *suggestion*. No doubt changes will be needed to accommodate the flow and worship style of your corps. The outlines are flexible and allow opportunities to “cut and paste” as needed. If you are blessed with instrumental or vocal music resources, you may find there is more structured material here than needed. It is recommended that the headings of each section of the service be included in the bulletin.

#### **Announcements and Offering**

### ***Where Is the Child?***

#### **Call to Worship:**

Sunday school Christmas pageants and television holiday specials tend to distort the Magi into caricatures. These ancient astronomers saw something rare and special in the night sky. Reading the celestial omens, they concluded that a Jewish king had been born. The star or phenomenon was so spectacular that they felt compelled to investigate. After a long, arduous journey, the magi stood at the gates of the king's palace and asked the obvious question, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” Terrified by a toddler, Herod decided to eliminate the threat to his throne. He ordered the vicious murder of all male children two years old and younger in Bethlehem and the surrounding area.

Like those long-ago wise men, we chase our star. Something captivates us—a career, a goal, an achievement, a dream, or a person. That's our star. The road from dream to reality is long and marked by difficulties, discouragement, dedication, determination, and discipline. It can take years. It can take a lifetime. Like the magi, we are heroes in our own stories on a great quest to find the treasure we seek. That journey is not measured in miles but in the transformation of our own lives.

(Adapted from *Five Questions of Christmas*, pp. 118-119, 121-122)

<b>HC#140 – O Come, All Ye Faithful SB#116</b>	HC-140 TB-496 – Adeste Fideles	HCD12-T20 HTD3-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>SB#100 – Angels, from the realms of glory</b>	TB-407 – Regent Square	HTD4-T12 (4 vs.)
<b>SB#113 – Joy to the world!</b>	TB-87 – same	HTD4-T9 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#146 – Here I am to Worship SB#114</b>	HC-146 TB-653 – same	HCD13-T16

SB#126 – The first noel the angel did say	TB-857 – The first Nowell	HTD6-T18 (3 vs.)
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## *The Candle of Love*

### Lighting of Advent Candle

**Reader 1:** Advent is a word that means “coming” or “visit”. In the Christian season of Advent, we prepare for the “advent” of Christ at Christmas. Our preparation includes many things:

- We remember Israel’s hope for the coming of God’s Messiah to save, to forgive, and to restore.
- We remember our hope for the second coming of Jesus.
- We remember our need for a Savior to save us from our sins.
- We prepare to welcome Christ at Christmas into our world . . . and into our hearts.

By lighting one candle each week of Advent, we help ourselves get ready for the birth of Jesus. The candles have different meanings, each based upon the Bible. These meanings help us understand how special the birth of Jesus is for us.

Today we focus on the expectation of **love**.

**Reader 2:** <sup>9</sup>This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup>This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. (1 John 4:9-12)

[Light all four candles]

**Reader 2:** Today we relight the candle of hope, recalling God’s promise; the candle of Peace, the candle of peace, reminds us to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ and the candle of Joy, reminding us of the joy found in HIM. Now we light the candle of Love. We celebrate the announcement of the coming King and the greatness of God’s love reveled through the Christ child.

**Reader 1:** How great is the love the Father has lavished on us! This is how God showed His love: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. (1 John 4:9) A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. (John 13:34-35)

**Prayer:** Father, we thank you for reveling yourself though Jesus, and we praise you for the greatness of your love. Help us to share your peace with others and live our lives more like Christ every day. In His name we pray. Amen.

<b>SB#101 – As with gladness men of old</b>	TB-276 – Dix	HTD11-T3 (4 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#45 – While We Are Waiting, Come</b>	HC-45	HCD3-T15
<b>HC#72 – Emmanuel</b>	HC-72	HCD6-T12
<b>HC#82 – Jesus, Name above All Names</b> <b>SB#82</b>	HC-82 TB-714 – same	HCD7-T12
<b>HC#136 – We All Bow Down</b>	HC-136	HCD12-T16
<b>HC#151 – Fairest Lord Jesus</b> <b>SB#77</b>	HC-151 TB-206 – Ascalon	HCD14-T11 HTD5-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#156 – Enter In</b>	HC-156	HCD14-T16
<b>HC#169 – Hallelujah</b>	HC-169	HCD15-T19
<b>HC#187 – Jesus, Messiah</b>	HC-187	HCD17-T17
<b>HC#219 – King of Kings, Majesty</b> <b>SB#376</b>	HC-219 TB-722 – same	HCD20-T19
<b>HC#220 – Incarnate</b>	HC-220	HCD20-T20
<b>HC#226 – I Worship You</b>	HC-226	HCD21-T16
<b>SB#102 – Away in a manger</b>	TB-497 – same TB-511 – The manger scene	HTD6-T3 (3 vs.) HTD6-T14 (3 vs.)
<b>SB#110 – In the bleak midwinter</b>	TB-184 – Cranham	HTD11-T2 (4 vs.)
<b>SB#117 – O come, Immanuel</b>	TB-444 – same	HTD11-T8 (3 vs.)
<b>SB#118 – O little town of Bethlehem</b>	TB-136 – same	HTD3-T5 (3 vs.)
<b>SB#128 – They all were looking for a king</b>	TB-421 – Childhood	No CD
<b>SB#129 – We three kings of Orient are</b>	TB-915 – same	HTD11-T12 (3 vs.)
<b>SB#131 – When wise men came seeking for Jesus from far</b>	TB-507 – Normandy Carol TB-497 – Away in a manger	HTD11-T6 (3 vs.) HTD6-T3 (3 vs.)

### Children’s Moment - Star Light, Star Bright

#### Announcements and Offering

#### Scripture Alive! (Matthew 2:1-12, *The Voice*)

**Leader:** These ancient astronomers saw something rare and special in the night sky. Reading the celestial omens, they concluded that a Jewish king had been born. The star or phenomenon was so spectacular they felt compelled to investigate.

**Reader 1:** <sup>1</sup>Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem, in the province of Judea, at the time when King Herod reigned. *Not long after Jesus was born*, magi, wise men or seers from the East, made their way from the East to Jerusalem. These wise men made inquiries.

**Leader:** These men from the East come looking for the One who has been born who will save His people from sin.

**Wise Man:** <sup>2</sup> Where is this newborn, who is the King of the Jews? When we were far away in the East we saw His star, and we have followed its glisten and gleam all this way to worship Him.

<b>SB#129 – We three kings of Orient are</b>	TB-915 – same	HTD11-T12 (3 vs.)
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**Leader:** <sup>3</sup> King Herod began to hear rumors of the wise men’s quest, and he, and all of his followers in Jerusalem, were worried. <sup>4</sup> So Herod called all of the leading Jewish teachers, the chief priests and head scribes, and he asked them where *Hebrew tradition claimed* the long-awaited Anointed One would be born.

**Reader 1:** <sup>5</sup> *An ancient Hebrew prophet, Micah, said this:*

<sup>6</sup> But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are no poor relation—  
For from your people will come a Ruler  
who will be the shepherd of My people Israel.

**Leader:** From that prophecy we learn that the Savior would be born in the town of Bethlehem, in the province of Judea. This information in hand, Herod orders the wise men to come to his chambers in secret; and when they arrive, Herod quizzes them.

**Reader 1:** <sup>7</sup> Herod called the wise men to him, demanding to know the exact time the special star had appeared to them. <sup>8</sup> Then Herod sent them to Bethlehem.

**Herod:** *Go to Bethlehem* and search high and low for this *Savior* child; and as soon as you know where He is, report it to me so that I may go and worship Him.

<b>SB#118 – O little town of Bethlehem</b>	TB-136 – same	HTD3-T5 (3 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>SB#109 – How far is it to Bethlehem?</b>	TB-509 – Stowey	No CD
<b>SB#101 – As with gladness men of old</b>	TB-276 – Dix	HTD11-T3 (4 vs.)

**Leader:** <sup>9-10</sup> The wise men left Herod’s *chambers* and went on their way. The star they had first seen in the East reappeared—a *miracle that, of course, overjoyed and enraptured* the wise men. The star led them to the house where Jesus lay; <sup>11</sup> and as soon as the wise men arrived, they saw Him with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. They unpacked their satchels and gave Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

**Reader 1:** These are exceptionally good gifts, for gold is what is given a king, and Jesus is the King of kings; incense is what you expect to be given a priest, and Jesus is the

High Priest of all high priests; myrrh ointment is used to heal, and Jesus is a healer. But myrrh is also used to embalm corpses—and Jesus was born to die.

**Leader:** <sup>12</sup> And then, *just as Joseph did a few months before*, the wise men had a dream warning them not to go back to Herod. *The wise men heeded the dream. Ignoring Herod's instructions*, they returned to their homes in the East by a different route.

<b>Drama – A Threat to the Throne</b>
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<b>HC#146 – Here I am to Worship SB#114</b>	HC-146 TB-653 – same	HCD13-T16
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#136 – We All Bow Down</b>	HC-136	HCD12-T16
<b>HC#219 – King of Kings, Majesty SB#376</b>	HC-219 TB-722 – same	HCD20-T19
<b>HC#220 – Incarnate</b>	HC-220	HCD20-T20

**Pastoral Prayer**

*The Greatest Quest*

**Message – *The Magi's Journey from Disappointment to True Treasure***

<b>SB#153 – Thou didst leave thy throne</b>	TB-94 – Margaret	HTD10-T6 (4 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#120 – In the Manger</b>	HC-120	HCD10-T20
<b>HC#123 – Shine on Us</b>	HC-123	HCD11-T13
<b>HC#127 – How Deep the Father's Love for Us SB#32</b>	HC-127 TB-663 – same	HCD11-T17
<b>HC#136 – We All Bow Down</b>	HC-136	HCD12-T16
<b>HC#139 – There Is a Message SB#439</b>	HC-139 TB-879 – same	HCD12-T19
<b>HC#169 – Hallelujah</b>	HC-169	HCD15-T19
<b>HC#176 – Holy Is the Lord</b>	HC-176	HCD16-T16
<b>HC#179 – Come to Jesus</b>	HC-179	HCD16-T19
<b>HC#186 – When I Look into Your Holiness SB#402</b>	HC-186 TB-927 – same	HCD17-T16
<b>HC#187 – Jesus, Messiah</b>	HC-187	HCD17-T17
<b>HC#219 – King of Kings, Majesty SB#376</b>	HC-219 TB-722 – same	HCD20-T19
<b>HC#220 – Incarnate</b>	HC-220	HCD20-T20

<b>HC#226 – I Worship You</b>	HC-226	HCD21-T16
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**Benediction**

<b>HC#260 – Go, Tell It on the Mountain SB#106</b>	HC-260 TB-631 – same	HCD24-T20 HTD11-T4 (2 vs., start w/chorus)
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**Additional Optional Songs**

<b>HC#151 – Fairest Lord Jesus SB#77</b>	HC-151 TB-206 – Ascalon	HCD14-T11 HTD5-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#180 – A Starry Night SB#112</b>	HC-180 TB-535 – same	HCD16-T20

<b>Advent 2017 – Week #4</b>	
<b>DRAMA</b>	
<b>A Threat to the Throne</b>	
<b>By Martyn Scott Thomas</b>	
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<b>Topic:</b>	Christmas: King Herod
<b>Scripture:</b>	Matthew 2:1-8
<b>Synopsis:</b>	King Herod and his attendant discuss his plans for the newborn “King of the Jews.”
<b>Characters:</b>	King Herod – ruler of Judea Julius – his attendant
<b>Props/Costumes:</b>	Biblical dress, if possible, with a robe and crown for Herod. A throne for Herod.
<b>Setting:</b>	Herod’s throne room.
<b>Running time:</b>	3 minutes

[Herod is seated on his throne.]

**Julius:** [enters] They’ve gone, your Highness.

**Herod:** Good. And they will report back to us once they find [*sarcastically*] “the king?”

**Julius:** Yes, your Highness.

**Herod:** Good. It’s best that we take care of this matter quickly and quietly before anyone realizes anything has happened.

**Julius:** Do you really think this child could be a threat?

**Herod:** I think everyone could be a threat. And I take any threat to my throne seriously.

**Julius:** But, we’re talking about a child. The Jews themselves didn’t seem to be too concerned about him. Why should we be?

**Herod:** The Jews were just trying to please me. And they knew that I would take care of the matter. Trust me; they don’t want to lose their place either.

**Julius:** Then why don’t they just handle it “internally?”

**Herod:** And risk the public backlash? It’s much easier to have the hated monarch killing babies. I’d get blamed for it anyway. Besides, this child could be more trouble than he seems.

**Julius:** Why do you say that?

**Herod:** Those travelers obviously know something.

**Julius:** They are very wise.

**Herod:** [*gives Julius a dirty look*]

**Julius:** But not as wise as the King.

**Herod:** But they had knowledge of some prophecy. They must've known of this child or they wouldn't have journeyed this far.

**Julius:** So, I ask you again, do you really think this child could be a threat?

**Herod:** It doesn't matter. Any threat, real or imagined, will be gone in a matter of weeks, if not days. And you will see that it is done.

**Julius:** As you wish, your Highness.

**Herod:** Make arrangements to travel to Bethlehem with a brigade of soldiers as soon as we receive word of the child's whereabouts.

**Julius:** As you wish, your Highness.

**Herod:** And make sure the parents are kept silent as well. By any means possible.

**Julius:** It shall be done – quickly and quietly.

**Herod:** I would have it no other way. Soon we will be done with this talk about the “King of the Jews” and we will be able to get back to what matters most. Now, bring me my drink.

**Julius:** As you wish, your Highness. [*exits*]

[*Blackout*]

# ***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***

## **Children's Moment – Week 4**

### ***Where Is the Child?***

***The Magi's Journey from Disappointment to True Treasure***

**December 24, 2017**

### **Star Light, Star Bright**

**by Martyn Scott Thomas**

*[The Narrator should call the children of the congregation forward and have them sit around his chair.]*

**Narrator:** Today is the fourth Sunday in Advent. Last week we learned about being fair. Today we're going to talk some of the visitors that came to see baby Jesus.

When you decorate your Christmas tree at home, what do you put on top of the tree? *[allow children to answer, looking for "a star"]* Yes, a star. And can anyone tell me why we put a star on top of a Christmas tree? What does the star have to do with Christmas? *[allow children to answer]*

The star is actually very important to the Christmas story and it has a lot to do with our visitors. You see, there were three men who came to visit baby Jesus after he was born. They came from very far away and needed a way to find the baby. Today, I can use my phone to help me find where I'm going, but they didn't have phones back then. They didn't even have maps to help them. All they could do was look to the sky. And what do you think they found? *[allow children to answer]* That's right, a star. And this was a very special star. It told them that a very important baby was born – Jesus – and it told them how to find him.

So these three wise men followed the star and it took them to Bethlehem where they found baby Jesus and his parents. They brought him three gifts. Do you know what they were? *[allow children to answer]* Very good! Gold, frankincense and myrrh. Then they bowed down to the baby and worshipped him because they knew that he was God's son.

So, you see, the star was very important because it told the wise men about baby Jesus and it helped them find him. And now you know why we put a star on top of the Christmas tree.

Let's pray. Dear Jesus, we thank you that you sent your son Jesus to the world so that everybody can worship him. Amen.

It's been nice sharing this time with you each week. I hope you all have a Merry Christmas. *[dismiss the children]*

# ***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***

## **Sermon – Week 4**

### ***Where Is the Child?***

*The Magi's Journey from Disappointment to True Treasure*

**December 24, 2017**

**Title:           Where Is the Child?**

**Scripture:     Matthew 2:1-12**

The magi left home and took a difficult and dangerous journey to bring incredibly expensive gifts to a baby they didn't know. They were privileged to see his star and fortunate to have the resources to make the trip. They presumed this new King of the Jews would be born in the palace, so they set out for Jerusalem. The star did not lead them to Herod's palace. Their assumptions did. They were wrong.

The journey was the pinnacle experience of their lives. Captivated by their star, the magi did what they had to do to reach their goal. They did not know they were part of the greatest event in human history. If they hadn't pursued their dream, they would have been lost in the archives of ancient history, not celebrated every year at Epiphany.

Their star wasn't just another one of the billions of heavenly lights shining on a clear, dark night. That particular celestial phenomenon held incredible significance and meaning. Other people look at the same panorama of options and possibilities but don't see what we see, value what we value, or choose what we choose. Like the magi we invest our stars with meaning and significance others do not and cannot see.

We chase our dreams because, at a deep and primal level, we believe reaching those goals will fill the great voids deep in our souls. That need drives the pursuit. The sheer varieties of the ways people seek meaning and happiness in life is amazing. But in the end, all human quests are variations on the same theme: **the relentless drive to satisfy the inexplicable hunger in our souls.**

For Christians that internal hunger confirms a divinely created longing for connection with God. Separation from our Creator leaves us empty and restless and fills us with deep and ever-expanding longings. We look for happiness in possessions, people, or achievements but only God can fill our empty souls.

#### **The Long Journey**

The magi came from the East. The Bible doesn't say how far east. Matthew 2:16-18 holds tantalizing clues about how far they had traveled. Terrified by a toddler, Herod decided to eliminate the threat to his throne. He ordered the vicious murder of all male children two years old and younger in Bethlehem and the surrounding area. Life or death was calculated based on the wise men's report of the star's first appearance.

The road from dream to reality is long and marked by difficulties, discouragement, dedication, determination, and discipline. It can take years. It can take a lifetime. Like the magi, we are

heroes in our own stories on a great quest and travel far to find the treasure we seek. That journey is not measured in miles but in the transformation of our own lives.

When the magi reached Jerusalem they went to the palace and gained entrance. It must have felt good to finally arrive. Only one thing remained: to meet and worship the child. The baby was their goal and the palace was their destination. They thought the two went together. They didn't.

### **Unintended Consequences**

The magi reached the Jerusalem palace but the newborn king wasn't there. The magi's question, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" set off a tragic chain reaction. King Herod wanted to know who threatened his throne and his heirs, so he devised a diabolical ruse. Armed with the report from his scholars, Herod sent the magi to Bethlehem. He made them promise to report back when they found the child so he could worship too. He lied.

Herod wanted to kill the baby. He would rather destroy the miracle and extinguish the hope of the world than forfeit his status and throne. Faced with the possibility of someone or something greater, Herod refused to relinquish his life as it was, with all of its problems and stresses and embrace what could be.

### **Finding Another Way**

It was a critical moment for the magi. They could have given up and gone home. Perhaps they thought about staying in Jerusalem to avoid the public shame of their failed quest. They could have spent their lives bemoaning what might have been. But the magi didn't give up or wallow in self-pity.

Confronted with the greatest disappointment in their lives the magi set off in a new direction. These wise men followed a path that was counterintuitive and contradictory to their culture and times. But in the end the magi found what they were looking for.

On the road to Bethlehem the magi again encountered a star. It led them to a young mother, her child, and the end of their quest. Their journey wasn't just from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. The magi went from painful disappointment to joy-filled amazement. In their story we find five critical steps to seeking and finding what satisfies the hungry soul.

### **1. Charting a New Course**

First, to find what we seek, we must chart a new course. The magi's goal of finding the newborn king of the Jews wasn't wrong. Their destination was. Satisfying our deepest longings is hardwired into each of us by our Creator. But we often go about it the wrong way. Like the magi, we need a course correction.

First the magi had to admit they couldn't find what they were asking for by following the path they were on. The baby wasn't in Jerusalem and that wasn't going to change even if they waited a little longer, or put in a little more effort, or invested more time or money.

We tell ourselves lies to keep us from admitting the obvious. What we seek isn't where we are looking. We believed all the cultural wisdom, did what we were told, and still got it wrong. The problem may not be our pursuit or performance but the destination itself. No matter how stubbornly we hang on, how long we stay at it, or how much harder we try, we cannot find what we seek where we're looking. It can't be found in wealth, power, pleasure, other people or achievement. If we follow those well-worn paths we'll end up in the same old desolate places.

It's time to try a new path.

## **2. Look for Greater Wisdom**

To find what we seek, we need greater wisdom. Herod had a question and needed an answer. The scholars Herod asked opened an ancient, sacred book and discovered greater wisdom there. We too need wisdom beyond our own and greater than our times despite the incredible advances in human knowledge and understanding. We too can open an ancient and sacred book and discover God's eternal wisdom in his revelation to us.

The magi set aside their assumptions and what was most often true to follow directions from an ancient text to a very unlikely place and a very unusual child. By all the standards of their culture and times they could not possibly succeed by pursuing that path. But they did.

## **3. Listen to People Who Know**

We find that path in part by trusting wise and insightful people. We won't find what we seek by following people who don't know the way. We all look to those we admire and respect, to the mores and values of our culture, and the wisdom of the day for clues. All too often and sometimes too late we discover that no matter how well intended or how widely accepted, we don't find what we're looking for there.

It's better to ask for guidance from people who have found what we seek.

But how do that? In a media-saturated world where superficial sources of supposed wisdom compete for our time and attention, how can we receive guidance from truly wise people? In two ways...first of all, the history of the church is filled with such people, and many of them left beautiful testimony to the wisdom they learned over a lifetime of faithfulness. We will be introduced in person to these wise saints when we get to heaven, but in the here and now we can uncover their wisdom through reading.

The second way to benefit from other people's wisdom, of course, is to carve out time to deepen the relationships we already have with wise people in our own communities, neighborhoods, and churches. Every church and neighborhood is home to a wise sage or two, and usually we know who they are because we find ourselves wishing our lives were more like theirs. The hard part is not identifying the sources of the wisdom. The hard part is being truly willing to receive the wisdom—because wisdom from a saint is likely to be the kind of wisdom that shakes things up, unsettles things, and calls us to an unfamiliar path.

Wise saints live quietly and peaceably all around us. How do we find the path of wisdom? Just ask them.

#### **4. Follow God's Leading**

The magi saw a star that went “ahead of them...until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped they were overwhelmed with joy” (Matthew 2:9-10). The same heavenly phenomenon that started them on their journey led them to the little house in Bethlehem that held their heart's desire. What was true for them is true for us.

God is leading. God “has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

A single bright thread is woven through the fabric of all human history: the relentless search for love, joy, and peace. It is the surest proof that eternity is in our hearts. People have examined every conceivable nook and cranny, engaged in every conceivable activity, created every conceivable relationship, and still not found what they're looking for. They have tried asceticism and hedonism, celibacy and sexual promiscuity, wealth and poverty. They have indulged or denied every possible appetite, frantically hoping to find joy. They didn't.

But God put eternity in our hearts too. The only possible solution is to follow the One who created the longing.

#### **5. Look Where You Can Find**

What the magi sought couldn't be found where they looked. All our efforts to find our soul's desire are meaningless if we look in the wrong places.

Jesus lived a completely unexpected life. Everything about Jesus and his teaching runs counter to the common practice, cultural norms, and accepted wisdom of the world. For millennia people have read his words, scratched their heads, marveled at their beauty, and wondered how anything so out of sync with human experience could possibly be true. It's all upside down. The world doesn't work that way. Maybe that's why so many people see the path but refuse to take it.

Peace and fulfillment come from the state of our souls and interior lives. They rest in selflessness, in relationship with God, and in surrender to divine control. There is nothing wrong with hard work, success, or enjoying life's pleasures. There is nothing wrong with good food, fun, art, or beauty. All are wonderful gifts from a loving God that demonstrate his generosity and grace. They are gifts to be enjoyed but were never meant to fulfill our deepest longings.

Christ's followers are not harsh ascetics who hate the physical world and its sensual delights. They do not believe suffering and deprivation automatically lead to righteousness. Nor are Christians willful hedonists and gluttons who worship the idols of pleasure. Both extremes are ultimately dead ends. Neither leads to the treasure we seek.

Creation is a great gift and blessing to be enjoyed. Like any loving parent, God delights in the joy his children feel when they experience his good gifts. But to give one's life to the pursuit of

pleasure is chasing the wind. Meeting needs that are spiritual and eternal by material and temporal means is like trying to draw water from a dry well.

A hearty meal, a beautiful vista, a playful puppy, a loving spouse, or a giggling child is delightful, but they are not the source of ultimate meaning. Distracted from the pursuit of what will truly satisfy, we lose the ability to enjoy these good gifts for what they are. It's far better to worship the God who created all these good and beautiful things. Worship puts us in right relationship with the giver of perfect gifts. It's the only joy-filled way to live.

Herod fell into that trap. Blinded by his power and wealth, he ignored the great truth, lost sight of what matters most, and made a disastrous decision that brought great misery and grief to the people of Bethlehem. If we're not careful we can do the same thing.

<sup>16</sup> When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. <sup>17</sup> Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

*<sup>18</sup> "A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more."*

Matthew 2:16-18, NIV

### **Staying the Course**

In the struggles of life, it's easy to lose our way. The magi strayed on course, ultimately reached their goal, and demonstrated what it takes to travel from disappointment to delight.

The magi showed perseverance. Great accomplishments are marked by perseverance that presses beyond the breaking point. Every failure can become the next step on the road to success. Weary of the road, disappointed with the result, and confronted with a daunting new reality, the magi left Herod's palace and began anew. They persevered in a new direction. So should we.

The magi treasured what they found. The star stopped in the most unlikely place: a little village in the Judean hills. The magi found themselves outside a small, humble cottage—not a king's palace. A simple peasant girl greeted them at the door—not a queen in her finery. A toddler sat alone on the dirt floor—not a pampered royal heir surrounded by servants. Baby Jesus wasn't what they expected. But he was the treasure they sought.

How do we know when we ought to press on or treasure what we have? This ancient story gives us three warnings.

1. First, **recognize true treasure when we find it.** All too often people don't recognize the treasures in the lives they already have. A thing of great value, precious and unique, can be overlooked in our frantic efforts. We give up real gold looking for fool's gold.

True treasure doesn't always look like treasure. This toddler in a peasant home was not at all what the magi envisioned when they set out on their journey. But they recognized the young king when they found him. They set aside their old expectations and assumptions to make room for a new treasure beyond anything they imagined. The truest, greatest, and most enduring treasure is often much closer than we think.

Many people reject Jesus because they look at the church and see control and corruption. They find Christians flawed and hypocritical. Priests and pastors betray the faith with greed, misconduct, and abuses of power. They hear Jesus' claim, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), and dismiss Christianity as intolerant and exclusive.

They are right. No Christian can deny that churches are full of flawed and failing people. They break biblical commandments and make bad choices. They struggle to emulate Jesus' compassion for the poor and commitment to justice. They are acutely aware of their failures and mistakes. They are weak and frail, broken and hurting. They are like everyone else—except for one thing. They've found treasure.

Dismissing Christ because of the failures of his followers is a terrible and tragic mistake.

2. Second, **acknowledge the value of the treasure.** The value the magi placed on the future king can be measured by their investment. Their gold, frankincense, and myrrh were incredibly valuable and had been carefully packed and zealously guarded throughout their long journey. Perhaps they were tempted to break into their treasure stash along the way—to borrow a little to make the journey easier. But they didn't.

We invest in God's kingdom by offering our time, talent, resources, and worship. We invest in treasure when we steward God's creation and care for people. That is more precious than gold and a sweeter fragrance than frankincense and myrrh. In the end these investments make us richer.

3. Third, **know when to stop searching.** The magi were right to persevere until they found Jesus. But once they found him, their quest was done and they went home (Matthew 2:12). Many people get so distracted by sparkling baubles in life that they give up a treasure of eternal worth. When you finally find what you're looking for, stop looking.

### **The Greatest Quest**

The story of the magi is one of the Bible's great quest stories. But the story of Jesus is history's greatest story of all. His mission statement was to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Jesus was remarkably good at finding treasure where no one else could. It usually got him in trouble with the religious leaders who couldn't or wouldn't understand the mission. They rejected the lost people Jesus found.

In response to their criticism, Jesus told three stories about lost things: a missing coin, a lost sheep, and a wayward son (Luke 15). The meaning of the first two stories is clear: God is like the shepherd anxiously scouring the hills for one lost sheep and the woman frantically sweeping her house looking for one lost coin. God is looking for the lost. God looks for us.

The third story is the well-known parable of a prodigal son and his father (Luke 15:11-31). In this story, we discover that there is plenty of God's love and grace to go around. The salvation of a lost sinner does not mean that a faithful follower is loved any less. God invites everyone to rejoice in the miracle of forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation. Together these stories teach three great lessons.

1. First, we are lost and can't rescue ourselves. We cannot find our way and need someone to find us and bring us home. We need a savior.
2. Second, people who reject their Father end up in a strange country where disaster waits on every side. Left to our own devices we blunder into danger, temptation, distraction, and disaster. It was true for Adam and Eve, and it's still true today. We need God to stay on course.
3. Finally, God pursues us when we're lost and welcomes us back when we come home. He'll restore what we've squandered. He'll even throw a party!

Jesus embarked on a perilous rescue mission. He left the glories of heaven to live on earth, to find us, and to bring us home to God. The Bible describes Jesus' great journey in several ways. In John's Gospel, Jesus is eternal Word who participated in creation. Jesus is the Light of the world in human form (John 1:14). In Paul's Letter to the Philippians, Christ's journey is described as transformation from a divine being into a humble servant.

<sup>5</sup> *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*  
<sup>6</sup> *Who, being in very nature God,*  
*did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;*  
<sup>7</sup> *rather, he made himself nothing*  
*by taking the very nature of a servant,*  
*being made in human likeness.*  
<sup>8</sup> *And being found in appearance as a man,*  
*he humbled himself*  
*by becoming obedient to death—*  
*even death on a cross!*  
Philippians 2:5-8 (NIV)

This is the miracle of the Incarnation. Jesus is not just human. Jesus is God in human form, God living among us as one of us. His journey began in the glories of heaven and took him to that small village. Jesus entered a world of poverty and hardship as a vulnerable infant. He surrendered incredible power to experience the frailties of human life. Loved and honored in heaven, Jesus was hated and despised on earth. He did all this to fulfill his quest, to seek and save the lost.

In those dark days in Jerusalem, it seemed Jesus failed. His treacherous enemies falsely accused him, tortured him, and crucified him. End of story! Except that it wasn't the end. It was all an essential part of his ultimate quest. Three days later Jesus defeated death itself and threw open the gates of the kingdom of God. He cleared away the rubble of sin so that the lost can be found and come home. Anyone who believes can be restored and reconciled to God and anyone can find the treasure they truly seek.

Jesus' quest continues. Christmas and Easter were the beginning. From that day to this, Jesus rescues people of every race, culture, ethnicity, age, and gender and brings them home.

If we seek him, He will find us.

Will you join the magi on the journey from disappointment to true treasure?

Sermon – *Five Questions of Christmas* – pages 115-137

# ***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***

## **Advent Worship Series – Week 5**

### ***What Will This Child Become?***

#### ***The Journey from Control to Creativity***

**December 31, 2017**

#### **WORSHIP SERVICE OUTLINES**

Each worship outline contains all elements needed for your worship service. The order of each service presented is only a *suggestion*. No doubt changes will be needed to accommodate the flow and worship style of your corps. The outlines are flexible and allow opportunities to “cut and paste” as needed. If you are blessed with instrumental or vocal music resources, you may find there is more structured material here than needed. It is recommended that the headings of each section of the service be included in the bulletin.

*[One of the goals of this service is to invite kettle workers and social service volunteers to a Sunday morning service at The Salvation Army. During the service there are many opportunities for them to take part. The use of the word ‘volunteer’ below is used to refer to one of these individuals, not a volunteer from the congregation.]*

#### **Call to Worship:**

This Christmas, we have looked at the questions of Christmas as our Advent theme each week. These questions can open the door to some of life’s great mysteries:

- How can we find truth and meaning?
- Why do people have to suffer?
- Why is the world so unfair sometimes?
- How can we trust the unseen?

Today we look at the question: How can we design the future we desire? The future is life’s great undiscovered territory. Everyone wants to control the future. People make plans, arrive at decisions, and mark their calendars, shaping the future of their dreams. The troubling truth is that no one can control the future. The present moment is all we control. We all wonder: What will the future bring?

(Adapted from *Five Questions of Christmas*, page 97 and back cover)

<b>SB#100 – Angels, from the realms of glory</b>	TB-407 – Regent Square	HTD4-T12 (4 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#146 – Here I am to Worship SB#114</b>	HC-146 TB-653 – same	HCD13-T16

#### **Recognition of Volunteers**

*[Invite kettle workers, social service volunteers to stand.]*

#### **Moment of Sharing:**

*[Invite a Christmas Volunteer to share their Christmas stories.]*

## *What Will This Child Become?*

**Reading:**

[Ask a volunteer to read the following introduction to the scripture.]

When a baby is born, we set aside our pessimism for a while and allow ourselves to dream. A newborn is full of potential and promise, fresh and clean like a new diary whose pages are yet to be filled. We read in the book of Luke, that long-awaited day has come for Elizabeth and Zechariah to become parents. The baby in Elizabeth’s arms became John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah. John was obedient to God’s call, like his parents, and Jesus called John the greatest human on earth. Here is the story of John’s birth:

(Adapted from Five Questions of Christmas, page 97)

**Responsive Reading:**

**Leader:**       <sup>57</sup> When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

**All:**           <sup>59</sup> On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, <sup>60</sup> but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.” <sup>61</sup> They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

**Leader:**       <sup>62</sup> Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. <sup>63</sup> He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.”

**All:**           <sup>64</sup> Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.

**Leader:**       <sup>65</sup> All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things.

**All:**           <sup>66</sup> Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “**What then is this child going to be?**” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

(Luke 1:57-66, NIV)

**Leader:**       It is a profound question. What will happen to this unformed life? What future is yet to be discovered? How will this baby’s destiny unfold? Even as adults we look at our unrealized future and ask, “What will I become?”

<b>HC#123 – Shine on Us</b>	HC-123	HCD11-T13
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#5 – There Is a Redeemer SB#204</b>	HC-5 TB-881 – same	HCD1A-T15

<b>HC#10 – The Light Has Come SB#133</b>	HC-10 TB-859 – same	HCD1A-T20
<b>HC#127 – How Deep the Father’s Love for us SB#32</b>	HC-127  TB-663 – same	HCD11-T17
<b>HC#151 – Fairest Lord Jesus SB#77</b>	HC-151 TB-206 – Ascalon	HCD14-T11 HTD5-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#247 – Still, My Soul, Be Still</b>	HC-247	HCD23-T17

**Reading:**

[Ask a volunteer to read the following prayer.]

We praise You, O God, that You sent Your Son Jesus to save us. You do not deliver us into the hands of the enemy when we sin; rather, You make a way to restore us into relationship with Yourself. You do not abandon us even though we stray from you; instead, You rescue us, redeem us, forgive us and guide our feet into the path of peace. Amen.

(The NIV Worship Bible, page 1373)

**Pastoral Prayer**

***What Will You Become?***

**Testimony**

[Have someone from the congregation share how they came to faith.]

**Message - *The Journey from Control to Creativity***

<b>HC#139 – There Is a Message SB#439</b>	HC-139 TB-879 – same	HCD12-T19
<b>HC#123 – Shine on Us</b>	HC-123	HCD11-T13
<b>HC#127 – How Deep the Father’s Love for Us SB#32</b>	HC-127  TB-663 – same	HCD11-T17
<b>HC#179 – Come to Jesus</b>	HC-179	HCD16-T19
<b>HC#219 – King of Kings, Majesty SB#376</b>	HC-219 TB-722 – same	HCD20-T19
<b>HC#226 – I Worship You</b>	HC-226	HCD21-T16
<b>SB#153 – Thou didst leave Thy throne</b>	TB-94 – Margaret	HTD10-T6 (4 vs.)
<b>SB#158 – Who is He in yonder stall</b>	TB-287 – Who is He?	HTD10-T19 (6 vs.)

**Leader:** Let us pray this prayer of salvation:

**All:** "Father, I know that I have broken your laws and my sins have separated me from you. I am truly sorry, and now I want to turn away from my past sinful life toward you. Please forgive me, and help me avoid sinning again. I believe that your son, Jesus Christ died for my sins, was resurrected from the dead, is alive, and hears my prayer. I invite Jesus to become the Lord of my life, to rule and reign in my heart from this day forward. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me obey You, and to do Your will for the rest of my life. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen."

***We Go Out in Faith***

**Leader:** This is our commitment to Holy Living: Since God has given us his great promises, how shall we live in relationship to Him who walks with us?

**All:** We will have no other gods before Him; we will not make for ourselves any substitute gods; we will not abuse the name of the Lord but speak it only in reverence and love; we will honor the Lord's day through worship, witness and fellowship with his people.

**Leader:** How shall we live in relationship to others?

**All:** We will honor our parents and hold the family in high esteem; we will not abuse, hate or injure our friends or neighbors by word, gesture or deed; we will not steal; we will not lie; but live holy disciplined lives; we will not grasp for what we do not have, nor reject others for having it.

**Leader:** How does Jesus summarize these commandments?

**All:** He says that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves, and by God's grace, we will do it!

**Benediction:**

<b>HC#149 – In Christ Alone SB#861</b>	HC-149 TB-132 – same	HCD13-T19
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>HC#151 – Fairest Lord Jesus SB#77</b>	HC-151 TB-206 – Ascalon	HCD14-T11 HTD5-T1 (3 vs.)

# ***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***

## **Sermon – Week 5**

### ***What Will This Child Become?***

#### ***The Journey from Control to Creativity***

**December 31, 2017**

**Title:           What will this child become?**

**Scripture:     Luke 1:66**

The events of the day John was born spread like wildfire through the village. No wonder people were afraid, marveled at his birth, and talked about his future. Zechariah's mysterious encounter in the temple and Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy pointed toward one conclusion: this child was destined for something special. The neighbors could only imagine and wonder, "What then will this child become? (Luke 1:66)

It is a profound question. What will happen to this unformed life? What future is yet to be discovered? How will this baby's destiny unfold? Even as adults we look at our unrealized future and ask "What will I become?" How we answer determines whether we find the happiness and satisfaction we so prize. It matters to other people too. Our humanity connects us, and one individual's fate impacts the happiness and satisfaction of many others. Sometimes the rules of society and the expectations of others leave little room for personal choice. It's easy for things to get off-track.

Some people don't consider the needs of others. They just charge ahead. Their pursuits, pleasures, and pride crowd out every other consideration. They cheat and lie to succeed at work. They commit adultery and recklessly abandon their families. The bright light of their achievements, wealth, and success outshines whatever damage other people suffer.

Other people put themselves very last on their to-do list. They subjugate their own plans to care for others, whether a mother sacrificing for her family, a pastor devoted to his congregation, or a teacher who never has a child of her own. Their sacrificial giving takes its toll as their emotional needs go unmet and their bodies suffer from neglect. Their dreams remain in the dark and never see the light of day.

Somewhere between the extremes of selfishness and selflessness is the responsible stewardship of personal potential. Like any work of art, the hands of the artist create the future. A steady grip on the brush, chisel, or pen allows us to explore the passions of our hearts and the ideas of our minds. We choose the colors and patterns of our canvas, the lines and shapes that form our life's work and legacy. We create a masterpiece that is ours alone. What we create largely determines whether we find meaning and joy in life.

The future is more than a moment that has not yet arrived. It is the life that waits. In each passing moment, the future flows like water through our hands, dripping from the present into the pool of the past. The future depends on what happens to us and how we respond. But getting to the future we want isn't about letting time pass aimlessly.

So what is our future and how do we get there?

The answer depends on how we understand our role in creating the future. In some ways, John was lucky. His future started with an angelic announcement and his birth was heralded by a prophecy from his father, Zechariah.

Luke 1:76-80

*<sup>76</sup> And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,  
<sup>77</sup> to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins,  
<sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God,  
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven  
<sup>79</sup> to shine on those living in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”*

*<sup>80</sup> And the child grew and became strong in spirit and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.*

## **Reality Therapy**

Three critical truths about the future are clear from John's story.

**1. First, the future is ours to make.** We create with what we have: our culture, genetics, family, and all we inherit in our place in the world. Life has boundaries, but they are much wider, higher, and deeper than we suppose and there is much more space to create life than most realize. We cannot soar like the eagle, but we can build machines that fly. John's calling was to be a prophet, but it was also to become his unique self.

**2. Second, we control how we respond to what happens to us.** Much of life is beyond our control. Other people, forces of nature, tides of history, and random events shape us, but we are not powerless. We retain the ability to respond to events that impinge on our future. Each blessing, pain, sorrow, and joy is an opportunity. Every choice nudges our future in one direction or another. Every decision opens some doors and closes others. In the end, we reach a future created by our accumulated responses over time.

**3. Third, our possibilities are limited by cause and effect.** Some philosophers and theologians play semantic games with the nature of freedom, choice, and will, but consequences are real and unavoidable. The results of each person's choices ripple through time. It's impossible to know the full implications of every action but our decisions matter.

The fact that Christmas is celebrated two thousand years after Christ's birth is, from a human perspective, the result of unintended consequences. The religious and political leaders of Christ's day conspired to falsely accuse, arrest, and execute him. They intended to change the future in their favor. They felt threatened by Jesus so they silenced him. They had power, wealth, and status and Jesus did not. Their plan should have worked. It didn't.

## **Creating the Future**

Creativity—the ability to imagine something new and bring it into existence—is the essence of the image of God. Of all God’s creations, only humans bear this mark of the Creator. Creativity is a divine gift.

Zechariah and Elizabeth’s family and friends were amazed when Zechariah declared, “His name is John.” That decision helped create the future. The baby in Elizabeth’s arms became John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah. John was obedient to God’s call, like his parents, and Jesus called John the greatest human on earth.

But John was a creator of his own future just like everyone else. He played the hand he was dealt and lived the life of a prophet crying in the wilderness. He chose the strange wardrobe and diet. He chose to preach repentance, baptize sinners, and challenge a wicked king. All of these choices created a future that led to a dungeon, an executioner’s ax, and his divine destiny.

God can create anything from nothing, with absolute freedom and endless imagination and vision. Humans can create from something God already made, within the boundaries of our reality, and we are often shortsighted. And yet, people take the stuff around them and employ passion, vision, and skill to transform it into something new and wonderful. The sculptor does it with stone, the musician does it with sound, the painter does it with color and the photographer does it with light. Every human being does it with time. We take what we have, reshape what we can, discard what doesn’t work, and add what we need to pursue our future.

Like any other creative activity, the art of living demands both choice and will. Some choices are conscious and executed with great forethought. Others are taken by reflex and executed with great forethought. Others are taken by reflex and instinct, but either way we make a choice. Without the will to act, a vision of the future remains a hazy dream. A potter can visualize the vessel and choose the lump of clay to make whatever she wants. But she must throw the clay, spin the potter’s wheel, wrestle the clay into shape, paint it, glaze it, and fire it in the kiln. If she doesn’t, the vessel remains a figment of her imagination.

## **On the Anvil of Time**

John the Baptist was extremely popular. The crowds were immense, his influence powerful, and his fame widespread. No wonder his disciples worried when Jesus came on the scene and the crowds shifted to him. But John wasn’t jealous; he was pleased to fulfill his role as preparing prophet. In an encounter with his disciples, John laid out five principles he used to hammer out his future on the anvil of time.

John 3:25-30

<sup>25</sup> *An argument developed between some of John’s disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing.* <sup>26</sup> *They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.”*

<sup>27</sup> *To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven.*

<sup>28</sup> *You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’*

*<sup>29</sup> The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. <sup>30</sup> He must become greater; I must become less.*"

**1. First, John displayed divine dependence:** "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven." The unique boundaries of John's life were his by divine right. He embraced God's overarching narrative for his life and future. His identity, his ministry, and his abilities were uniquely his. All of it was the marvelous gift of an all-wise, loving, and powerful God.

We too have the life we have and not another. We were born who we are, not someone else. We live where and when we live and not in some other place or time. We too are called upon to create lives inside the fences of that reality. Like John, our lives are the marvelous gift of our all-wise, all-loving, and all-powerful God even when life feels more like a burden than a blessing.

**2. Second, John displayed a distinct identity:** "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.'" There was only one John the Baptizer. He alone lived that life and claimed that mission. He did not waste time wishing he was someone else. Each person is the unique proprietor of a distinct identity with specific features and circumstances. There is no one else exactly like you. Accepting that truth is the beginning of creating and living a beautiful life.

We alone have the power to create that life. Every life has its own features, unique borders, and resources that result in a singular identity. There never has been and never will be another like it. Accepting that truth is the beginning, not the end, of creatively living the most beautiful and wonderful life we can.

**3. Third, John displayed undeniable purpose.** He knew his place in the world. He was "the friend of the bridegroom." That undeniable purpose gave shape, direction, and impetus to his entire life. It fueled the man he became and the legacy he left.

People today have one of three reactions to the notion that God has purpose for their lives. Some deny that anyone, even God, has the right to tell them what to do. They intend to control and steer their own destiny. Others believe they are created with a purpose, but don't have a clue where to find it. They drift around looking for it, mostly in places it cannot be found. Finally, some embrace their purpose, the boundaries of their lives, and the God of those boundaries. Their distinct identity, purpose, and meaning are found inside the fences of their own backyard. They grow and bloom where they are planted.

**4. Fourth, John discovered joy:** "The friend of the bridegroom...rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled." At the zenith of his ministry, John watched his fame, influence, and adoring crowds slip away. Most people would have felt angry, hurt, or disappointed. John was happy.

Joy is found in gratitude for God's gifts. Those who create the future with that heart discover deep, undeniable, and permanent joy. Envy of the lives of others or demanding to know what God's plan and purposes for our lives aren't what we wish they were robs us of that joy. Deep joy belongs to those who are grateful for the privilege of participating in God's great work in the world.

**5. Finally, John fulfilled his future:** "He must increase, but I must decrease." John created his life in accordance with his destiny, not in opposition to it. The portrait of his life was of the bridegroom's friend, not the bridegroom. John came alongside Jesus to assist, and then stepped out of the limelight.

When we live out our purpose, we cooperate with our Creator to achieve our destiny. Fulfilling our divine destiny, doing what God made us to do, satisfies our deepest desires. We aren't limited to a paint-by-numbers design and a few tiny pods of paint. The artist's commission provides general direction, but it doesn't limit the artistic freedom required to create a masterpiece.

Creating the future is hard work. The artist has no greater joy than stepping back and beholding the fulfillment of his vision. We can have no greater joy than living with purpose, fulfilling our dreams, and creating a life of beauty and value. It doesn't get better than that.

The neighbors murmured, "What will this child be?" Your family probably wondered the same thing about you. Perhaps you still wonder what you will become, what your future holds. Perhaps you worry that the best opportunities have passed you by, or that your abilities are not very special. Perhaps you think that God doesn't really care about you or your life.

"What will this child be?" The answer is simple. You are commissioned by the Creator to design a portrait of yourself in gratitude for the gift of life. Let God lead you to the canvas that represents your future. Open your hands as God furnishes you with the perfect brush and palette of paint. And then fashion a masterpiece, rich in vibrant color and undeniable passion that only you can design.

What will you be? What will I be? That is the question the Nativity stories pose to us. It is, of course, a question we ask at baby showers, or when we hold a newborn daughter, or niece, or grandson. But it is not only a question to ponder around a birth. It is, in fact, a question to ask over the course of our lives. We are constantly *becoming*. We are constantly in process. That is true because the human condition is one of change and changeability—but it is particularly true of life with God. Friendship with God is never static.

God is always offering us the invitation to become more like him: to become more merciful, more loving, more generous. God is always offering us the invitation to become more like those saints and heroes of the faith who have gone before us: more prayerful, more committed to people at the margins, more attentive to the flickers and surprising presences of God in our midst. And so the last question of the nativity—is really a question for the whole of our lives: whom will we become? Will we accept the invitation from the most creative One there is to become more like him? To journey from control to creativity? To allow God to take us on a

lifelong process of becoming—becoming more like the Christ whose coming we welcome at Christmas?

Sermon – *Five Questions of Christmas* - pages 96-110

***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***  
**Advent Worship Series – Christmas Eve**  
***Why Don't We Go Now to Bethlehem?***  
***The Shepherd's Journey from Oblivion to Faith***  
**December 24, 2017**

**WORSHIP SERVICE OUTLINES**

Each worship outline contains all elements needed for your worship service. The order of each service presented is only a *suggestion*. No doubt changes will be needed to accommodate the flow and worship style of your corps. The outlines are flexible and allow opportunities to “cut and paste” as needed. If you are blessed with instrumental or vocal music resources, you may find there is more structured material here than needed. It is recommended that the headings of each section of the service be included in the bulletin.

[NOTE: *Congregation receives a candle upon entering the chapel*]

**Call to Worship:**

<sup>2</sup> The people who walked in darkness  
 have seen a great light;  
 those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
 on them light has shined.

<sup>6</sup> For a child has been born for us,  
 a son given to us;  
 authority rests upon his shoulders;  
 and he is named  
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

<sup>7</sup> His authority shall grow continually,  
 and there shall be endless peace  
 for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
 He will establish and uphold it  
 with justice and with righteousness  
 from this time onward and forevermore.  
 The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 9:2, 5-7, NRSV

<b>SB#100 – Angels, from the realms of glory</b>	TB-407 – Regent Square	HTD4-T12 (4 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>SB#113 – Joy to the world!</b>	TB-87 – same	HTD4-T9 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#140 – O Come, All Ye Faithful</b> <b>SB#116</b>	HC-140 TB-496 – Adeste Fideles	HCD12-T20 HTD3-T1 (3 vs.)

<b>SB#104 – Come, Thou long expected Jesus</b> (sing 2 verses together; no chorus)	TB-370 – Hyfrydol	HTD1-T14 (3 vs.)
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## *Our Waiting Is Over!*

### **Lighting of Advent Candle – The Christ Candle**

[Relight the first four candles]

**Reader 1:** On this Christmas Eve we light all four candles in our Advent wreath, and we are reminded of the hope, the peace, the love, and the joy of his coming. Tonight we light the Christ Candle; we rejoice that the promise of God has been fulfilled in the coming of the Baby born in a manger.

**Reader 2:** Emmanuel, God with us, a promise kept, a child. By definition, a baby is dependent on adults for everything—food, shelter, protection, and love. But the baby Jesus—this child created the world. This child existed before anything or anyone. This child was God. Imagine: he’s the creator of the world and suddenly he feels cold and hungry. Imagine: becoming human was not a twist of fate, or a punishment from a higher being; it was a choice. God chose to give up everything—to become nothing.

**Reader 1:** This child was a King. A King in a dirty stable, wrapped in rags—but a King with a plan.

**Reader 2:** This child would bring hope. Not just a wish, but the confidence that God would defeat Satan, that good would win over evil.

**Reader 1:** This child would bring peace, even in the midst of great suffering and trials—a peace that assures his followers that he is in control even when it feels like nobody is.

**Reader 2:** This child would bring love—a love that would never be taken away, a love that is beyond our understanding.

**Reader 2:** And this child would bring joy, for he would deliver us.

[Betsy Arkema, New Era Reformed Church in New Era, Michigan.]

[Light center “Christ” candle]

**Prayer:** O God of love, you have brought us together tonight and blessed us with your very self. Open our eyes to the light of Christ which glows in the darkness of a world engulfed in apathy, pain and loss; a world separated from you. Speak to us now that we may hear the good news of your salvation. Bring us into the wonder

of your presence. Fill us with that light and carry it out with us into our lives.  
Amen.

<b>SB#108 – Hark! the herald angels sing</b>	TB-270 – same	HTD4-T5 (3 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>SB#100 – Angels, from the realms of glory</b>	TB-407 –Regent Square	HTD4-T12 (4 vs.)
<b>HC#180 – A Starry Night SB#112</b>	HC-180 TB-535 – same	HCD16-T20
<b>HC#140 – O Come, All Ye Faithful SB#116</b>	HC-140 TB-496 – Adeste Fideles	HCD12-T20 HTD3-T1 (3 vs.)
<b>CF#14 – Good Christian Men, Rejoice</b>	CF-14	No CD

### *Mary's Story*

#### **Responsive Reading:**

**Leader:** <sup>26</sup>In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

**Women:** <sup>29</sup>But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

**Leader:** <sup>30</sup>The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup>He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

**Women:** <sup>34</sup>Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

**Leader:** <sup>35</sup>The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup>And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup>For nothing will be impossible with God."

**Women:** <sup>38</sup>Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:26-38, NRSV

<b>CF#30 – O Holy Night</b>	CF-30	No CD
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		

<b>SB#111 – It came upon the midnight clear</b>	TB-133 – same	HTD9-T7 (3 vs.)
<b>SB#117 – O come, Immanuel</b>	TB-444 – same	HTD11-T8 (3 vs.)
<b>SB#118 – O little town of Bethlehem</b>	TB-136 – same	HTD3-T5 (3 vs.)

### *Joseph's Story*

#### **Responsive Reading:**

**Leader:** <sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,

**Men:** “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

**Leader:** <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

**Men:** <sup>23</sup> “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

**Leader:** <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Matthew 1:18-25, NRSV

<b>HC#220 – Incarnate</b>	HC-220	HCD20-T20
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### *The Birth of Jesus*

#### **Responsive Reading:**

**Leader:** <sup>1</sup> In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

**All:** <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<b>SB#113 – Joy to the world!</b>	TB-87 – same	HTD4-T9 (3 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>SB#108 – Hark! the herald angels sing</b>	TB-270 – same	HTD4-T5 (3 vs.)
<b>HC#180 – A Starry Night</b>	HC-180	HCD16-T20
<b>SB#112</b>	TB-535 – same	

### *The Shepherds' Story*

#### **Responsive Reading:**

**Leader:** The Christmas story has a surprising number of angelic appearances. The Gospel of Luke tells us that angels visited some hillside shepherds on the night Jesus was born.

**Men:** <sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them,

**Women:** “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

**Leader:** <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

**All:** <sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

<b>SB#126 – The first Noel the angel did say</b>	TB-857 – The first Nowell	HTD6-T18 (3 vs.)
<b>Additional Optional Songs</b>		
<b>SB#132 – While shepherds watched their flocks by night</b>	TB-123 – While shepherds watched TB-125 – Winchester Old	HTD11-T14 (4 vs.) HTD11-T15 (4 vs.)

**A Time of Sharing:** What Does Christmas Mean to You?

### *Why Don't We Go Now to Bethlehem?*

**Leader:** <sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another,

**Men:** “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”

**Leader:** <sup>16</sup> So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

**Women:** <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

**All:** <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:1-20, NRSV

**Devotional – *The Shepherd’s Journey from Oblivion to Faith***

**The Spreading of the Light**

[*Congregation will move to form a large circle around the room. Candles will then be lit during the singing of Silent Night.*]

<b>SB#124 – Silent night! Holy night!</b>	TB-842 – Stille Nacht	HTD4-T15 (3 vs.)
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**Benediction:**

**Believe:** for light is now in the world.

**Believe:** for God has become one of us.

**Believe:** for Love is born in each of us.

**Believe:** for the manger is full.

**Believe:** it is as the prophets said.

**Go and believe:** the blessings of Christmas...of family, of friends and of God be with you today.

***FIVE QUESTIONS OF CHRISTMAS***  
**Devotional – Christmas Eve**  
***Why Don't We Go Now to Bethlehem?***  
***The Shepherd's Journey from Oblivion to Faith***  
**December 24, 2017**

Devotional – *Five Questions of Christmas* - pages 141-148

The Christmas story has a surprising number of angelic appearances. In Luke, the angel Gabriel delivered personalized messages to Zechariah and Mary. In Matthew, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in his dreams and told him to marry Mary, flee to Egypt, and finally to return to Nazareth. The magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. But only one angelic appearance involved a full multitude of heavenly creatures. The Gospel of Luke tells us that angels visited some hillside shepherds on the night Jesus was born.

The angel's message begins like the others: don't be afraid, I bring good news. Unlike some of our other characters we've studied, the shepherds don't hesitate or falter. They get up to investigate the angel's message. "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

The shepherds move from oblivion to faith. They follow the angel's directions to find the baby. When they arrive in Bethlehem, the baby is lying in an animal's feeding trough, just as they were told. The newborn Messiah looks like one of their children: humble, safe, protected, and loved. The angel's words are true! The shepherds immediately start spreading the good news, first to Mary and Joseph, and then to everyone they encounter. The shepherds are the first evangelists for the good news of the gospel.

Unlike the other characters in the Nativity stories, the shepherds don't question what's happening. They aren't like most of us. When we face suffering, disappointment, tragedy, unfairness, and loss of control, we ask hard questions and expect real answers. These questions can be hard to answer, but we need to wrestle with them.

There is one more question. It doesn't appear in our Matthew and Luke Christmas stories. It doesn't come with a colorful narrative, engaging characters, heavenly visitors, or any of the rich tapestry of the other questions. But it too must be asked and answered—and then asked again.

That question is, So what? Why should we concern ourselves with events that happened thousands of years ago and far away? Why does Christmas even matter?

Some say the Christmas story makes no difference at all in our lives or in history. Humans are just pieces of debris floating on the waves of time. Suffering, betrayal, and injustice are just facts of life. There's nothing more, no bigger picture to worry about. The only thing we can do is float along on that current for as long as we can. Even some of the Bible's ancient Wisdom Literature seems to echo this view. "What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity. There is nothing better for mortals than to eat

and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil” (Ecclesiastes 2:22-24)

The writer of Ecclesiastes had seen and done everything. No desire went unfulfilled and no feast was left on the table. Still, his life was meaningless. No matter how delicious the meal, how great the pleasure, or how much he enjoyed the moment, he was always hungry for more. When he added it all up, it didn't add up to much of anything. His life was meaningless.

Most people recoil from that kind of despair. We want to believe that life is more than just dust in the wind. Yet we're afraid to take stock of the few decades we've been given. We don't want to admit how we've squandered our time, energies, and talents. We're terrified that when we reach the end of our lives, they won't amount to anything.

Why should it matter how we've lived? If we are just the cleverest creatures to climb the evolutionary ladder it shouldn't. Our nearest relatives on the evolutionary family tree don't suffer this affliction. They are born, live, eat, and make little apes, fight and die, and do it all without worrying whether or not they lived meaningful lives.

But regardless of ethnicity and gender or their times and cultures, people long for lives that matter. Different cultures have different answers but they all feel the same need. Until very recently the underlying truth was just as universal and just as unbounded by race, place, or time. People are a special creation and the direct result of divine intervention in the natural order.

Some of the most educated and sophisticated among us reject spiritual answers. Science and technology have replaced the old gods, goddesses, and long-held superstitions. Others believe in bits and bytes of data, not dusty old books.

But the triumph of modern science cannot soothe the ache in our souls. Science has wonderful tools for understanding the what and how of our world. But it was never meant to answer the ultimate questions of why or who. Science fails us when people draw conclusions about spiritual reality based on limited observations of our physical existence

There is another explanation. People long for meaning and purpose because God gave us that impulse. We hunger for justice because God is just. We seek truth because God is truthful. We long to create beauty and meaning because we reflect God's creative nature. We long for eternity because we have a future beyond the grave.

If the human race is the product of a divine hand, our incessant longings make perfect sense. This world and life in it are out of phase with his image in us. We were created for something completely different. We are displaced refugees from the realm we long for and were made to inhabit. We instinctively know the deep truth. This world as it now exists, broken and bruised, is not the world we were meant to call home.

Humanity's attempts to satisfy these longings have always failed. Utopian schemes turn out to be far from idyllic. Our best efforts to create just and compassionate societies fail to overcome greed, selfishness, and corruption generation after generation. The inevitable and disturbing conclusion is that we wish for a world we cannot create here on earth.

Personal answers fair no better. Materialism, hedonism, power, and personal happiness ultimately fail to satisfy. Despite centuries of experience and millions of examples, people keep traveling these well-worn paths. New generations appear, ignore the lessons of the past, and repeat the same old mistakes.

So why won't we give up on the quest? We can't. These needs are deeply rooted in our souls. If we want a better world or better lives, we see no option other than to keep trying the only ways we know. But we are swimming against the current of our own fallen nature. If humans could create perfect societies or find personal happiness, wouldn't w' have done it by now? We've had more than ten thousand years to figure it out.

Stacked up on one side of this dilemma is the accumulated wisdom of the ages. We want a better world. We think we can create it if we are diligent enough, good enough, and keep the rules well enough. We just need to try harder, be more disciplined, or find our path. There's only one problem. It hasn't worked, doesn't work, and can't get us where we long to be.

On the other side are the implausible biblical stories of a virgin birth, a divine child, a remarkable life, and an unusual death that lasted only three days. The story of Jesus, the Son of God who was fully human and fully divine, is at odds with science, culture, philosophy, and religion. His life comes down to one simple truth: Jesus did for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

We can't get to God, so God came to us. We can't rescue ourselves, so God rescues us. We can't earn what we most long for no matter how hard we try. So he gives it to us. We seek a future beyond the grave. He waits there for us. We seek justice, and he will set everything right in the end. We want to relieve pain, and he comforts us. We can't find the solace we need, so God gives us his grace and peace. By God's divine alchemy, even our suffering works together for our good and God's glory.

This is the gospel, the good news of great joy for all people.

We picture Jesus lying in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes. We see him wearing a seamless robe walking the Judean hills teaching and healing the masses. We see him on Good Friday, a living sacrifice for our sins. We see him wrapped in a burial shroud and gently carried to a rock-hewn tomb. We see him in a spotless glowing robe conquering sin, death, and the grave in his resurrection on Easter morning.

Jesus is the Father's gift to all who suffer, doubt, long for the future, and search for meaning. Jesus is the gift wrapped in the mystery of divine love....a gift meant to be opened.

The gift is yours. If you'll have it.