

God with Us



Christmas is a time for reflecting. We think of holidays past and the one that's upon us. As you read the messages of *God with Us*, consider the many ways that God is present in your life—through His Word, your loved ones, the fellowship of believers, Holy Communion, and more. His love for us is personal. He proved that in a Bethlehem manger—God's only Son born for all mankind, so that through the Christ Child we might know life with Him forevermore.



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DEVOTIONS
Advent 2020

As an added feature, these devotions have reflection questions for each day's messages. These can be used for self-study or as prompts for discussion when reflecting as a group.

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ACCOMPLISHED AMONG US

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

I'm writing this during the pandemic, and I am as prickly as a porcupine. We are under orders to stay home—and so there are three people and a dog sharing the same small space. The air is filled with whining (not all of it from the dog). We are cranky and snarly with one another—in a pastor's household! Where is God in this mess?

Maybe Luke was thinking something like that when he wrote his introduction for Theophilus. Luke says that he is writing a narrative “of the things that have been accomplished among us.” He doesn't say “what we did” or even “how God used us.” He puts the whole thing in the passive.

Who is doing the accomplishing? Clearly it's God. What are we doing, then? Mostly getting in the way, I suspect. And what is getting accomplished anyway, in spite of us? The coming of God into our world. The birth of God as a human baby, Jesus Christ. The beginning of God's saving acts, as He rescues us from our broken, sin-stained, deathly situation. This Advent, let's watch what God is doing in the midst of us.

Lord, thank You for loving and saving me, in spite of me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. How does your mood affect the way you relate to God?
2. Why do you think God chose to save us completely on His own, without our help?
3. Does that comfort you? Why or why not?



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WHO ARE YOUR PEOPLE?

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham. (Matthew 1:1)

In many places in the world, practically the first thing people ask you is, “Who are your people? Where did you grow up?” They are trying to place you in the mental framework they use to understand the world.

People do this to Jesus, too. Maybe that’s why God included Jesus’ genealogy right at the beginning of Matthew. Dull as it may seem, it answers the question of where Jesus came from.

“Who are Your people, Jesus?” Kings and princes. Nomads and rich men. Poor women and artisans. The high and the low.

“Say it again, Jesus? Who are they?” Liars and thieves (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob). Murderers and adulterers (David). The half-faithful and half-foolish (Hezekiah). Foreigners (Ruth and Rahab). Prostitutes (Rahab). Broken families (David, Uriah, Bathsheba). Child abusers (Manasseh). These are Jesus’ people. This is whom He comes from.

Do they look familiar? These are our people, too. They are us. This is the family Jesus was born into, in order to save us all—to be born and grow up and lay down His life on a cross, so that we might become God’s family. Because Jesus died for us, our evil is taken away. Because He has risen for us, we have new, everlasting life as children of God.

Lord, thank You for coming to us, just as we are. Thank You for making us Your own. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Who are you most surprised to see in Jesus’ family tree?
2. Why do you think God chose people like this to be among Jesus’ ancestors?
3. Jesus is now a member of your family. How is God making you look more and more like Him?

REST—AND PREPARATION

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon Him. (Luke 2:39-40)

How glad Mary and Joseph must have been to get home! They’d been to Bethlehem, had a child, fled to Egypt, returned to Israel—and finally here they were, back home in Nazareth. Here they would make their home for the next 25 years or so. Joseph would work as a carpenter; Mary would cook and sew and clean, and Jesus? He would grow—day by day, stronger and wiser, like the human child He truly was.

I wonder if, after a few years of this, those earliest years began to feel like a dream? As far as we know, Jesus did nothing very surprising during those years. Even the memorable trip to Jerusalem where He got left behind was nothing in comparison with angels and angry kings.

But those years were a blessing, because they were the years when Jesus grew strong in the ways we do. He would have studied the Bible and memorized God’s Word. He learned to live with other people, seeing what their cares and concerns were—and how often those things came out in His parables later! And through it all, He lived a complete, full life, according to both parts of His heritage—son of humanity, and Son of God.

What a great preparation for His great work of saving us, through His suffering, death, and resurrection!

Lord Jesus, thank You for living for me—and then dying and rising for me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Are you easily bored, or do you enjoy peaceful times?
2. What was the quietest year of your life? Why do you say so?
3. What blessings has God given you through the quiet times in your life?

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the Child and His mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the Child's life are dead." And he rose and took the Child and His mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth. (Matthew 2:19-23a)

Mary and Joseph must have wondered what was coming next. Oh, they knew how the story was supposed to end—with Jesus on the throne of David, ruling a redeemed creation. But how to get there from a life as refugees in Egypt? That wasn't so clear.

God showed them the way—but not ahead of time, as they probably wanted. God treats us this way, too. There are questions we desperately want answers to—"Will I get married?" "Will we have a baby?" "Will this illness end in death?" But though God knows, He hardly ever tells us until the time comes.

What questions does He answer, then? He answers the big ones: "Do I matter to God?" Yes, so much that He was born into this world for you. "Who can help me right now?" The Lord will be your help and strength. "Am I loved?" Yes, the wounds in Jesus' hands and side will always make this clear.

Lord, help me to trust in You when I don't see my way clear. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When has your life gone in an unexpected direction?
2. What do you do when you don't know what to do?
3. Looking back over your life, where do you see God guiding you?

SUDDEN TURNS

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers ... And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah ... and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon ... And Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. (Matthew 1:2a, 6b, 11, 16)

Have you ever had a sudden turn in your life? You're expecting things to go on as normal, and suddenly something shocking happens and you find yourself on an entirely new road.

Jesus' ancestry is full of such turns. Abraham was a childless man who became the father of a nation; Judah was a fourth son who inherited his father's blessing after his older brothers' crimes. Salmon was a leader who married a Canaanite prostitute; their son Boaz married a poor foreign girl, Ruth, and became the great-grandfather of King David. David was a shepherd who replaced a disastrous king. If David had stayed away from murder and adultery, his son Solomon would probably never have been born!

Some of these turns were terrible, though not all. But all of them were unexpected—except to God. God knows exactly what He's doing when He throws a turn into our lives—or takes advantage of one we caused by doing wrong. Even our sin can't stop Him!

And of course, the greatest turn of all is the one when God came into our world as a human being: Jesus Christ, to suffer, die, and rise again for us. Because of Him, we are finally on the right road—with all our wrong turns forgiven.

Lord, help me to trust in You when my life changes suddenly. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Name a time when your life changed suddenly.
2. What were you expecting? What actually happened?
3. How did God help you deal with your new situation?

BROKEN

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. (Luke 1:5-7)

The story of Jesus' birth starts out with discord: "In the days of Herod, king of Judea ..." Wait a minute. Herod wasn't from King David's family—he wasn't even a Jew. So for him to be called "king of Judea" shows that things were broken, not the way they were supposed to be.

But there were still faithful people who loved God, like Zechariah and Elizabeth. The Bible even uses the words "righteous" and "blameless" about them—high praise from the Holy Spirit!

But here, too, there was something broken. "They had no child"—why? Who knows? It had nothing to do with sin, though people usually thought it did. This, too, wasn't the way it was supposed to be. These wrong things happen to us, too—and we grieve and get angry and cry out to God.

This is why Jesus came into our world—a tiny baby, born to set the world right. As God's own Son, He would lay down His life to fix our broken world—and rise from the dead to make us new again.

Lord, help me with the broken places in my life. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What feels wrong to you about our world today?
2. In the Bible stories you know, how does Jesus work to fix what is wrong?
3. What is a broken part of your life where you ask for God's help?

RESPONSIBILITY

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the Child, to destroy Him." And he rose and took the Child and His mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. (Matthew 2:13-15a)

Look at how much trust God put in Joseph! God trusted him with Jesus' safety. He spoke to him in a dream to warn him about Herod's plans, and Joseph listened. He got Jesus and Mary safely out of the country, and took care of them there until it was safe to come home again.

What a huge responsibility! I wonder if Joseph ever lay awake thinking about it. There he was, an ordinary man, acting as father and protector to God's own Son. How would he ever manage to do the job right?

You may be thinking much the same thing about some responsibility God has saddled you with right now. "How in the world am I going to do this?" you wonder. "Why would God choose me to handle this situation? I'm just ordinary!"

And of course, you are right. But God is right, too—because He puts His Holy Spirit within you to strengthen and guide you. He knows your weaknesses—they are exactly why Jesus came to be your Savior. He knows you cannot do anything on your own. But He also knows that, with God working through you, amazing things can happen. Trust in Him.

Father, help me with the work You have given me to do. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What do you think Joseph did when he was worried or troubled?
2. When have you felt like you were not enough to deal with a situation?
3. How has God helped you in those times?

SEEING OUR KING

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the Child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. (Matthew 2:9-11a)

Picture the scene—Mary and Jesus in the house on an ordinary day. Mary was probably cooking or cleaning. Most likely, Jesus was playing on the floor, maybe with a toy Joseph had made for Him. It was a simple, homely scene. They didn't know the wise men were coming.

I wonder if the wise men were any better prepared for what they saw? Either way, they did exactly the right thing: they fell down and worshiped Him. They saw the real King, the real Son of God, playing in His toddler's clothes, and they were happy and celebrated.

We too see our real King, our real Savior, in the humble baby in the manger; in the Man in dusty robes who walked the roads of Galilee and Judea; in the Man hanging on the cross—our cross—to bring us life and forgiveness; and in the risen Jesus, who left the grave to be with us forever.

This is our King, and this is our God. Hallelujah!

Dear Father, thank You for making Your Son known to us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Did you ever meet anyone famous? Were you surprised by what they said, did, or looked like?
2. How do you think Mary and Joseph felt about this unexpected visit?
3. What do you imagine was the effect of this visit on the wise men's lives after they went home?

REARRANGED

Now while he was serving as priest before God ... And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. (Luke 1:8, 11-12)

What happens when your prayers are answered at last?

Zechariah's life was predictable. He did the same tasks, ate the same food, kissed the same woman, probably lived in the same quiet house. And prayed the same desperate, begging prayers for a child—the prayers that many years had made it clear God was never going to answer.

Until He did. An angel bursts into Zechariah's life, and nothing will ever be the same. His life is about to be totally rearranged.

That can happen to us, too, can't it? No matter how wonderful the blessing is that God gives us, it can take some getting used to. We may trip and stumble. We may even grumble—and then feel guilty about it.

God is not surprised. If you are struggling, ask Him for help! He will certainly give it. He loves you dearly, and He will not blame you for needing help. After all, you are the one Jesus came into the world to save—to live, die, and rise again, to make you His own dear child.

Lord, help me when my life changes. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do you like change? Why or why not?
2. When did something good happen to you that brought stress into your life?
3. Is there something new in your life right now that you need God's help for?

KNOWING THE FUTURE

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” (Luke 1:13-17)

Listen to the way the angel describes John’s future! He focuses on the good, wonderful things. It’s so much better than saying, “Your son is going to live out in the desert eating bugs and get killed by an evil king.”

Both futures are equally true, aren’t they? All of those things *did* happen to John. And yet God focuses on the blessing.

Why? Partly out of mercy, to avoid distressing John’s parents, I think. But there’s another reason, too. God is looking at what John’s suffering will buy. The suffering passes; the blessing remains forever.

And this is no surprise, for John serves our Savior Jesus, who “for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2b). His suffering became our blessing.

Lord, thank You for what Your suffering has bought us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. If you love a baby, would you want to know that child’s future?
2. Are there events in your life your parents would have wished not to know about?
3. When has God brought good out of your suffering?

PLOTS

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea ...” Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the Child, and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him.” (Matthew 2:3-5a, 7-8)

Evil plots. Looming death. Danger hanging over the Christ Child. With all the power that was arrayed against Him, how would He escape?

Surely, God would provide Him with an army of angels—with the power of invisibility—with the ability to zap anybody who came within a mile of harming Him. Right?

But God didn’t do any of that. He allowed the plans of wicked men to unfold without putting any obvious barrier in their way. Was God sleeping? Or did He not care?

We can be tempted to ask that, too, when we see wicked people prospering in our world today. They seem to get away with so much. Will God not do anything?

Jesus’ birth is God’s answer. Yes, God does see. He cares enough that God came into this world as a human baby, to suffer under the same evils we do—to hang on a cross bearing our pain—and to rise from the dead, victor over all of it. Jesus proves that evil does not win in the end. God wins. And because of that, we win—for God has made us His people.

Lord, help me when I am afraid of evil, and help me to trust in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What particular evil are you most worried about now?
2. What do you do when you are afraid of the future?
3. How has God delivered you from evil in the past?

THEY DIDN'T KNOW

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him." (Matthew 2:1-2)

It's one of the saddest parts of the Christmas story. The wise men saw the star, realized that a king had been born in Judea, gathered their gifts, and set off to honor the baby. Naturally, they headed for Jerusalem, the capital city, where King Herod lived with his family. They didn't know that the new king was no relative of the old one.

With the best of intentions, the wise men touched off a massacre. Herod killed all the boy babies he could find in Bethlehem and around it. I wonder if the wise men had trouble sleeping later on. Surely the news must have reached them!

This is an extreme case, but it happens to us too—we make innocent choices that result in terrible outcomes. And then we lie awake, wondering: "What if I had gone the other way? What if I did that instead of this?"

To all of us who suffer this way, Jesus says, "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). He takes that load from us: "Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows ... (He is) "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (see Isaiah 53:3-4). Jesus came to be our Savior—not just from obvious sins and guilt, but from all the griefs we suffer that could destroy us. He took those things to the cross, too—and offers you something better: healing, comfort, freedom, and everlasting life.

You know my burdens, Lord. Help me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do you think the wise men found out? Why or why not?
2. When have you done something that had unexpected consequences, good or bad?
3. How do you deal with guilt?

PATIENT LOVE

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." (Luke 1:18-20)

"How can I be sure it's going to happen?" That was probably not the answer the angel was expecting. "Thank you," maybe, or "Hallelujah!" Instead he got what? A slap in the face; his credibility questioned; rank disbelief.

But look at how patiently Gabriel answers him! He spells it out for Zechariah in the plain, simple language you would use for a toddler. "Here are my credentials. And now you can go and sit on the naughty step for bad behavior. But it will still come true!"

God didn't take away His good promise from Zechariah. He got nine months of silence to think about the error of his ways, but he also got the blessing—a baby growing invisibly inside his wife, then a bump, then knees and elbows moving, kicking, squirming. And then a newborn—John, the one God promised would prepare the way for Jesus.

God disciplines us, too. But He never stops loving us, and He never takes His good promises away from us. We, too, have the blessing—a newborn Savior, Jesus, who came to give us peace with God forever.

Lord, thank You for Your patient love for me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When you were a child, how did you drive your parents or teachers nuts?
2. Who was the most patient with you? How could you tell?
3. When have you seen God being patient and loving with you?

GOD'S CALLING

And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. (Luke 1:21-23)

What would you do if an angel appeared and gave you a glorious promise? I doubt most of us would do what Zechariah did. Luke tells us: he kept right on working. And then, “when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.”

Really, it's like that for us too, isn't it? You may have just won the Nobel Prize, but you still have to change the kitty litter. You get married, start your dream job, or have some wonderful spiritual experience—but the dishes are waiting, you need to put gas in the car, and your child needs his homework checked.

Zechariah got on with the job—because it *was* his job, it was the calling God had given him. God's promise added to his life—it did not replace it. In the same way, God's promise to you is Jesus, our Savior. As you carry out your responsibilities, whatever they may be, Jesus lives in you and His forgiving love shines through you. And the people around you will see that light and be drawn to Jesus, by the Holy Spirit's gift.

Dear Father, use my role in life to bring other people to trust in Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What jobs or roles in life do you have?
2. How do they impact other people?
3. Tell about a time when God used someone else's work to give you His love and mercy.

SEEING AND TELLING

And there was a prophetess, Anna ... She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36a, 37b-38)

There were only two people at the temple that day who realized who Jesus was—Simeon, and now Anna, a prophetess. Both of them were close to God and filled with the Holy Spirit. They could see what so many other people didn't see—that the month-old baby with his parents waiting to offer a sacrifice was the Messiah, the long-promised Savior.

They saw Him, and they celebrated. And they did more than that—they told other people who were waiting for the same good news. “Our Savior is here!” they must have said. “God has kept His promise. The One who will rescue us from evil has come as a tiny baby.”

You are like Simeon and Anna today—you see and recognize Jesus when other people walk past unknowing. You see Him at work in your life, in the church, in the world. You know what He has done for us already—how He suffered and died for us, how He was buried, how He rose from the dead. You know that He shares that everlasting life with you and everyone who believes. You know that He has promised to come back.

Now, take it a step further. Tell other people who need Him that He has come! Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how. It might be as simple as telling the Christmas story to a child—or offering to pray for a friend in need. The Holy Spirit lives in you, and He can speak through you.

Lord, use me so that others see and trust in Jesus, too. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Who first told you about Jesus?
2. Whom do you want to know about Jesus?
3. What is a first tiny step you could take toward talking about Jesus?

WAITING

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon ... And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ... When the parents brought in the Child Jesus ... he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation." (Luke 2:25a, 26, 27b, 28-30)

Imagine what it must have been like for Simeon, standing in the temple courts and looking out over the crowds. God the Holy Spirit had sent him there that morning to see the Messiah. But where? How he must have stared at every family in eyeshot. And then he found them—poor, travel-worn, looking like nobody special.

Simeon had no doubts. How joyfully he took Jesus up in his arms and sang his praise to God! He knew this was his Savior, who would redeem Israel and all the world. Now Simeon could die happy. God had kept His promise, and all the waiting was worth it.

You, too, may be waiting for God to do something. Maybe there's a family problem you've been praying about for a long, long time. Maybe you are hoping for a spouse, a child, a job. Maybe you are waiting for the end of a sickness—for healing, either here or in God's time in heaven. Waiting is hard.

But in your waiting, you have the same gift Simeon did—you have Jesus Himself. You have your Savior who loves you even in this hard time—who lay down His life for you—who rose from the dead and offers you a share in His resurrection life even now. Let Him be your strength during your waiting.

Help me lean on You, dear Lord. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do you like waiting?
2. What are you waiting for right now?
3. How do you find strength in Jesus to keep going when you're tired or worried?

GRACED

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. (Luke 1:26-29)

I'm fascinated by the way the angel greets Mary. In the English Standard Version, the translation goes, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But Mary is an ordinary, humble girl, and this greeting confuses her. She is afraid.

The Greek for "O favored one" comes from the root word for "grace" or "favor." The ESV translation is not wrong, but it seems to me that "you who have been graced" is easier to grasp at a deep heart level. Mary has been graced—and who is giving the grace? The Lord, who is "with you."

Gabriel speaks the truth—the Lord is with Mary, first as a believer, and now, very soon, as a tiny baby within her body. He will not be separated from her. Jesus will take His own flesh and blood from hers, and she will be the source of His humanity. All of this is grace, a free gift from God.

We, too, are people who have been graced, just as Mary was. The Lord took on human flesh because He refuses to be separated from us broken, sinful human beings. He suffered, died, and rose again, so that we could become His "graced ones"—the people God is with forever.

Lord, be with me forever, and keep me with You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever been separated from someone you love?
2. What price did Jesus pay to bring you back to Him? Why did He do it?
3. What does it mean to you, that the Lord is with you?

HOW WILL THIS BE?

And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall call His Name Jesus. 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 father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:30-34)

Mary is so practical—instead of wasting her time or the angel’s by arguing, asking for reassurance, or showing disbelief, she simply asks about the “how” of God’s promise. Because there’s a practical problem—though Mary is betrothed, she isn’t living with her husband yet—the final wedding celebration is yet to come.

So Mary wants to know: what happens next? Does God want her to move the wedding forward? Or does God have other plans—plans she can’t even imagine?

Sometimes it’s obvious what God wants to happen in our lives. And then sometimes we have no idea what comes next, and we ask God: “How will this be? What do You want to happen?”

It can be scary to ask that question, because we fear what the answer might be. But it helps if we remember that we are asking the One who loved us so much He came into our world and our lives, to be our Savior forever—Jesus, who lived, died, and rose for us.

Dear Lord, show me the path You have for me to walk. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When in your life did you not know what was coming next?
2. How did you deal with the uncertainty?
3. How did God help you through that time?

SAVIOR

And at the end of eight days, when He was circumcised, He was called Jesus, the Name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. (Luke 2:21)

Happy Circumcision Day! Now that’s a greeting you’re never likely to hear from anyone. Nobody likes pain or blood, especially in connection with a baby. Those of you who are parents, think of what it was like when you took your baby to get his or her first immunization shots!

And yet, the day Jesus was circumcised is important for us, little though we talk about it. It’s a day of firsts—first blood, first pain, and the first day Jesus officially came under the Law God gave to Moses.

That makes this day a tiny preview of what Jesus would do for us years later at the cross. That day was filled with pain and blood, as we all know—and it makes us tremble. That day Jesus took our place under the Law of God and suffered the penalty we had earned through our wrongdoing. He willingly chose to take our place—and so now, we stand in His place, as beloved, clean, forgiven children of God.

No wonder God said to name Him “Jesus”! That Name means “God is Savior.” What better Name could we give Him on the day of His circumcision?

Lord, thank You for everything You bore for me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When you were a child and had to go to the doctor or dentist, were you afraid? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think God chose the name “Savior” rather than “healer” or “miracle worker” or “teacher”?
3. Tell about a time when someone took your place—when they carried your burden, paid your cost, or dealt with your trouble and let you go free.

REMEMBERING

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:19-20)

I have a treasure drawer in my bedroom. It's the place where I put my son's baby teeth, his first report card, Grandma's ring, my husband's naturalization flag. I look through these things every so often and remember. It's a way of connecting to the people I love.

It might have been harder for Mary to keep physical mementos of Jesus' birth. But she kept the memories and thought about them often. They kept her connected to God's great works of the past, both during the hard life as refugees in Egypt, and then later, during the quiet years in Nazareth. She remembered what God had done—and she looked forward to what He would do in the future.

For us who believe in Jesus today, that is what we remember and treasure: Jesus' birth among us, God with us; His life among us, serving the poor and broken; His suffering and death on a cross—all to rescue us from the power of evil; and His resurrection from the dead, which means that we, too, shall rise.

This is a God worth remembering—a God worth loving, worth treasuring everything we know of Him. Right now we don't see Him face to face, and that's hard; but we can do what lovers do, and look through the treasures He has left us—His promises, the Gospel story, Baptism, the Lord's Supper. The Holy Spirit will work in our hearts to keep us trusting and loving Jesus until we see Him again.

Lord, help me to remember and think on You with love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What is one object you keep to remember someone you love?
2. When you want to feel close to someone you love who is far away, what do you do?
3. What mementoes does Jesus have of you?

CARING FOR OUR NEEDS

And the angel answered 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 called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:35-38)

It's interesting how Gabriel just volunteers that information about Mary's cousin and her miracle pregnancy. Mary didn't ask God for a sign—but she got one, nevertheless.

She got more than that—she got a pretty strong hint on what her next steps should be. Elizabeth is pregnant? Why, what a great time to visit! As a strong young woman, Mary would be able to help Elizabeth around the house during the difficult last months of pregnancy. She herself would have a safe place to stay as she adjusted to her own miracle—and any morning sickness that might have come with it!

This is the kind of God we have—One who understands the fears and confusion we have, whether we say it or not. He provides for those needs, too, even before we know what to ask for. And that is no surprise, because this is the God who sent us His only Son Jesus to be our Savior—to be Immanuel, "God with us," no matter what we are facing.

Father, help me to see how You care for me in my daily life. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. How do you feel when your life changes in a major way?
2. What do you do to cope with worry and confusion?
3. Tell a story about how God provided for you when you faced a difficult time.

JOY

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." (Luke 1:39-44)

Sometimes you've just got to be happy. On a few rare days in your life, everything comes together, and you rejoice. You may know that harder days are coming, but today is lovely.

We can see Mary and Elizabeth doing that in today's reading. Both of them are just so excited and happy—to see each other, to see what God has done for them, to know that Jesus is right there in Mary's womb.

We, too, can have that joy when we think about our God and what He's done for us. He created you—loved you—refused to give up on you. He came into this world to save you, and to make you His own forever. He died and rose for you. He promises to be with you, now and every day of your life. He cares for all your needs. He will raise you from the dead.

Lord, give me Your real, lasting joy, even when life is hard. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Describe one of the top three happiest days in your life.
2. Have you ever rejoiced, even in the middle of trouble?
3. What one thing, big or small, has God done for you that gives you joy?

GO AND SEE

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!" When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this Child. (Luke 2:13-17)

Once the angels went away into heaven, the shepherds had a decision to make. What should they do with what they had just learned? Why, go and see, of course! They would have arranged for their flocks' safety as best they could and then ... away to Bethlehem, as fast as possible, to see what the Lord had given them.

And they found Him—Jesus, the newborn Savior, lying in a manger, exactly as God had told them. So again, they did what came naturally—they spread the word to all their friends and neighbors, telling them about Jesus and what the angels said.

We can do that, too. "Taste and see that the Lord is good," says the psalmist (Psalm 34:8a). "Come and see," said Philip to his doubting friend. We, too, can come and see, come and taste that Jesus is good. And then we can share that news with the people we love, so they can have Him, too—trusting in the Savior who was born for them, who died for them, and who rose to give them everlasting life.

Father, thank You for telling me about Your Son Jesus! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do you try everything first, or do you wait till others try it first?
2. When did you try something so wonderful that you just had to tell others about it?
3. Who told you about Jesus?

A NEW SHEPHERD

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:8-12)

I wonder why God chose shepherds to be Jesus' first visitors. Maybe it's because they were awake at night? But that seems too simple. Is it just because they were humble people? That would fit in well with the rest of the story. Nothing about this birth was glorious—except, I suppose, the angels singing!

But I keep coming back to the fact that these were shepherds—caretakers, protectors, providers. And that's one way God talks about Himself in the Old Testament—He calls Himself "the Shepherd of Israel" and calls His people His flock (see Psalm 80:1).

So what were the shepherds coming to see that night? A new shepherd, just like them. Their own new shepherd, born to protect and provide and rescue them and us both. The Good Shepherd, who would lay down His life for God's flock on the cross, rescuing us from the power of sin and death. Our Lord Jesus, "the Great Shepherd of the sheep ... (whom) the God of peace who brought again from the dead," to share everlasting life with everyone who trusts in Him (see Hebrews 13:20).

Lord, thank You for being my Shepherd. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When have you taken care of someone or something?
2. What kind of person makes a good caretaker?
3. How does Jesus take care of you?

SEEING

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His Name." (Luke 1:46-49)

Do you see me? That is a question a lot of people would like to ask God. We know that we are so little, so lowly, in a vast universe filled with terrible, wonderful, glorious things—why should God be concerned with us? Some people feel this so strongly that they refuse to believe in Jesus—they can't get over the idea that God would actually see them, would actually care.

But Mary knows the truth. Humble as she is, she knows that God has done the unthinkable—He has taken notice of her, even her! And He has chosen her. And so, like Hagar before her (Genesis 16), she says, "God has seen me. God has looked on me, and seen my situation. I matter to the living God."

You matter to the living God. Though He is high and lifted up, glorious above all the heavens, He has come near to you. He has come into your world as a human being just like you—One who shares your suffering, knows your fears and griefs, carries your guilt and shame. Why? Because little as you are, He loves you, and He wants you to be His own. He will give you life forever, because you trust in Him, and you are His. You are blessed.

Lord, help me to truly trust in You, that You see me and love me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever felt like you didn't matter?
2. Is being seen by God always a good thing, do you think?
3. How do you know that God sees and cares about you?

AMONG THE UNNOTICED

And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. (Luke 1:56)

Have you ever thought what it must have been like, in that house where Mary was staying? There were probably only the three of them there—Mary, Elizabeth, and her husband Zechariah. Actually there were five, if we count the two unborn babies. But none of the males in the family could talk at that point. I suspect it turned into a very feminine world for three months—a world full of the concerns of women of that culture.

What did they talk about? Surely about the chores of daily life—who would get the water, what to buy at the market, offers to teach Mary a new recipe. They would have discussed pregnancy and childbirth. Both of them would have thought about the future—what it meant to raise a child in old age, and whether Joseph would go through with the wedding. And of course they prayed and talked about the Lord and what He was doing, like the faith-filled women they were.

In that day, even more than in ours, the family home was a humble place—mostly private, full of practical chores and concerns, not much valued by the wider world in spite of its absolute necessity. But it was precisely that humble, homely environment that God chose for His Son's first months on earth—for His prophet John's last months before birth—for His servant Zechariah, who was learning the hard way what it meant to trust God's Word. God is not above diapers and cradles and morning sickness, anymore than He is above suffering and death on a cross—or rising from the dead in a borrowed tomb. He chose this—all of this—because He chose you.

Lord, help me to truly believe how much You value me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever felt overlooked? Why?
2. How do you know that God does not overlook you?
3. What difference does that awareness make in your life?

GOD WITH US

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7)

Mary prepared for her baby's birth as carefully as she could. She brought swaddling cloths with her, to wrap Jesus in—the humble clothes of any newborn baby, intended to keep Him warm and help Him grow up straight and tall.

God also prepared for Jesus' birth. What did He prepare? Not an inn or guest room, and not a cradle, even a borrowed one. God gave Jesus a manger to sleep in, to keep Him off the ground, safe and clean. It wasn't glorious, but it did the job.

Now we have this picture to treasure forever—the picture of our newly come Savior Jesus, wrapped in the clothes of humble love and already sharing in the poverty of the people He came to save. Who could be scared of such a Savior? He comes to us right where we are—not where we ought to be. A God who wears our baby clothes is a God who is intimately connected to us—a God who walks in our shoes, who carries our burdens, who hangs on our cross. The Lord who sleeps in a manger is the same Lord who slept in our tomb—and rose from the dead, victorious, bringing us all along with Him—into eternal life.

Dear Lord, stay with me forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever cared for a newborn baby? What was it like?
2. What feelings do you think Mary and Joseph had about this whole experience?
3. Why do you think God let Jesus be born in such unpredictable circumstances?

GOD OF THE SMALL THINGS

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. (Luke 2:1-5)

It's easy to overlook the small things. Caesar had no idea what was going on in tiny, conquered Judea. All he knew was that he wanted a tax registration; he ordered one, and that was the end of it. Who cared about the little people he was burdening?

Among them was a young couple from Nazareth. She was heavily pregnant—not a good time to be traveling. Still, they obeyed the order, like everyone else. Who would have looked at them twice?

God did. This was the birth He chose for His own Son Jesus—that He should be jounced along dirt roads as His mother walked or rode the long way to Bethlehem; that His mother's labor would begin at the worst possible time, before they had a decent place to stay; that He would be laid to sleep in a manger instead of a cradle. In Jesus' eyes, no one is too small to matter—not you, not me. He became small for us—so that He could be our Savior.

Thank You, Lord, for noticing, loving, and saving us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What surprises you most about the birth God chose for His Son?
2. When do you feel small or insignificant?
3. What reminds you that God notices and loves you?

THE TIME CAME

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. (Luke 1:57-58)

The thing about pregnancy is, it comes to an end. Nobody ever stayed pregnant forever (though it feels like it sometimes). I remember when I first found out I was pregnant. Suddenly my world turned into a relentless countdown to birth. There was no way out—it was a one-way ride that would end sometime in May. I was overjoyed, but also terrified.

I wonder if Elizabeth felt like that, facing childbirth? I wonder if you feel like that, facing something that has a predestined end, either good or bad. The days before you start a new job. The senior year of a son or daughter. The final days of a loved one.

Waiting is rarely easy, and God knows it. Maybe that's why He has given us so many good things to get us through—His promises, His Word, the Lord's Supper, each other. Best of all, He has given us His own Son Jesus, our long-awaited Savior. We could have no better companion during these days. He loves us, He has redeemed us, and He will never leave us alone. We can bear our waiting one day at a time, leaning on His strength.

Lord, when I am having a hard time with waiting, please help me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What are you waiting for right now?
2. What is the hardest part of waiting?
3. Tell a story about a way God helped you when you were waiting and it was difficult.

FIRST AND LAST WORDS

And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. (Luke 1:59-64)

Have you ever had a surgery you thought you might not wake up from? If you're like me, you try to make your last words to family and friends count. For me, it's usually "I love you." I don't get to choose my first words on waking up, because the anesthetic makes me loopy, but if I could, they'd probably be the same.

Zechariah must have had a lot of things he wanted to say, after nine months of muteness! His last words hadn't been particularly well-chosen: "How can I know this is true?" They were words of doubt, words that refused to trust in the good message of God. Maybe that's why Zechariah made sure he got it right when the muteness was finally lifted: "He spoke, blessing God."

Baby John was a promise fulfilled, but he was also the promise of a greater blessing on the way—Jesus, God's Word in human flesh. And His message, from first to last, has always been "I love you," from His birth to His death to His resurrection from the dead. Jesus did all these things for us, to make us God's own forever.

Lord, use my words to help others to know Your love and mercy. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What were your first words as a child?
2. Have you ever heard someone's last words?
3. What specific words of Jesus mean the most to you?

KNOWN BY HIS DEEDS

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a Son. And he called His Name Jesus. (Matthew 1:24-25)

Do you realize that we never hear Joseph speak? Not once do we hear a word from his lips in the whole Gospel story. But that doesn't stop us from feeling like we know him very, very well. We know Joseph by the actions he takes.

Look at his response to the angel's message! He doesn't hem and haw or hang around agonizing about whether the dream was real or not. No, as soon as he wakes, he goes to do what the angel said; he brings Mary home to be his wife. He respects her situation all through her pregnancy. And he names the baby Jesus, just as he was told to do.

Joseph was a faithful man. God entrusted His own Son into Joseph's care, and that trust was repaid with simple, straightforward obedience. Joseph was reliable, trustworthy, and loving. His deeds speak for him.

God's deeds speak for him too, don't they? Look at the daring of a God who would give His very Son into the hands of human beings, frail and fallible as we are! Look at the love that drove Jesus to come to us, laid to sleep in a manger that was already overshadowed with the coming cross.

Our God is faithful—and He is loving. We can rely on Him to the uttermost. He will never fail us.

Lord, help me to remember Your deeds, and to see what they say about Your heart. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Think of someone you know and love. What kind of deeds do they do?
2. What do those deeds say about them?
3. Which of your own deeds show that the Holy Spirit is making you more and more like Jesus?

KEEPING HIS PROMISES

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall call His Name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:22-23)

How long was it between the day God made this promise and the day He kept it? Several hundred years, at least. God spoke through Isaiah to the evil King Ahaz, who was worrying about an invasion at the time. He didn’t really care what Isaiah had to say.

The rest of us cared, though—everyone who realized that God had just promised to come into our world as “God-with-us,” God made human, God born of a virgin as a tiny baby—our Savior. That was a promise worth waiting for!

Still, the waiting was difficult. People spent years suffering under wicked kings—taken off into exile—returned to a ruined country and to homes they had to rebuild stone by stone. And they wondered: When will God keep His promise?

We, too, groan sometimes as we wait for God to keep His promises to us. It is taking so long for Jesus to return—for God to put an end to all evil—for God to destroy death, our last enemy. In the meantime, we suffer. How long, O Lord?

But we know God is faithful. He kept this first promise, to come to us as our Savior. He kept other promises, to suffer and die and rise again, all to free us from the power of evil. And He will keep every promise He has ever made, including the ones we will see fulfilled when Jesus returns, and the world is made new. God will not forget.

Lord, help us to keep hoping in Your good promises. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When did someone make you a special promise?
2. What does it mean to you when someone keeps a promise to you?
3. How has God been faithful to you in difficult times?

FEAR

And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him. (Luke 1:65-66)

It’s a little strange, isn’t it, that the miracle of John’s birth causes fear in the family’s neighbors? Joy makes sense, but fear? And all the angels in the Christmas story, always saying, “Don’t be afraid.” What’s going on?

I wonder if the problem isn’t the deep strangeness of John’s birth—and later, of Jesus’. Miracles cause fear—they rip away the comfortable illusion most of us have, that our daily lives are under our control. We tend to expect that, when we come up against trouble, it will be safely human-sized.

But miracles expose the truth: that we are living in a world filled with forces far greater than ourselves, and out of our control. This universe was not built for us, but for God, who also made us for Himself. When we forget that fact, seeing God at work visibly can make us panic.

It is good to know the truth, even when it causes us fear for a while. In this case, there is real comfort for us—a great, holy, and loving God who has sent His only Son Jesus to be our Savior. Our world may not be comfortable, but it is infinitely safer, because Jesus has suffered, died, and risen again for us, and He holds us safely in the palm of His hand.

Lord, help me to trust in You and nothing else. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When have you trusted in something that turned out to be a false assumption?
2. What do you do when you discover that thing is no longer trustworthy?
3. Why do you think God is trustworthy—or do you?

ENEMIES

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us ... that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us ... that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.” (Luke 1:67-69a, 71,74-75)

Did you know you have enemies? Oh, I’m not talking about ordinary human enemies, though those certainly exist. I’m talking about supernatural enemies—the devil and his angels. I’m talking about any creature that sets itself against God. Those are your enemies whether you like it or not, because you trust in Jesus and belong to Him—and therefore you will be a target for their hatred.

Zechariah talks about this hatred openly. He says that God is sending Jesus “that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us ... to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear.”

Clearly, we ordinary human beings aren’t up to dealing with an ordinary angel, let alone Satan. Nor can we deal with death, “the last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Corinthians 15:26a). The good news is that we don’t have to. Jesus Himself has come into this world to deal with those enemies and to save us forever. Because we are in His hands, we don’t have to be afraid. We can relax and “serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.”

Lord, save me from my enemies and help me to trust in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Did you have enemies as a child?
2. How do you stay safe from enemies?
3. How has Jesus dealt with the things that threaten you?

SON OF DAVID

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son, and you shall call His Name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:20-21)

I wonder if Joseph ever had trouble accepting his place in the whole Christmas story. If Mary wanted to ask, “Are you sure you’ve got the right girl?” she had the proof of God’s choice in her own body, in her pregnancy. But Joseph? He had dreams. And those are a bit harder to hang on to when doubts come into your mind.

Maybe that’s why the angel addressed him as “Joseph, son of David.” Long ago, God promised King David that the Messiah would come from his family: “I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body. ... I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son” (2 Samuel 7:12b, 13b-14a).

If Joseph was going to be the legal father of the Messiah, he needed to be a son of David—and he was. God picked Joseph as surely as He picked Mary. Joseph could lean on that promise if he ever had doubts.

God has picked you, too, and sealed it with a promise: “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God” (1 John 5:1a). You are God’s forever, through the loving work of Jesus your Savior, who died and rose for you.

Dear Father, thank You for choosing me to be Your own. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Why do you think God chose dreams to speak to Joseph?
2. Is it ever hard for you to trust that God has chosen you?
3. If so, what do you do when such doubts trouble you?

A THIRD WAY

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:19)

Joseph found himself caught in a nightmare situation that was none of his fault. His fiancée was pregnant, and he knew he was not the father. By Jewish law he had a legal case against her for adultery—and the traditional penalty for that was death by stoning. Hurt though he must have been, Joseph had no desire for that.

There was another option in Joseph's day, which was to divorce her. He could do that as publicly or quietly as he liked. Being a compassionate man, he decided to do it quietly and hope that the reason didn't become widely known. These were the only two choices he had—or so he thought.

A third choice opened up when the angel came to visit him—a choice Joseph never could have imagined. He could go ahead and take Mary home to be his wife, and take Jesus to be his son. This would be an act of sheer grace. If he chose to believe her story, he would be laying himself open to the mocking of everybody in the village who learned she was pregnant too early. He would be blamed—or worse, pitied as a cuckold.

We know what Joseph chose. And is it really surprising, this small act of grace, in a story which is all about God's grace to us? God didn't have to save us—didn't have to take us into His family—didn't have to love and accept us as His own. But He chose to make it so—through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of His Son Jesus.

Father, thank You for graciously making me Your own. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What do you do when there are no good choices?
2. Did you, or someone you know, ever find an unexpected gracious option to take?
3. When has someone shown you unexpected grace?

SUNRISE

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:76-79)

There's a reason why people in hospitals, sitting by the beds of loved ones, look out the window at the night. They are waiting for dawn—for the hope of a new and better day.

Zechariah refers to Jesus as our sunrise who "shall visit us from on high." He will not simply stay in heaven and shine on us from there—He will come down, into our dark world, and be born as a human baby among us. He will "give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death." He will do more than that—through His death and resurrection, He will remove the shadow of death forever, and bring us into the everlasting light of God's kingdom.

Zechariah spoke as a man who was privileged to see the first rays of dawn, the beginning of Jesus' coming. But you and I have something even better—the full knowledge of how Jesus has saved us, laying down His life for us, and then sharing His resurrection life with us even now. We see the sunrise clearly—and already we begin to see the increasing full light of His wonderful day.

Heavenly Father, lead us into the light of Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Which do you prefer, sunrise or sunset? Why?
2. Can you recall a sunrise that meant a lot to you?
3. How does Jesus' coming into our world give you hope?

IN THE WILDERNESS

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. (Luke 1:80)

The wilderness is not a comfortable place. There isn't much to eat there—locusts and wild honey?—and there isn't much company, either. A man who lives in the wilderness is giving up a lot—a nice home, a good career, a life surrounded by family and friends.

But the wilderness is good for some things. Because there are not many distractions, it makes a useful place for someone who wants to draw near to God. There is less to compete with His voice. Maybe that's why Isaiah spoke of John as a voice crying in the wilderness (see Isaiah 40:3). People would hear God's call to repent—and to be forgiven.

We, too, have our own wildernesses. There are times in our lives when the good things we count on fall away—home, family, health, financial security. These are scary times, but they are also times God can use to speak to us and to call us closer to Himself. And then we hear Jesus, saying, "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29). "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never cast out ... For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:37, 40).

Lord, when I am in the wilderness, help me to hear Your voice. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever camped in a wilderness?
2. What wilderness experiences have you had in your life?
3. Tell about a time God met and helped you during a wilderness period.

UNDONE

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18)

Mary probably had a mental picture of how her life would go: first betrothal, then a few months before the wedding party, and then (nine or ten months later) a baby. It was the normal course of things.

All of that got messed up when God took a hand. Suddenly she found herself betrothed and pregnant, with no assurance that there'd ever be a wedding. Her life had come undone.

Most of us have life plans too, even if they're not conscious. We imagine the future and say to ourselves, "I'll be living in this house," or "My children will be out of high school by then." We get a lot of emotional security from imagining these things. And then something happens—death, divorce, disability—and our plans go out the window. Our lives come undone, and we can't imagine what will come next.

When that happens, the best thing we can do is what Mary did—turn to God and let Him lead us. "I am the servant of the Lord," she said. "Let it turn out according to what He wants." That feels scary, but it's the only real safety that we have. With God in control, we can learn to relax and let Him work things out. After all, He is the One who laid down His life for us, to rescue us from evil and to bring us safely into His kingdom forever. If He can do that, He can certainly bring us safely through the scariest parts of our lives.

Father, lead me and help me to trust in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When is a time when your life turned upside down?
2. How did you feel when that happened?
3. How did God help you during that time?