

**Sacred Space
Advent Reflections**

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Day One
IN THE BEGINNING
Genesis 1: 1-11

We begin our annual pilgrimage to Bethlehem's manger in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. This first creation narrative (a second one quickly follows) is found in the opening verses of the Book of Genesis. But before delving into this story, it would be helpful to understand the mindset and world view of its ancient author who lived at least four thousand years ago.

First, we should realize he was putting down on parchment a story the Jews had already been verbally passing down from one generation to the next for over a thousand years. We should also realize he lived multiple centuries before modern science started cracking the codes of what we now call the universe.

I was told in Sunday school that God created the world out of nothing. However, according to the first verse of Genesis, "**the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters.**"

The Hebrews believed this empty void was already filled with oceans of water. This is key to our understanding of this story. The Hebrews, a landlocked people were absolutely terrified by the seas. They believed the oceans were chaotic

and deadly, cursed with turbulent currents and horrible monsters.

Picture Noah's ark bounding over the treacherous flood waters or the Hebrews running away from what they feared the most on land, Pharaoh's chariots, before passing through what they feared even more, the depths of the Red Sea. Now add to the mix Jesus walking on Lake Galilee's boiling deep one dark and stormy night. Point taken? As far as the Jews were concerned, the sea symbolized chaos.

It was from this bottomless, watery pit that God begot the cosmos from the chaos. Something else to consider. Our savior, whose birth we anticipate was not only present at the creation, he was the agent of the creation. Remember the opening verses in John's gospel?

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God... the Word was God. All things were made through him, without him nothing was made that was made."

Knowing God created the world through Christ and saved the world through Christ offers a new appreciation for God's sovereignty over his creation and God's love for his creation.

*Creating God, your fingers trace,
The bold designs of farthest space.
Let sun and moon and stars and light,
And what lies hidden praise your might.*

Day Two
WHY WE ARE THE WAY WE ARE
Genesis 3: 1-4

Ever wonder why we are the way we are? There are multiple psychological reasons but the biblical explanation found in Genesis is even more insightful. So, let's take a second look at Adam and Eve's fall from grace.

Adam and Eve are Hebrew names that mean man and woman. Adam is every man and Eve is every woman. The Bible says that through Adam and Eve, everyone has fallen into sin. And since they are us and we are them, we have fallen along with them.

God created Adam and Eve in his image. That is, God created them to be spiritual beings, able to enjoy harmonious and intimate friendships with God and each other. But something unavoidable happened. When given half a chance, they ruined everything.

Why did they do it? Free will. God didn't create us to be mindless robots incapable of making our own decisions. To the contrary, we are free to love and obey God or not.

God put only one restriction on Adam and Eve. They were forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. But human nature being what it is, it was only a matter of time before their hubris got the better of them.

So why did they risk doing the one thing

God told them not to do? Did they think they'd get away with it? In a word, yes. They fell for the serpent's lie that God forbade them to eat the forbidden fruit to keep them from gaining knowledge that would guarantee equality with God as something to be exploited.

The unintended consequences of their chutzpah? They lost their innocence and they lost paradise. But not everything was lost.

In Paul's letter to the Romans we read,

“Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation so, one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and new life for all.”

The second Adam is Jesus. Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead, Jesus did for us what we could never do for ourselves, he gave his life to restore our broken relationships with God and each other.

Advent is a time to take all the time you need to meditate on God's mercy and then thank God for being so loving, gracious and forgiving.

*Spare us, O Lord who now confess
Our sins and all our wickedness;
And, for the glory of thy name,
Our weakened souls to health
reclaim.*

Day Three
"AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?"
Genesis 4:1-9

The story of Adam and Eve's fall from grace is quickly followed by the story of their son Cain murdering his brother Able. Question: Why did God favor Abel's sacrifice over Cain's. Answer: Abel's offering was a genuine, heartfelt sacrifice whereas Cain was only going through the motions. (Later in the Old Testament the prophets railed against empty ritual sacrifices performed in the temple in place of real repentance.) Anyway, whatever the reason, God favored Able over Cain and that made Cain both angry and jealous.

Knowing this, God reached out and promised Cain he could still be accepted if he rebuked his jealousy and controlled his anger. But Cain, of his own free will, chose to do neither. Nurturing his jealousy and anger, he allowed both to fester until he was driven to commit premeditated murder.

After the wicked deed was done, the Lord cornered Cain. "Where's your brother, Able?" God asked. Trying to deflect God's question, Cain retorted, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

In Luke's gospel, a lawyer attempting to justify himself, asked Jesus a similar question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan, its lesson

being, anyone in need is my neighbor.

Whether we realize it or not, we dehumanize ourselves whenever we allow anger and envy get the better of us. The same is true whenever marginalize anyone we consider to be beneath us.

Jesus didn't mention the fate of those who scurried past the man left bloodied by the roadside. We do know Cain's punishment. He was destined to aimlessly wander the earth for the rest of his life in fear of his life.

Cain's might be a hard story but it's not necessarily our story. God is merciful and forgiving. Through Christ, we can repent and be forgiven and then follow up by being attentive to God's voice and in sync with God's will.

Throughout your Advent pilgrimage to the manger and beyond, why not keep repeating the mantra, **“I am my brothers and sisters’ keeper and anyone in need is my neighbor.”**

Lord, make us servants of your peace.

Where there is hate, may we sow love.

Where there is hurt, may we forgive.

Where there is strife, may we make one.

Day Four
BE PREPARED
Luke 3 :1-20

Advent is the season to set aside any unnecessary busy work and then refocus our attention on preparation and repentance. Listen hard enough and the Baptist's cries, "**Prepare ye the way of the Lord,**" and, "**Repent, and hear the good news!**" can still be heard across the eons.

Even today, John is still exhorting us to get ready to meet Christ when he comes, most likely incognito, through every person we meet and every situation we encounter.

The Bible is God's revealed word to us. From the time God called Abraham to be the father of a great nation, up until Christ' birth, death, resurrection *and everything else in between*, we find stories in the Bible that are part of the greater, seamless story of God's love affair with humanity.

These stories go way beyond history. Certainly the biblical story reports history but it also reveals something no modern history books would ever tell us. We learn that God intervenes in human events to move along his plan to restore and redeem his creation and everyone in it.

Since it's all God's doing, does that allow us to sit back and watch God do all the heavy lifting? Or, is something required of us?

You already know the answer. More is required of us. God wants our commitment and cooperation to do our part to turn the world upside down until its finally right-side up!

Doing our part takes the decision to do God's work. But good works alone aren't enough to mend broken lives and restore the creation. Doing these things with the right motivation and spirit can only happen when we allow God to have his way with us.

We respond to God by being prepared for whatever God has in store for us. How? By making and spending quality time, every day, with Jesus. It begins with reading, praying and meditating your way through the scriptures. And then, while waiting for God's word to emerge from the scriptures, we allow God's word to emerge from us and into the lives of others.

During the next few weeks, getting ready for Christmas Day will be a high priority. Just make sure you don't forget your highest priority, getting ready for Jesus!

*On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's cry
Announces that the Lord is nigh
Awake and hearken for he brings
Glad tidings of the King of king*

Day Five
RECEIVE A BLESSING, BE A BLESSING
Genesis 12:1-9; 18:9-15

As God's children, we can trace our spiritual genealogies back to an old man willing to risk everything and then go wherever God told him to go. When Abraham pulled up stakes, left his home and trekked to a far-away country, he demonstrated how to trust in the unseen.

Abraham was an amazing man. At seventy five, he still had a youthful, adventurous spirit. Obviously, this totally unexpected directive from God reenergized him. But there's something else in his favor. Abraham received more from God than marching orders. Later, along the way, he also received a promise.

He was told that his descendants would be a blessing to all the tribes and nations of the earth. Never having a son of his own to be his heir, Abraham had to be intrigued but also motivated by this promise.

Here's something to remember. Whenever you answer the call to risk yourselves for a cause greater than yourself, whether you can see it or not, somewhere hidden in the mix, there's a promise to be kept.

So, it was more than just the opportunity for a new adventure or even becoming a wealthy landowner in this far-away land. Abraham never turned back and kept moving forward if only because God promised to finally bless him with a son.

This son would not only be Abraham's

blessing, all the tribes and nations in the world would also be blessed. That's why we call him Father Abraham. He was the first to begin the journey that would find its final destination in Bethlehem and beyond.

As Abraham's descendants, we are called to be the vanguard of the Good News. We tell it and especially live it by serving and loving others. As Saint Francis told his followers, "*Always be ready to preach the gospel. If necessary, use words.*"

We are all on a journey. The question is, do we know why and where we're going? Some folks, even if they're excited and motivated, still have no idea where they'll end up. They wander aimlessly until someone intervenes and points the way.

Whenever Jesus met lost people on the road, he said to them, "**Follow me.**" Abraham could hear that invitation even before Jesus was born. If you're reading this, that same call to follow Jesus has caught your attention too. And now, the journey and the promise continues through you

*Go, tell it on the mountain
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born!*

*Down in the lowly manger
The humble Christ was born,
And God sent us salvation
That blessed Christmas morn.*

Day Six
Believing is Seeing
Colossians 1:9-23

Everyone on the Advent pilgrimage sooner or later asks the question, "Just exactly who am I preparing for?" The right answer, of course, is Jesus. But who is Jesus?

Was Jesus just a wonderful teacher, a man of superior moral courage whose deluded disciples later put words in his mouth he never said? Or, can we trust their claims about Jesus for being reliable?

First of all, yes, they're all true. And why wouldn't Jesus' disciples believe their fantastic claims about Jesus? And if they *didn't* believe them, why would they stake and then lose their lives for a pack of lies?

They say, "seeing is believing." True enough but isn't, "*believing is seeing*" a more accurate description of faith in the unseen?

When you think about it, the Bible never makes any arguments to prove God exists. Nor did the disciples ever try to prove Christ's resurrection happened. (The Apostle Paul did say if the resurrection never happened our faith would be in vain.) Instead, Paul and the others could only say what they believed to be true. In his letter to the Colossians Paul wrote,

**“Christ is the visible image of the
invisible God... he himself is before all things**

and in him all things hold together."

In other words, Paul believed that Christ is God *and* that Christ is the glue holding the creation together. Withdraw his presence and everything, including you and me, would be pulled apart.

Paul also believed Jesus is both fully human and fully divine **"He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God...he is the beginning, the first born of the dead..."**

Again, Paul believed Christ was raised from the dead but never tried proving it. Why? He knew he could never prove Christ was raised from the dead any more than he could prove a mother loves her child. Only by *seeing* how a mother cares for her child can you *believe* she loves her child.

Likewise, the only way of knowing Christ is both divine and human *and* if his resurrection really happened is either by you experiencing Christ rising up within yourself or seeing its transformative effect on others.

Open your eyes and you will see God making all things work together for good. Look again and see God inserting himself in human events to inspire people of good will to change the world one life at a time. Look one more time and you just might see yourself joining in to do your part.

It really is true. Seeing is believing!

Day Seven
BORN INTO CONFLICT
Micah 5:1 -5

When this passage is read on Christmas Eve, the first verse is usually omitted. We think it begins, "**But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah...**"

But that neglected first verse reads, "**Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid upon us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel on the cheek.**"

Phillip Brooks' sentimental carol, "*O Little Town of Bethlehem,*" sings a different tune. But being so close to Jerusalem, Bethlehem was never spared the tumult directed at the City of David from the warlike Assyrians, followed by the Babylonians, then the Greeks and finally the Romans.

When the angel appeared in the night sky over the outskirts of Bethlehem to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, the angel had to say, "**Do not be afraid,**" because the angel sensed they were frightened. But living under the harsh Roman occupation, the shepherds had a lot more to be frightened about. Making matters worse, there were deep divisions in their country between the religious and political factions comprising of Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians.

Today we seem to be just as conflicted. Too many conversations morph into confrontations. We hear laments over the loss of unity and civility but

few dare, with olive branch in hand, take that first step towards reconciliation. Truth be told, we have carefully yet thoughtlessly replicated Micah's war torn little town of Bethlehem.

It's easy to stereotype people we disagree with. It's harder to sit down with people on the wrong side of the spectrum and imagine new ways to restore civility and unity to those needing it most.

Ask each other, what's keeping us from becoming intentional peace makers in our homes and communities, starting with serious discussions with people who are just as eager to listen as they are to speak?

Jesus said, **“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.”**

Are we acting like the children of God?

If not, why not?

*How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts on human hearts
the blessing of his heaven.
We hear the Christmas angles,
their great glad tidings tell;
O come to us abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel!*

Day Eight
ONLY THE STRONG ARE HUMBLE
Philippians 2:1-11

Today's reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians highlights the humility of Christ. Unfortunately, in the "real world," humility is a weakness. If you're humble, you obviously have nothing to be proud about.

According to the scriptures, humility takes strength. Confidence, courage and willpower are the necessary accessories before being clothed with the mantle of humility.

Christmas is all about humility. God humbled himself and surrendered his power over us to become one of us. Making that decision is the ultimate expression of humility.

Paul's sublime hymn, about Jesus, "**not regarding equality with God as something to be exploited,**" beautifully describes how Jesus emptied himself throughout his ministry and especially through his Crucifixion. Study the four gospels. Not once did Jesus ever pull rank. Instead he always humbled himself.

Consider the implications of Jesus constantly giving himself away. Think of a battery being drained of its power or emptying a pitcher of water.

When Paul urges us to imitate Christ's humility you might think, "*Hey, that sounds great... but wait one minute! What if I'm the*

only one humbling myself? It would be open season on me. I'd become everyone's doormat!"

That's a fair observation. All the more reason to know the difference between being aggressive and being assertive. Aggression is actually a sign of weakness. Whenever aggressors lose control of the situation, they pounce. On the other hand, assertive people remain unruffled, yet still determined.

Read the gospels. When Jesus' adversaries became aggressive, he never lost it and stooped to their level. When they become cruel and nasty, Jesus remained calm and self-assured. Drawing strength from his father and his own authority, Jesus always prevailed.

In and through Christ, we are given that same inner strength and by striving to be of the same mind as Christ, we stand on firm ground. Easier said than done, but all things are possible with God!

*O come, Desire of nations bind,
All peoples in one heart and mind
Bid envy and discord cease,
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel,
Shall come to thee O Israel!*

Day Nine
YOUR STAR IN THE HEAVENS
Genesis 15:1-6

All Christians know and love the story of the magi following the star to Bethlehem. But did you know there's a star in the heavens with your name on it?

God made what seemed to be an impossible promise. Abraham would be the father of a great nation, but his wife Sarah was both elderly and barren. To make sure God's kept his promise, Abraham took the situation in hand by having relations with Sarah's slave, Hagar. When his first son, Ishmael, was born, Abraham believed he would be his promised heir and the family line would continue through him. Not so.

How often do we lose patience and try circumventing God's timing and forcing God's hand by convincing ourselves our unilateral actions are part of God's plan?

God's mysterious ways can never be orchestrated or manipulated. God's will only unfolds in his own way and by his own timing. Our primary job is to wait for God to make things happen and then, go with the flow.

Anyway, getting back to the story, one night God invited Abraham to stand outside his tent and said, "Look toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able... So shall your descendants be."

With light pollution, we can't see all the stars embossing the night sky as clearly as those living in rural areas. Being in the wilderness or any other place far away from city lights, you can experience the same high quality of star gazing readily available to Abraham.

Now turn to the genealogies listed in both Matthew and Luke's Gospels and see all the names, some familiar, some not, included in the list of Abraham's descendants, until you come to that very last name standing out from all the rest, "**Jesus...who is called the Messiah.**"

All of these names represent the promise God made to Abraham. But this list of Abraham's descendants didn't stop with Jesus. Since then, like the countless stars in the heavens, countless other names have been added to the list, including yours!

The next time there's a clear moonless night, look to the heavens and realize that one of those stars has your name on it. Then, thank the Lord for the Star of Bethlehem that makes your star possible.

*Midnight stars make bright the skies
Bethlehem in slumber lies
Glistening heaven sends forth great light
Shepherds see a wondrous sight
Glory be to God be on high,
Blest are all beneath the sky.*

Day Ten
ONLY MARY AND ONLY YOU
Luke 1:26-38

When John the Evangelist wrote, "**the Word became flesh and dwelt among us filled with grace and truth,**" that was the sum total of his Christmas story. Thankfully, Matthew and Luke tell the rest of the story revealing the wondrous and sometimes terrible events surrounding Christ's birth.

The Christmas story begins with an unprecedented birth announcement. Mary was afraid when the angel Gabriel appeared and said, "**Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you.**" Immediately after saying that, Mary learned she was chosen to be the mother of God.

Not yet married, Mary's pregnancy would certainly cause a messy scandal that would cause her death by stoning. Despite these probable dire consequences, Mary tapped into that youthful aura of invincibility reserved for teenagers and said, "**Here I am, a servant of the Lord. Let it be according to your will.**"

Mary's answer took a remarkable combination of courage and faith. Unlike Moses, who tried wiggling his way out of his call to bring the Jews out from Egypt, Mary immediately embraced her new responsibility to give birth to the Christ Child and raise him to manhood.

Since Mary was instantly obedient, it's

probably futile to ask all the, "*What if Mary refused?*" type questions, unless we're willing to turn these same questions back on ourselves.

What if you're being singled out to do something important? You know you have the right gifts and temperament to get the job done. Will you do it or, will you turn God down flat?

Only Mary was called to carry the seed of the Christ child in her womb. You are called to carry the Christ child in your heart, but only you can be the right person to carry out whatever God created you to accomplish.

Be in prayer in prayer about this. Then, the next time God sends someone to announce your newest assignment, you can promptly answer, **"Here I am ... Let it be according to your will."**

*The angel Gabriel from heaven came
His wings as drifted snow, his eyes aflame
"All hail," said he, "O lowly maiden Mary."
Most highly favored Lady, Gloria!*

*"For know a blessed mother you shall be,
All generations praise continually, Your Son
shall be Emmanuel by seers foretold."
Most highly favored lady, Gloria!*

*Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head
"To me be as it pleases God," she said, "My
soul shall laud and magnify God's holy name."
Most highly favored lady, Gloria!*

Day Eleven
GOD WITH US
Isaiah 7:1-14

Isaiah, who ministered in the middle of the eighth century B C, was the first prophet to reveal God 's plan of redemption through the birth of a special child.

This first prophecy emerged from Jerusalem 's frantic preparations to repulse an invasion from her neighbors, the kingdoms of Aram and Israel. (Earlier a civil war broke out after King Solomon 's death resulting i n two separate kingdoms, Israel to the north and Judah in the south.)

When it was learned these two neighbors were about to invade Judah, "**the heart of King Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.**"

Isaiah sought out Ahaz to assure him God would deny Judah's enemies ("**those two smoldering stumps**") victory. God promised Ahaz these neighboring kingdoms would instead be invaded and conquered by the Assyrians.

When Ahaz didn't believe the prophecy, Isaiah encouraged him to ask for a sign. Ahaz, wanting to put an end to Isaiah's medaling, said self-righteously, "**I will not ask for a sign and put the Lord to the test.**"

Sensing Ahaz was only blowing smoke, Isaiah ignored his game-playing and delivered

still another prophesy. **“Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and he shall be called, Emmanuel.”**

From then on, for nearly seven hundred years, God’s people waited, waited and waited for this child to be born. In fact, every time a new king was anointed in Israel, the people would wonder, *“Is this the one, the promised Messiah?”*

Complicating things, in 576 BC after Babylon defeated Judah, no one from the House of David ever ruled again. Even after the exile ended and the faithful remnant returned to Jerusalem, David’s throne remained empty.

How then, could Isaiah’s prophesy be fulfilled? Not to worry, everything was still going according to God’s plan

It’s so hard waiting for God to show up at the right time, especially when your heart is shaking **“as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.”** That’s when we need to pray for and encourage each other that one way or another, God will help us stay the course in sync with God’s will.

*O come, o come Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel.
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death’s dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice, rejoice Emmanuel
Shall come to thee O Israel!*

Day Twelve
NEW LIVES FOR OLD
Ephesians 4:17-32

During the holiday season, sometimes it seems like the worst excesses of the culture are on full display. Maybe the Puritans, who outlawed celebrating Christmas, were right. Christmas was banned in reaction to the celebration's excesses. What was supposed to be a holy day devolved into a gluttonous pagan feast with riots in the streets.

While we aren't quite there yet, too much time and energy preparing for Christmas Day is misdirected. Any anticipation of Christ's coming is eclipsed by the mantra,

*"There's only (fill in the blanks)
shopping days until Christmas!"*

Even believers can get caught up in the chaos. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul warned against falling back into old ways and living as the Gentiles live, **"in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding...because of their ignorance and hardness of heart."**

Is Paul surmising unbelievers are horrid people who kick their dogs and beat their children? Or, is Paul blaming the unbeliever's licentious and greedy ways (from which even the finest Christian isn't immune) on ignorance?

Jesus prayed on the cross **"Forgive them**

Father, for they know not what they do." In other words, Jesus knew his accusers were ignorant.

Unbelievers today don't know any better either, especially if no one takes the time to properly introduce them to Christ and his gospel. *(If that's the case, whose fault is that?)*

Anyway, you and I have already been introduced to Christ and his gospel. By the grace of God, we've experienced the new life through Christ. And since we're supposed to know better, Paul's challenge, to the Ephesians, "**you must no longer live like the Gentiles,**" still holds.

Christ was born to make our rebirth possible. Old lives are replaced with new lives. **"The old is finished and gone. Behold, all things are new!"**

Keep in mind this is only possible because God makes it possible. Isn't Christmas all about God making the impossible possible?

We can't *make* Christmas but we can *keep* Christmas since we've already received the best Christmas gift ever, our Lord Jesus Christ who died to keep us firmly under his grace and authority.

*Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates,
Behold the King of glory waits;
The king of kings is drawing near
The savior of the world is here!*

Day Thirteen
THE NAMES OF GOD
Isaiah 9:2-7

This is Isaiah's second prophecy of the birth of a special child. He already named him Emmanuel which means, "God with us." What parents named their children in former times was as just significant as it is today. Like them, we hope our child's name will determine his or her personality and purpose in life.

It's probable Isaiah didn't fully comprehend the significance of his first prophecy. Yes, he believed this child would be a sign of God's presence and agent of God's will, but did he realize this child would be born hundreds of years later and literally be God in the flesh?

"For a child has been born to us...and he his name will be called, Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

Like the Jews of Isaiah's time, we still live in deep darkness. Assurance is needed that the light is still shining. By pondering the significance of the names given this child, God lights the way and gives us clues revealing his identity and purpose.

Wonderful Counselor. He fills us with awe and wonder. He's our counselor who brings genuine wisdom and truth into the world.

Mighty God. This child is of the same essence as God. He reigns over the universe. He is invincible.

Nothing or no one in the creation will ever be able to bring him down.

Everlasting Father. Unlike our vain attempts at building empires that come with a flourish and go with the wind, his kingdom will never end. And he shall reign forever and ever.

Prince of Peace. His reign will be marked by shalom, the perfect peace and harmony. His truth and justice will wipe out conflicts between neighbors and nations.

(Here's a suggestion, listen to a recording of For Unto Us A Child is Born from Handle's Messiah. You will be inspired!)

Through Isaiah's prophecies, God revealed Christ's identity and purpose through the names given him. What a blessing it is to know Jesus as our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace!

Call upon the Holy Spirit to widen your appreciation for the implications these names have for you as a child of God and a disciple of Christ.

*He came down to earth from heaven
Who is God and lord of all,
And his shelter was a stable
And his cradle was a stall.
With the poor, oppressed and lowly,
Lived on earth our Savior Holy.*

Day Fourteen
CHRIST'S BIRTH AND YOUR REBIRTH
John 3:1-16

Nicodemus personifies the intentional seeker of truth. He stepped out from the darkness and into the light seeking new life. He even acknowledged Jesus as, **"a teacher who has come from God."**

Unlike many of his brother Pharisees, Nicodemus took Jesus seriously. And Jesus took Nicodemus seriously too. Instead of sparring with another Pharisee, Jesus could have a serious conversation with Nicodemus shedding new light on the pilgrims' journey back to God.

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above."

Straight away, Jesus stated the minimum requirement for eternal life. You must be born from above (or born again) to enter God's Kingdom.

Unfortunately, many seekers have walked away feeling frustration and rejection after having conversions with some "born again" Christians who claim we must be able to name the exact hour, date and year when we were converted to Christ.

To be sure, many Christians have experienced this type of conversion. At the same time, many other Christian conversion experiences are an ongoing process. God works with different people in different ways. However, there are some things all Christians hold in common.

Ideally, a Christian's perceptions and priorities should be constantly changing for the better. You just don't turn over a new leaf, you become a new leaf. You can experience joy which, by the way, should never be confused with happiness. Why? Because you're only happy when everything's going your way. At the same time, you can still be joyful even when everything's going against you. This joy is founded on the promise that despite everything, God is still with you and not about to let you be crushed by your adversaries or contrary situations.

Christ was born so we can be reborn. Your second birth awakens you to the reality of Christ's kingdom within and around you. Your rebirth is God's Christmas present to you!

This Christmas Eve, while singing Mendelssohn's beloved carol *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing*, listen carefully to the final lyrics in the last stanza,

*Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace,
Hail the sun of righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glories by
Born so we no more may die.
Born to raise us from the earth.
Born to give us second birth.
Hark! The Herald Angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born king!"*

Day Fifteen
BORN TO SUFFER
Isaiah 53:1-13

We can only imagine the disciples' amazement when they reread with fresh eyes this passage from Isaiah soon after Christ's death and resurrection. There, in plain Hebrew, was the description of and explanation for that terrible day when Jesus suffered to the redeem the world.

Seven hundred years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah painted a portrait of God 's suffering servant. Consider these word pictures:

"He had no form or majesty that we should look at him ...He was despised and rejected by others... he has borne our infirmities...like a lamb led to the slaughter ... he not open his mouth."

Before Christ, the accepted interpretation of this passage identified the people of Israel as being God 's suffering servant. Destined to be a light and blessing to all the nations the earth, Israel would instead be scorned and rejected by all the nations of the earth.

Why? Partly because instead of becoming a suffering servant, Israel became and acted like all the other nations of the earth. But now, through the lens of Good Friday, we can identify God's suffering servant as Jesus who, **"by a perversion of justice was taken away. Yet, it was God's**

will to crush him with pain.”

Some will argue that bringing up all this talk about suffering, death and perverted justice aborts the traditional Martha Stewart Christmas many try so hard to emulate. Wouldn't we rather celebrate the day with family and friends without having to confess our culpability that made the Christ Child's Crucifixion necessary? Like it or not, Christmas Day and Good Friday are as intrinsically connected as the link between Good Friday and Easter morning. By ignoring Good Friday, Christmas and Easter become no different than family and friends' get-togethers on Super Ball Sunday.

Better still, by daring to make room for Good Friday during Advent, we certainly have a more complete appreciation for the ebb and flow of life. And by including Christ in the mix, we can come to realize that for every crucifixion we experience in life, there's a promised resurrection.

Far from being a downer, making room for Good Friday at Christmas elevates our understanding of and gratitude for the linkage of Christ's birth and his Crucifixion. It's the total package that makes our salvation possible.

*Lord Christ when you first came to earth
Upon the cross they bound you
And mocked your saving king-ship then
With thorns with which they crowned you.
Love that triumphs over loss,
We bring our hearts before your cross.*

Day Sixteen
ACCEPTING GOD'S TIMING
Galatians 9:4-7

They say, timing is everything. Super successful people are all about good timing, whether it's timing a roast in the oven, a grand entrance at a party or the right moment to introduce a new product to the public.

Timing *is* everything.

Perfected timing is an art form, and its expert perfecters are specialists at manipulating time so events only happen when it suits them and their clients. However, real time, past, present and future time, can only be mandated by God.

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son born of a woman ...in order to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children."

Fullness of time means the appointed time, but it especially means the best time. Remember, timing is everything, even for God.

Christ was born into the world at the optimum time of God's choosing. The faithful in Israel, living under one conqueror to the next, waited for the Messiah for multiple generations, crying out time and again, *"How long, O Lord? How long must we endure these 'in between times'?" Why are you holding back, God? We need deliverance now!"*

Sound familiar? Although conditions, at least in our country, are a far cry from the suffering the Jews endured, we still demand answers or better still results, right here, right now. We also want to know, what will happen next? Will it be good or bad?

Coming to terms with God's timing decreases stress and increases trust. Try as we might, we cannot manipulate or make things happen to accommodate to our schedules. Like it or not, we're always left waiting for God to choose the right time. But while you wait, it does help to remember that, through it all, God's timing is always the best timing.

It's usually in hindsight when we can finally admit that after all our worries and grouching, everything we fretted about is addressed at just the right time when God knows it's the best time. Timing *is* everything and when we get in sync with God's timing, needless pain and worry gives way to refocusing our attention on the things that really matter.

*Jesus is our childhoods pattern
Day by day like us he grew;
He was little weak and helpless
Tears and smiles like us he knew;
And he feels for all our sadness
And he shares in all our gladness.*

Day Seventeen
THE GOOD SHEPHERD
Ezekiel 34:11-16

One of the enduring Christmas images is "shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night." Surely, the Twenty-third Psalm comes to mind whenever we think about shepherds. But sheep are also referenced in this lesser known passage in Ezekiel. The prophet reveals the Lord to be a diligent shepherd, searching for his scattered sheep, bringing them home and healing their wounds.

People living down on the farm already know sheep aren't very intelligent. They over eat until they get sick and wander off until they get lost. Sheep, like toddlers, need constant supervision.

On the plus side, sheep are naturally trusting. Like Mary's little lamb, they follow their shepherds wherever they're sure to go. Sheep also know and recognize their shepherd's voice. Whenever in danger, or special attention is needed, sheep instinctively trust their shepherd to be there for them.

In keeping with this shepherd and sheep theme of Christmas, consider our sheep-like tendencies, both the good and not so good.

Maybe you can remember when you sensed danger and were wise enough to heed your shepherd's voice warning you to back off.

Or, how about the times you were (literally or figuratively) left bloodied and wounded by the roadside and your Good Shepherd showed up to heal your hurts and love you back into his fold. And certainly you can recall the times when you were confused and lost but still trusting your shepherd to lead you back to the still waters and green pastures where you belong.

Can you also remember the times when maybe you weren't all that trusting? You worried yourself sick while waiting for the worst possible scenario (invented in your head) to come crashing down on you. But even if that worst possible scenario played itself out, your Good Shepherd's rod and staff were in still on hand to comfort and guide you.

As we get closer to that day we pull out all the stops to celebrate Christ's birth, resist wandering off and getting lost by confusing Christmas Day as your destination. Instead keep close to the one you know and trust to be the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord.

*O come, O dayspring come and cheer
Our spirits by thine Advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows turn to flight.
Rejoice, rejoice Emmanuel
Shall come to thee O Israel!*

Day Eighteen
LISTENING FOR GOD
Matthew 1:18-25

Consider Joseph, the man engaged to Mary, who was "**with child by the Holy Spirit.**" At least that's what Mary said. Joseph had a hard time accepting Mary's far-fetched story about Gabriel's announcement. But even when Joseph thought himself to be the "wronged man," he refused to destroy her reputation.

That decision alone shows Joseph had character. But Joseph's compassionate behavior also demonstrated a sufficient faith. Later that night, God spoke to Joseph through a dream. Unlike Mary, who was awake when she experienced her visitation, Joseph was sound asleep. Like Ebenezer Scrooge, he could've dismissed his dream being triggered by an undigested piece of beef!

One of the lessons learned from Joseph's story is the importance of being aware of God constantly bombarding us with messages. Unfortunately, we're usually too distracted to tune into God speaking to us through the scriptures, other people and that still small voice.

Certainly you've experienced a moment of enlightenment, when the solution to a vexing problem suddenly became clear. Maybe you've had premonitions of danger *or* affirmations from above that made all the difference. Are these coincidences, the result of chemical exchanges in your brain?

Personally, I don't believe in coincidences. There's always something more going on.

If you're more inclined to hear a scientific explanation, maybe this will help you consider this alternative probability. Consider this, when God created Joseph, did God encode into his DNA the ability to hear and respond to God's voice?

Scientifically speaking, what's so outlandish about that?

Being a man of faith, Joseph was able to navigate fluid situations while being open to God's still small voice calling him in the night. And since God enabled Joseph, why couldn't God encode into your DNA the same ability?

Scientifically speaking, what's so outlandish about that?

If you're still not sure it's God speaking to you, test and verify. If you finally believe God is speaking, go with it and see what happens next.

And be assured, if these messages are in sync with scripture and you find yourself being drawn closer to God, follow Joseph's example. Take the risk, trust and obey.

*Let all mortal flesh keep silent
And with fear and trembling stand
Ponder nothing earthly minded
For with blessings in his hand
Christ of God descend-eth,
Our full homage to demand.*

Day Nineteen
Coming Again
Malachi 4:1-5

It makes sense that the very last verses of the Old Testament deal with that terrible yet wonderful day when the Lord finally comes to usher in his kingdom having no end. One of the earliest creeds of the Church proclaims, "**Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.**"

Jesus foretold his second advent when he was on trial before the Sanhedrin. The high priest asked Jesus, "**Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One? Jesus answered, "I am and you will see the Son of Man... coming with the clouds of heaven."**

Christ's Second Coming has always been grist for speculation. Over the centuries too many Christians were convinced they found clues in the scriptures matching current events that predicted exactly when Christ was coming again.

So far, they've all been very, very wrong.

Yet even today, some Christians are still obsessed with pin pointing the exact time of his coming. But why keep doing this when even Jesus admitted that not even he, only the father, knows about these things?

Clearly, all of this speculation is a fool's errand. So what's a Christian to do? The only sensible thing is to repent and prepare for Christ's

second coming without fussing about the when.

Waiting for Christ's second coming is actually a calling to faithful living. In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel we find Jesus' parable about the final judgement of the nations.

The King divided everyone into two camps, with the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. He then welcomed the sheep into his kingdom saying, **"I was hungry and you fed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and in prison and you visited me."**

Straight away, the sheep wondered when they did any of these things. That's when Jesus answered. **"Whatsoever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters you also did it to me."**

This parable begs the question, "What is faithful living?" The answer: It's all about becoming Christ-like by allowing the spirit of Christ to live in and through you, especially when you least expect it.

The Great Day of the Lord is nearer than you think. Maybe not sometime soon but certainly sometime. In the meantime, repent and prepare, and be on the lookout for Jesus coming to you day after day under the radar as one of those least of these.

*Redeemer, come! I open wide
My heart to thee, here Lord abide.
Let me thy hidden presence feel:
Thy grace and love in me reveal.*

Day Twenty
GOD KEEPS ANOTHER PROMISE
Jeremiah 33:14-16

Jeremiah was the prophet on duty when the Jews were hauled off to Babylon. Their exile was the consequence of their disobedience. The glory days were over. Jerusalem was in smoldering ruins. The House of David was dethroned. Never again would a descendant of David reign over Israel.

Or so it seemed.

Jerusalem was conquered and destroyed not because God let his people down but because they let God down. For generations God sent prophets warning them that by consistently making wrong choices, they were slowly undermining Judah's moral foundations based on their covenant with God.

But there was still good news. Although God's people broke their covenant to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth, God still kept his promise to still be their God.

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill (or keep) my promise...In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David land."

Try as we might, sometimes things keep going from bad to worse. We feel abandoned and rudderless with no way out. That's how the Jews had to be feeling after everything they knew and loved was taken away and smashed to pieces.

Even so, something was completely different. Having hit rock bottom, for the first time in a long time, the Jews repented and welcomed God's prophesy of redemption and restoration. Someone from David's branch would rise up to liberate them from Gentile oppression! Someone even greater than David would come along to set things right again.

Alas, for the next five hundred years the Jews were stuck in a holding pattern. They waited, some would insist impatiently, for God's promise to be kept. But when the Messiah finally did appear not everyone accepted him.

The more things change the more...

With the benefit of the faith handed down to us *and* the gift of hindsight, we know that Jesus is David's greatest son. We also know Jesus was born, not to make us feel superior to people of other faiths or no faith at all. Instead, our mission is to serve other people by lowering ourselves to raise them up.

Jesus was born, died and raised not just for us to end up in heaven. In the meantime, we are expected to be God's servants and agents of grace here on earth. Then, when the time finally comes to meet our Maker, by then we'll already be sufficiently trained and ready to serve in heaven.

*Come thou long expected Jesus
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sin release us
Let us find our rest in thee.*

Day Twenty-One
PRAY ANYWAY
James 5:7-11

The persistent themes of waiting, patience and endurance run through the scriptures from beginning to end. It's tempting to idealize the concept of prayerful waiting while ensconced in peaceful surroundings, isolated from the problems of the world. But peaceful surroundings don't guarantee a peaceful life.

A quick review of the lives of the saints tells a different story. Their prayers grew out of struggle and despair. They learned, the hard way, that prayer never offers an escape *from* but the way *through* our challenges and difficulties. Prayers leading to intimacy with God often emerge from our deepest hurts. These sacred conversations with God don't necessarily take the burdens off our shoulders. Instead, God strengthens our shoulders.

You realize that God never promised to "turn off" personal problems and world conflicts, even at Christmas. So, bracing for the holidays, you put on a happy face so you don't demoralize your family and friends. Then, to distract yourself from your sadness and distress, you throw yourself into baking, buying gifts and decorating the house. You might even stop praying. After all, if your prayers aren't being answered why keep on praying?

A friendly word of advice from someone whose

been there and done that. Even if you're at the end of your rope, pray anyway. Even if you don't think it, God is still listening!

In his letter to the churches, James wrote,

“Be patient, therefore beloved...the farmer waits for the precious crop rising from the earth, patiently...until it receives the early and late rains. You also must also be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.” (James5:7- 9)

Having been conditioned to expect instant gratification, we expect instant results, but for some reason, prayer doesn't always yield instant results. Why? Who knows? Maybe God knows you're not quite ready yet. Or, maybe God has answered your prayers but you don't like what you're hearing. Either way, don't fall for that lie from hell that God abandoned you, that God is mad at you or that God doesn't care about you. Nothing is further from the truth.

Since the Jews waited eight hundred years for the Messiah to come, maybe we can wait a bit longer too?

*What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our griefs and pains to bear.
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer.
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear.
All because we do not carry,
Everything to God in prayer!*

Day Twenty-Two
KEEP CHRIST IN CHRISTMAS
Genesis 11:1-9

You've seen the signs, "*Keep Christ in Christmas*" and the other one, "*Jesus is the reason for the season.*"

Why are these signs necessary? The world culture has secularized Christmas. Now we're expected to say, "Happy Holidays" and accept schools closing for "Winter Vacation." In many towns and cities manger scenes are banned from the town square.

I'm not advocating a culture war to fight the Helots and Grinches trying to steal "our" Christmas. I am suggesting it would be more productive if we gently redirect the focus of our frustration back onto ourselves. Ask yourself, am I putting Christ at the center of my Christmas? Not Christmas Day but the mystery of the incarnation, God becoming flesh to live among us.?

The story of The Tower of Babel makes compelling Advent reading. The people of the earth conspired together to make a name for themselves. They built a sky scrapper reaching into the heavens. Theirs would be a society free from God's restraints.

Like Adam and Eve before them, these people were out to get out from under God's authority. So, to keep them from moving forward with their ill-advised plans, God thwarted them by turning their speech into gibberish and scattering them across the face of the earth.

Today, we're just as scattered and babbling as ever. Unless challenged by people of good will, the world system, bolstered by the lights of perverted science, could build what Aldous Huxley called, *A Brave New World*. In this world, God is discarded like a useless pile of eight track tapes. Like Adam and Eve, everyone is determined to become their own gods, moving higgledy-piggledly at breakneck speed for who knows why and to who knows where.

These final days of Advent can be a time of reordering our priorities by taking a bold moral inventory of the various ways we spend our time and energy. By doing this we often find there's more than enough time and energy to set aside our gadgets and redirect more of our attention towards Christ and his kingdom.

Another suggestion, make it a priority to gather together in Christian worship and fellowship to encourage each other to resist any brave new world having nothing to offer but grief, despair, fears and fret.

*By thine own eternal spirit,
Rule in all our hearts alone.
By thine own sufficient merit,
Raise us to thy glorious throne.*

MAGNIFY THE LORD

Luke 1:39-56

Less than a week until Christmas. Lots yet to do. Can you get it all done? You always do. Just under the wire. All the cards get sent, the cookies baked, the presents wrapped. So why do you feel frazzled and empty? Maybe it's time again to set aside all the busy work and refocus on God 's Christmas presence.

Let's return to the gospel stories of Christ's birth. Today, we again encounter Mary and her spontaneous song of praise we call, The Magnificat. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Mary praised God for choosing her, above all women, to bear the Christ child. God set Mary apart and despite the danger, Mary was prepared to embrace her calling.

Carefully reread Mary's song and ask the Holy Spirit to help you sing along with her, share Mary's joy and then realize you've got your own song to sing. You may not think it, but think again. You are a child of God and a disciple of Christ. You have your own story to tell and celebrate. Still think not? Think again. Don't underestimate yourself or the Holy Spirit's influence on your life.

The Holy Spirit stiffens your will to gladly surrender your goals and desires, even your rights and privileges at the foot of the cross. It's no longer what you want. Now, it's what God wants

from you.

And what does God want from you? Your love. God wants you to fall and stay in love with the child who grew up to be Jesus of Nazareth, God' agent of creation and reconciliation, your Lord and your God.

Mary had no crystal ball. She had no idea what the future would bring. But she did know the reality of the present moment.

Likewise, God comes to you in the present moment to comfort, inspire, rule, and guide you into your future. And as Mary had no fear, you have no need to fear. Why? Because God is already in the future waiting for you with the promise, you never walk alone.

*The angel Gabriel from heaven came
His wings as drifted snow his eyes as flame
All Hail!" he said, "O lowly Maiden Mary,"
Most highly favored lady, Gloria!*

*"For a blessed mother you shall be, All
Generations praises continually,
Your son shall be Emmanuel by seers foretold."
Most highly favored lady, Gloria!*

Day Twenty-Four
DELIVERANCE AND LIBERATION
Isaiah 61:1-11

This Old Testament prophecy is probably familiar because it's quoted in Luke's gospel. Jesus began his ministry in his home town synagogue by reading from Isaiah before saying, "**Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.**"

Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit to be God's Messiah (*the "Anointed One."*) to bring good news, freedom, healing and liberty to dispirited, broken people. His incarnation was a sign of God's active presence bringing peace and reconciliation to the world God loves.

Isaiah's prophecy is actually the Messiah's job description. But the Nazarenes took umbrage when Jesus seemed to be implying this was his job description. You can almost hear them grouching, "How dare he come back here and preach at us!"

You may be wondering, what was their problem, why so mean and nasty? Here's one explanation. Familiarity breeds contempt. These people watched Jesus grow up, some of them even played with Jesus when they were kids. Maybe some of them knew about the scandal surrounding Mary's inconvenient pregnancy that was only averted because Joseph took pity and forgave her. From their twisted perspective Jesus was no better, even less better than anyone else in Nazareth.

Being a prophet, Jesus knew that prophets were

rarely accepted in their hometowns. So, he left Nazareth, never to return again.

Sometimes we realize nothing we can do or say will placate hard headed antagonists who've already made up their minds to reject anything we have to say. Jesus warned his disciples there'd be people fighting them even before they opened their mouths. "So, what should we do?" they asked Jesus. He answered, ... **"knock the dust off your feet as a warning and go elsewhere."** Don't argue, just leave and go where you're wanted. *However*, never stop praying or caring for these people. And as far as any judgement is concerned, that's way above our pay scale and better left in God's hands.

Having reflected on the negative, let's accentuate the positive. Jesus came to liberate sinners. Whatever we have done or failed to do need not remain a stain on our permanent records. Remember, Christ was born for this: to bring good news, release captives, recovery of sight and smashing any form of oppression that crushes the human spirit. Through Christ, life begins all over again.

*Good Christian Friends rejoice
With heart and soul and voice;
Now ye hear of endless bliss;
Jesus Christ was born for this!
He hath opened heaven's door
And we are blessed for ever more.
Christ was born for this!
Christ was born for this!*

Day Twenty-five
THE CHRISTMAS STORY PART 1
Matthew 2:1-12

As Christmas Day draws near, let's explore three variations on the same theme of Christ's birth. Each theme reveals the incarnation from three different perspectives.

Matthew's gospel is all about linking Christ's birth to the prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures. Writing his gospel for a Jewish-Christian community, it was necessary to negate the Pharisees and Sadducees' accusations that Jesus was a renegade and a heretic.

Read the opening verses of Matthew's gospel and you catch something we usually skip over, Jesus' genealogy. Matthew traced Jesus' ancestors back forty-three generations to Abraham. In this long list you discover familiar names, like Isaac, Jacob, Ruth, Jesse, David, Solomon, all the kings of Judah and finally Joseph and Mary, Jesus' parents.

This list is Matthew's exhibit "A" reaffirming Jesus as being everything Jesus' disciples and apostles claimed him to be, the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, the Christ, the son of the living God. And unlike Luke, Matthew reinforces these claims without referencing, "**no room at the inn,**" or "**shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night.**"

Instead, Mathew highlights the wise men

from the east bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, to fortify the claim that Jesus is David's greatest son raised up from obscurity to reign as God's prophet, priest and king over Israel.

This is much more than just a charming story. Even though you've heard these birth narratives a thousand times, read them again, slowly and intentionally. Use your imagination and enter into these stories. Ask yourself, if you were Herod, what would you be afraid of? If you were the innkeeper, how would feel if you turned away a pregnant woman in dire straits? If you were a wise man, how amazed would you be when you found who you were looking for?

Using your God-given imagination lifts these stories from the printed page into your heart. These aren't isolated events from the distant past. It happens all over again, every time the mystery of the incarnation encounters any latter day shepherds, wise men, Herods and innkeepers who just might be you and me. So, hope and pray that our response to the Christ Child will always be generous and sincere.

*What can I give him poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give him:
Give my heart.*

Day Twenty-Six
THE CHRISTMAS STORY Part II
Luke 2:1-20

Two days before Christmas. There's still time to seriously ponder the impact Christ has had on you and the world. We've already seen how Matthew revealed Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. So does Luke, but with a different twist. While Matthew portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, Luke emphasizes Jesus as the savior of all the people of the world, especially the poor and the lost.

Like Matthew, Luke also has a genealogy. Many of the same names appear, some are different, some left out. The one big difference is "**...Adam, son of God.**" By including Adam, Luke expands Jesus genealogy to cover not only the Jews but the entire human family.

Another theme in Luke's Christmas story is the special place the poor have in God's heart. Note that Luke doesn't focus on Jesus being the heir of the Royal House of David, by using the wise men's search for the newborn king and Herod's menacing plots, to make the connection.

Instead, Luke tells the story of a young couple uprooted from their home on the whim of an emperor. This decree allowed Joseph to be registered in his hometown, thus fulfilling the

prophesy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Luke also draws our attention to the shepherds, (*representing the common folk back living what Thoreau would later call, "lives of quiet desperation"*) singled out to be the very first to hear and then share the good news that God's love came down at Christmas.

As you read this, are you able to find common ground with anyone back then, rich or poor, living in quiet desperation?

Whether you're standing on top of the heap or being crushed it, ranked high or low or somewhere in between on the social scale, feeling good about yourself or beating yourself up for being a failure, come to the stable. Gaze into the manger until you recognize the child in the manger born to lift you above your darkness and distress and into the light and peace of God's presence.

May the Holy Spirit lift you up as you ponder and treasure his birth in your heart. Then, return to your daily routines and challenges by glorifying and praising God for all you have seen and heard, as it has been told you.

*And our eyes at last shall see him
Through his own redeeming love
For that child so dear and gentle
Is our Lord in heaven above
And he leads his children on
To the place where he is gone*

Day Twenty-Seven
CHRISTMAS STORY PART III
John 1:1-18

Unlike the Greek and Roman myths surrounding the births of pagan gods and goddesses, Matthew and Luke's Christmas stories are set in a precise context by naming historical personalities and actual geographical locations, thereby giving us a sense of time and place.

Knowing the stories of Jesus' birth were already documented by Matthew and Luke, John was free to tell his Christmas story from a totally different perspective, through the lens of cosmic dimensions.

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things came into being through him."

The first of these Advent meditations began with, **"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth ..."** God spoke and begot the cosmos from the chaos.

Now John reveals, **"...the Word was with God and the Word was God."** God in Christ and Christ in God, one in the same yet separate from each other. Welcome to the mystery of God!

Try as you might, you'll never comprehend any of these sacred mysteries. But don't worry. It's not a requirement.

"And the word became flesh and lived among us...and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son."

The Word became flesh, God became a human being. God opened a hidden door and stepped out from eternity to enter our time and space. This mystery is the essence of Christmas.

Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. Your long journey to Bethlehem is almost over. What we call the rest of your journey is about to begin. What you learned on your journey thus far prepared you to go on, sometimes through deep, dark valleys, other times to the bright, lit uplands.

Wherever you find yourself, be assured, you will never walk alone. You are forever surrounded by the communion of saints walking beside you on earth and that great cloud of witnesses looking down on you from the highest heavens. And at the center is Jesus, holding us together while leading us to that place where he is gone.

Merry Christmas and may God bless us everyone!!

*Silent night, holy night,
All is calm, all is bright.
Round yon virgin mother and child,
Holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

A PRAYER FOR CHRISTMAS EVE

Father of creation, humanity and our Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for the invitation to take this Advent journey. You blessed and sanctified my time. You challenged me to grow in faith and practice. You guided and lighted the way through these days of preparation. I pray I'm ready to meet the child of Bethlehem.

I know you will continue to teach me to trust in the unseen and acknowledge, savor and celebrate your mysteries while I wait for Christ to come again when I least expect it.

I realize I still have much more to learn. Bless and keep me during the hard times when it seems I'm living in your absence. Equip me to patiently wait for you as for long as it takes.

As I approach your manger to bring the gift of myself, give me the courage to leave my gift in your hands. Also bless me with the wisdom to not, whenever tempted, turn my back to you. Purge my soul of baseless anxieties when I fear giving myself away will leave me with nothing left over for myself. Instead, as Christ emptied himself of his power to make love possible, help me follow his example of self-giving so that I may be a Christ-like presence for my neighbor.

Lord God, on this silent, holy night, when your children listen to hear the glad tidings of

great joy for all the people, I recommit myself to Christ and his kingdom. To insure my pledge, bless me with the same mind that was in Christ Jesus so that my being and doing reflects the way he lived and served.

Finally, my Lord, keep me and my loved ones, my friends and my neighbors bonded and secure under your sovereign love, grace and protection. May we continue to grow in faith and stature and in favor with you and all people, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Joy to the world the Lord is come
Let earth receive her king
Let every heart prepare him room
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven and heaven and nature sing*

*He rules the world with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove,
The glories of his righteousness,
And wonders of his love
And wonders of his love
And wonders, wonders of his love!*