



PREPARING ROOM

Twenty-five Reflections on the
Arrival of Jesus for Everyday Life

BRAD WATSON

Copyright © 2019 By Saturate

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Requests for permission should be addressed to the publisher.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV Bible, copyright 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

Design | Sunee Hillyer

Editing | Brooke Turbyfill.

Saturate

1100 Bellevue Way NE
Suite 8A, #224
Bellevue, WA 98004

www.saturatetheworld.com

MERRY CHRISTMAS

Hello Saturate Member,

Your partnership in the gospel is a treasure to us. It's an honor to imagine the small role we get to play in your discipleship and your journey of making disciples in everyday life.

As an expression of our thankfulness for you, we want to share this devotional on the arrival of Jesus. We believe Jesus came into our world, and as the Father sent the Son, so the Son sends us (John 17). Advent reminds us of both the hope we've already received and the hope we long for. Advent also challenges us to both celebrate the incarnation and live incarnationally as the body of Christ.

We're excited to give this to you. We pray this devotional guides you into the company of Jesus during this Advent season, and that as you encounter Him in the stable, you will also encounter Him in your neighborhood, at your work, and with friends.

Jesus is Better, His Church is More, and His Mission is Everyday.

The Saturate Team,

Ben, Jessica, Sara, Brad, Duke, Sunee, Jeff, Robin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Day One Preparing for Advent	1
Day Two Why Did Jesus Have to Come?	3
Day Three The True Story of Hope	6
Day Four Jesus Came into the World	10
Day Five Life from a Stump	13
Day Six Responding to the King's Arrival	17
Day Seven A Humble Baby?	21
Day Eight Mourning with Hope in a Tragic World	24
Day Nine What is Peace on Earth?	27
Day Ten A Child and Big Government	31
Day Eleven How the Long Expected Jesus Came	35
Day Twelve The Kingdom that Divides	39
Day Thirteen We've Been Brought Near	42
Day Fourteen Healing of the Nations	45
Day Fifteen When the Soul Feels Its Worth	48
Day Sixteen The Meaning of Joy	51
Day Seventeen Joy to the World, Good News!	56
Day Eighteen So Go Tell It on the Mountain	60
Day Nineteen Emmanuel	63
Day Twenty The True Light	66
Day Twenty-One Future Victory and Present Joy	69
Day Twenty-Two Loved from the Beginning	72
Day Twenty-Three Lasting Redeeming Love	75
Day Twenty-Four Gospel Feast	80
Day Twenty-Five Arrival of Enough	84

PREPARING FOR ADVENT

Day One

Christmas Tree Hunting

In the early days of Advent, my family drives out to the Beck family farm to cut down a Christmas tree. Our only rule is it must be shorter than "Mom" so it will fit in our house. This rule is always disappointing, especially as you walk around towering, beautiful trees. Instead of those giants, we pick a tree that only slightly dwarfs Charlie Brown's. And yet, once we bring the tree into our house, we realize it's too big. There isn't room. We have to move furniture, change our seating arrangements, and move lamps out of the living room. It inconveniences everything. It disrupts our feng shui.

Our children clamor to decorate it as fast as possible, placing all the ornaments on the bottom half of our tree. The whole, lovely experience involves getting muddy, dirtying our car, moving furniture, pulling boxes out of the basement, and attempts at teaching a five-year-old the aesthetic of a balanced Christmas tree.

This is one of my favorite moments. It's the moment we prepare room in our house for the Christmas season. It's the moment we make our house ready for the ongoing celebration that is full of expectation of God's arrival. This physical discipline and family moment is an outward expression of what takes place within us.

You are a Disciple and Worshipper of God

Advent is a fresh invitation from God to prepare room in our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies to worship Him. This is the call to worship we hear as we sing "Joy to the World": "Let every heart, prepare him room." This is not merely a missional call toward the world, but it is a call to each other and to ourselves within community.

Many leaders and missional communities forget we are welcomed into a life of enjoying God, knowing His love, and experiencing His presence in our lives. We forget that we *are* God's mission and *on* God's mission. You and your community were created to live the gospel in unity with God. To taste the grace of God through repentance and faith. To worship God through confession. To know the depth of God's love by listening to God. Christopher Friedrich Blumhardt notes the discipline we undertake of preparing room and searching for God's work today...even in the ordinary.

One does not always have to wait for something out of the ordinary. The all-important thing is to keep your eyes on what comes from God and to make way for it to come into being here on the earth. If you always try to be heavily and spiritually minded, you won't understand the everyday work God has for you to do. **But if you embrace what is to come from God, if you live for Christ's coming in practical life, you will learn that divine things can be experienced here and now.**

This requires an intentional focus, just like the welcoming of a Christmas tree into your living room. How will you prepare room in your heart? How will you look for God's presence? How will you turn your ear to hearing His voice?



We forget that
we *are* God's
mission and
on God's mission.

WHY DID JESUS HAVE TO COME?

Day Two

Christmas is a magical time for kids as they see the glow of lights, trees in the home, and packages accumulate. It's also the season when we get to regularly articulate the meaning and nature of God coming to us to save us. This, to my four-year-old, is the most astonishing of questions: "Why did God have to come, anyway?"

Why Did God have to Come?

He came to deal with sin for the sake of resurrecting our lives from the dead. The nativity narrative makes major claims that cannot be ignored; the world is not right—we are not right. Cornelius Plantinga writes this well in his breviary of sin, *Not The Way it's Supposed to Be*. "Our world has been vandalized by sin. We've perverted, polluted, and disintegrated God's shalom and our shalom." All that God intended in this world, shalom, has been marred by human sin. The consequences are devastatingly final: death.

See, the meaning of the season is not only Jesus' birth, but the purpose for His birth. The manger is not the setting of a peaceful and gentle gift from God to a cozy world. The cradle is occupied by Christ because our world is at odds with Christ. The birth of Jesus ought to shock us as much as the flood of Noah. God has entered the world to see it judged, reconciled, and saved. When the angels sing, "Joy to the Lord, the Savior's come," they are saying, "The world is in need of a Savior!" We are in need of judgment for sin, reconciliation for the effect of sin, and salvation from the result of sin. Christ's first coming is the introduction to His great passion for the world. It's the beginning of His death and resurrection. Jesus was born on death row for our sake.

Why Did God Choose to Come?

The last deeply spiritual question children ask in their curiosity is this: Why? Why did God choose to come? Jesus offers the Church today the full meaning of the Christmas season through the often forgotten Christmas verse: *"God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only son."* John 3:16

This is our family's verse during Advent. Each month, thanks to Mirela's intentional motherly eye, we try to memorize a verse while we eat dinner. We're able to work on the verse about 50% of the time (the rest of the time is filled with spills, screams, and lots of loud singing from our three kids—many of our meals feel like they're straight out of the garbage crushing scene in *Star Wars*). We aren't heroes, and honestly, we're pretty great parents even when we don't do the Bible verse. Back to our Bible verse for Advent, John 3:16. While John 3:16a feels cliché because of our over familiarity, it's far from trite. It's history-shattering truth.

Our children have successfully memorized the first half, and this alone is hard to grasp. God exists. God loves. He loves the world. The world is the object of God's love. In John's writing, "the world" speaks to forces, powers, attitudes, and beliefs that are in complete opposition to God and His ways. This verse says the Creator of the universe loves the world opposed to Him. That's not all; God loves the world so much. God loved the world lavishly, overwhelmingly, or

A misty landscape with bare trees and a path. The scene is captured in a soft, hazy light, with a path leading through a field of dry grass and small, leafless trees. The sky is overcast, and the overall mood is quiet and contemplative. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image, with a red vertical bar behind the reference text.

1 John 3:1a

See what kind of love the Father
has given to us, that
we should be called children of
God; and so we are.

wastefully. I told my children to remember how Will Farrel's *Elf* pours generous, overflowing amounts of syrup on each meal. This is how God pours His love out to the world.

The second half of this verse explains Christmas. God gave. He wasn't under compulsion by legal requirements or drama. He freely and lovingly gave His Son. The gift of the Child of Bethlehem is the tangible love of God into a world that didn't deserve to receive such a gift.

Our two-year-old always stresses SO MUCH. It's part shout and part laugh. Her reciting the verse is 100 percent joy. Even in her youth, she has captured only a sliver of God's truth and it's enough for joy. The joy-inducing truth is that we have received this abundant love of the Father by the Son and through the Spirit.

Who Do We Become Because He Came?

C.S. Lewis wrote this on the miracle of incarnation: "The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God." Later in the New Testament, John writes in 1 John 3:1a: "See what kind of love the father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." Through the only Son, we become sons. God's love and the resulting gift of His Son transfers us from children of wrath to children of God. Now this, this changes much. No longer are we orphans, tossed to and fro by the circumstances of this world, surviving by sheer labor and self-protection, no... Now we're His children. We're called His children, and we are His children. Why does Christmas have to happen? Because He loves you to the depths of death and the heights of heaven.

Christmas is not all swaddling cloths. It's also about a cross. It's about an empty tomb. It's about the Father's love to redeem and restore everything. More on that in the next installment, but before then, just sit under the truth of Christ. **Jesus' arrival on earth is the Father's whisper: You are lavishly loved. More importantly, the world is lavishly loved.** This is hope. The Christ Child has made you a child of God.

THE TRUE STORY OF HOPE

Day Three

On a December morning in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012, children and teachers were likely gearing up for a day filled with glueing cotton balls onto Santa beards when a 20-year-old man came into the school shooting and killing 20 children between the ages of six and seven. Six adults were also killed. There should be a bigger and weightier word than "tragedy," but I can't find one.

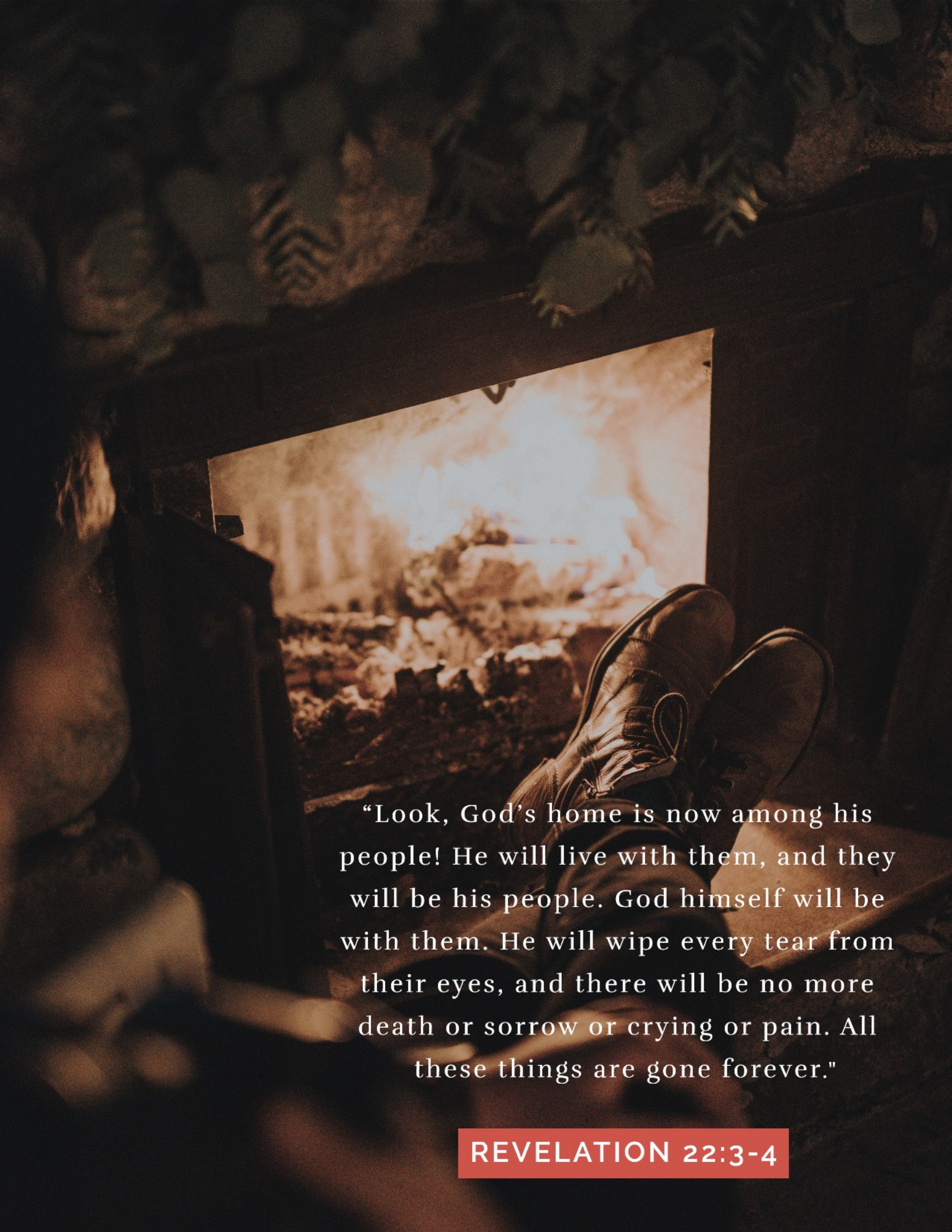
In the days, and even years, following the murder and death of 27 humans, we focused on mental health: How has the human brain and emotions gotten so perverted? We also focused on guns: How did humanity create such efficient, cold, and callous tools for death? I remember talking about safety: Why can't we protect our youngest? What happened was death. It was evil. It was sin. And while for many of us in America it was a shock to our system, this was also just another news story in the grand scheme of genocide, greed, war, abuse, assault, murder, and terror. This is our world. One of the reasons I love the Bible is not just its beauty and purpose, but also its realism; the story of the world is not right. The reason I've given so much of my life to reading the Bible is because it also offers the story of what will make the world right, new, and beautiful. **Strangely, Advent takes us into both the broken and the hope.**

The Story of Advent

One of the best Advent passages is found in Genesis 15:1-6. There's a great one in Deuteronomy 18:15-19, and still another inspiring one in Psalm 89:1-4. But, before we get into those, let's go to the very first reference, Genesis 2:1-3:15, and work our way back.

Genesis 2 is the arrival of humans into the world. What a thought. The beginning of humanity. Genesis 2 describes the perfect garden for humans to thrive. There are rivers and trees and animals. And God (like a potter) forms man, breathing into the nostrils, life. Imagine that! God, so close to creation, that He put His breath into man and that breath creates life. Humanity doesn't exist apart from God's intimate presence and generosity. God walks with Adam in the cool of the day, in rest and in labor. Then He creates for Adam human relationship. Human companionship. When Adam sees Eve, he says: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." Believe it or not, this the beginning of the Advent Story.

Next, Adam and Eve rebel against the living God who breathed life into them. The Maker and Sustainer of their entire universe. The serpent came and asked, "Did God really say if you eat it you will become like God? He doesn't want that." Then, eating the fruit of the "Knowledge of Good and Evil," they knew shame, hiding, and guilt. But, God comes to them. He calls to them. He asks for them. This is the second act of Advent; God came to humanity (even in the early pages of this story) seeking the ones He loved. He also comes explaining justice: The brokenness of shame, guilt, and striving to be God will result in catastrophic relationships, work, birth, environment, futility, and separation from the source of Life. In this second act, God seeks the people He formed to be His image and declares the reality of rebellion away from Him: a life of death. He informs them of a different world, a world we inhabit today.



“Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”

REVELATION 22:3-4

But in the midst of that curse, God gives a promise: a Child or Seed from Eve will oppose and do battle with Evil—with the Serpent. The Serpent will be destroyed, but it will cost the life of this Heir of Adam and Eve. But this cost brings with it an even greater value: the promise of redemption and restoration. This is the third act of Advent: Promise. Hope. This is the one we often inhabit, of God's plan to re-create the world. God's promise to send a Savior.

There are many promises. In Genesis 15, God promises to create a family that will bless the whole world and that the heir to Abraham will be a blessing. "Blessing" here isn't a little gift; it's a making right. Hope from a Child. Hope from a Family. In Deuteronomy 18, this promise expands to a prophet who will speak truth and life. A Son, a Family, a Prophet. In Psalm 18, and in so many other places, God promises a King who will sit on the throne and make all things new. He will reign and there will be redemption. God promises to send rescue and to send blessing.

Just as God pursued Adam and Eve in the garden as soon as they sinned, God pursues humanity in the midst of our sin in Jesus. His birth is the culmination of promise. A Child. A Son. A Family. A King. This is the forth act.

Jesus' life is filled with battling the curse of sin and evil itself. He battles with words. He battles with stories. He battles with actions. He battles with friendships. Ultimately, He battles it with death—His own. Bruised to the point of death. But Jesus isn't a martyr. He's a King—the King. Pulling back centuries of the curse, Jesus is raised from the dead by the power of the Spirit. He crushes sin, death, and evil. Sparking a revolution that none can be compared to, God breathed closely and intimately into the souls of men and women, raising us from the dead. He conquered the shame of the garden. The evil of the world. Those who were far off have been brought close. Advent: redemption has arrived.

Act five. Just as God sent the promise, He sends the Church. He sends His newly formed family of adopted sons and daughters into the world by the power of God. In darkness, we find opportunity for light. In evil, we see calling to push back. In sin, we see the power of God to redeem all things. This is our moment in the Story. Christ has arrived. He has redeemed and we are the people of redemption. We are a people who know hope in a world incomplete.

But the Story isn't over. One day, all things will be restored. All of heaven will come to earth. The end of the Story, act six, is restoration. Hope complete.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true." And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children. - Revelation 21:1-7

Then later, there's this description:

Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.

No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. And they will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads. And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever.

Then the angel said to me, "Everything you have heard and seen is trustworthy and true. The Lord God, who inspires his prophets, has sent his angel to tell his servants what will happen soon." Revelation 22:1-6

This is the story of Advent, of hope's arrival in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and the arrival of hope in His arrival that is to come. And we, who live in this true story of the whole world, get to make this declaration along with the Holy Spirit to all those around us from Revelation 22:17b: "Come. And let the one who is the thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price." We declare hope. We invite people into the redemption and restoration of Advent. All the while, we echo this classic refrain for this season. We say it in every aspect of life: "Come, Lord Jesus!" Revelation 22:20.

The Story acknowledges and battles the horror of our world. It also offers the most hope. How can you— how can we —be people of the mission of God in declaring the Hope that has come and the Hope that is to come?

JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD

Day Four


"Jesus came into Galilee" is offered as hope, the first hope. After centuries of silence, of struggle, and continued sin, the resignation of the people was, "No one is coming." And yet, Jesus came into Galilee. "No-one-is-coming" is over, replaced forever with, "Jesus came." These words cannot be ignored. In fact, the whole of the Christian faith is bound by these words. Rescue has come. Jesus came into Galilee and His arrival itself was good news. A man named Jesus, which means Savior from the sins of the world, walked into the real world. Willingly came. Joyfully Entered. Arrived. Savior. Incarnation.

Incarnation is the first miracle of the gospel. It isn't the turning of water into wine, the cleansing of lepers, or, for our more tightly wound friends, the preaching with authority. No, all those things are symptoms of this inciting miracle of God taking on flesh and living among us. The Apostle Paul writes saying the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Him. John says that He was the message and the message took on flesh. Luke tells us of shepherds while Matthew speaks of wise men. Mark, in almost Hemingway minimalism says, "Jesus came into Galilee." God arrives with a body, with a hometown, with a voice, and with a name.

What's in a Name?

A whiteboard came into our living room as the decision-maker, the name-maker. With friends and family, it guided us through the work of "educated" people. Brainstorming led us to the name of our first child, Norah Rocha Watson. Norah, a Celtic name meaning ray of light and compassion, acknowledged my spiritual mentorship, albeit through books, under St. Patrick. Rocha and Watson, rooted this new child in her family and union of marriage from her mother and me. Maitê Rocha Watson's name arrived from the power of God's grace and love poured into our marriage through a year of marriage counseling. Maitê means beloved and when we say her name, we're reminded that we are the beloved children of God. Our last child, a boy, received the name Truman Salvador Watson. When we say his name, we pray he will grow up into a true man of God, finding his masculinity as son of God. Salvador is the city that buried his grandmother. We also named him that to remind us and him of the Savior. In Jesus, salvation has a name. There's no more out-of-place name in our world today than Jesus. While "God" is as stylish as ever, gracing the platforms of political speeches, patriotic songs, and the thank you's of award ceremonies, the particularity of God with a name is confrontational. Outside the confines of church buildings and community groups, His name sounds forced, confrontational, and even simplistic. But, there's a lot in a name. Jesus, we learn and see in Matthew's gospel, wasn't plucked out of a baby name book, summoned from Joseph or Mary's family trees, or a result of a brainstorm. He shall be called Jesus, the Lord will save His people from their sin.

His name is out of fashion because it, in part, makes a claim our minds find hard to digest: we have a problem with sin and we need saving. His name disrupts our understanding of self-fulfillment and self-sufficiency.



Colossians 1:9

For in him all the fullness
of God was pleased to dwell.

Cornelius Plantinga writes this well in his breviary of sin, *Not The Way it's Supposed to Be*. "Our world has been vandalized by sin. We've perverted, polluted, and disintegrated God's shalom and our shalom." Sin is a perversion of humanity. Every sin committed twists your soul and the soul of others. Short words, middle fingers, constant consumption, jealousy, greed, and selfishness all pervert the souls of men and women. Furthermore, sin pollutes. Sin is an oil-spill on the Great Barrier Reef of humanity.

All that God intended of the world, shalom, has been marred by human sin.

Christianity's Problem of Sin

While the term "sin" continues to vanish from our vernacular, its presence cannot be exaggerated or ignored. GK Chesterton famously said, "Sin is the only doctrine that we can definitively prove. All we have to do is look around, the evidence is everywhere." Sin is the perversion of peace through the rebellion of humanity against God and others. Humanity exists to reflect the character, creativity, and compassion of God, and yet, our thoughts, relationships, actions, work, economics, and politics rarely align with His justice, mercy, and compassion. We can literally see it everywhere, at our dinner tables, at our workplaces, in our schools, and on the news. By the time you are two years old, you are already well acquainted with sin. You've tasted the darkness of humanity. However, it doesn't simply exist "out there," being done to us; it exists within us. We're familiar with the internal rage when we don't get what we want, the manipulation, lying, stealing, cheating, lusting, abusing, and using of others for our own comfort—even the ones we claim to love.

The opening five books of the Bible make humanity's purpose clear: trusting God's goodness and obeying Him as God. However, we honor and worship the created things instead of the Creator. We make our own way in this world. Sin leaves us isolated from God and others as we grapple with wounds caused by others and the wounds we inflicted. While we might attempt to mask our shame, it reveals pride. While we run from our guilt, it seeps out in self-made attempts to solve what's broken within us—sin. Sin is why we find ourselves lying alone on the kitchen floor, abused and abuser, shouting for rescue.

Jesus is a name with purpose: He will save us from sin. Praise His Name, His name of Hope. How will you prepare room for His name in your life?

LIFE FROM A STUMP


Day Five

As I mentioned previously, our family always cuts down a Christmas tree. Each year, we leave a stump in the ground—something that was once growing is now dead. Stumps in Oregon are a part of life. In fact, Portland was built on the foundation of stumps. Bare hillsides in Oregon, where the forestry department utilizes a strategic plan for deforestation, make for haunting drives as you imagine the density and life that once filled skies and cast long shadows. The stumps whisper the story of life gone by, not the story of life to come. Yet, one prominent image of Advent is the stump.

The stump, where you've been cut down. The stump, where your soul has gone quiet. The stump, where you've been destroyed. The stump is that tangible picture in everyday life that the world is not thriving but decaying. What are the stumps in your daily life? What are those visible images of sin, death, and evil?

Isaiah 11:1-10 says, get ready for the fruitful branch that will come from the stump:

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—
and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.*



There shall come forth a
shoot from the stump of
Jesse, and a branch from
his roots shall bear fruit.

ISAIAH 11:1

*The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.
In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will
be glorious.*

Out of death, there's hope and it's a Person. Yes, out of the stump will come a shoot, a frail glimmer of life that will become a branch that will then bear fruit. Then, in verse 2, Isaiah says: Him. The Spirit will rest on Him. From the ground of death will come a Person. A Person who will make things right. He will be wise and judge. He will see. He will decide. He will make peace out of war. Out of the stump will come fruit. When He comes, death will be turned to life. He will rule and be in charge. Finally! There will be someone to care. Not only that.

Isaiah goes on to describe the most bizarre picture of world peace! With the near naïveté of a beauty pageant contestant, Isaiah promises the shoot from the stump will make wolves sleep with lambs, calves snuggle with lions. Children leading the parade! Cows and bears together. The hunted and the hunter living at peace. The world no longer at odds.

While this passage speaks a message of great hope and sits in the pantheon of must-quote Christmas passages, I find many Christians bored with it. It doesn't do anything for them. If anything, it doesn't describe a life longed for in Jesus, but a life already received through the power of the holy supermarket, the wisdom of Wall Street, the counsel of consumerism, and knowledge and fear of the *other*.

In fact, I frequently encounter Christians that have little use for the coming Kingdom of God. It unnerves them to imagine this world making way for the world of Jesus. Perhaps you are such a Christian. You, with the help of a few others, have already built a peaceful kingdom. You hope things stay the same. If God wants to add a cherry on top, so be it, especially if it comes in the package you envision. So long as it fits the decorative tastes of your kingdom.

The hope described in the Bible feels like a luxury for the put-together, the self-sufficient, the safe, the secure, and the stable. Hope for the independently secure is like fine jewelry to wear around the house. It's like the orange put in

your stocking on Christmas morning. It's a nice accent piece for an already secure life. Is the hope of Christ's coming like a garnish?

To a person who lives in chaos, who breathes in the atmosphere of injustice, who tarries in the tyranny of trauma, hope is currency. Hope that injustice will become justice. Hope that death will become life. Hope that war will become peace. Hope that wounds will become wholeness. Hope of Christ's coming, for the needy, is the foundation of life.

Isaiah 11:1-10 is that kind of hope. But it isn't generic, blind hope. Its focus is on a King who is coming to bring justice. To make wrong things right. Sick things healthy. Outsiders insiders. Are you longing for hope?

See, your level of expectation and longing for Jesus' Kingdom is *the* barometer of your soul towards God. I'm convinced one of the main reasons we struggle to embrace our identity as missionaries in the church is because we don't think we need the hope we're sharing. We would be fine without the arrival of Jesus. But we aren't. We've covered the stump. We've built our lives on the stump. The truth is we're dead without Him. The things we turn to for comfort and safety don't provide either.

But here is the good news. It's found in verses nine and ten. The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea. In that day, the root shall stand as a sign to all the people, the nations shall come and ask about Him. His resting place will be glorious! It will happen. The earth will be saturated with the knowledge of Jesus. The people of the world will ask about Him. The resting place—His tomb—will be filled with glory. From the stump comes life. Out of death comes resurrection!

Do you need that hope? Is the hope of Jesus' coming a force that invades your entire life, or is He simply an added feature?

RESPONDING TO THE KING'S ARRIVAL

Day Six

*Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God!"
Behold, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young. Isaiah 40:9-11*

When I was a kid, the #1 soccer player in the world was a handsome, Portuguese man named Luis Figo. If you remember him on the soccer field, you're privileged. The way he passed, the way he ran, the way he shot the ball, was poetry. His #7 jersey flew off the racks in my hometown of Lisbon. He played for Real Madrid, the greatest and biggest soccer club in the world. Figo was transcendent.

During spring break, my junior year of high school, I went on a choir tour across Europe in a big touring bus. We made a pit stop off the highway in Madrid on our way home. As me and my friends were buying candy and soda, the transcendent became imminent. Figo was pumping gas like a demigod while his supermodel wife sat in the passenger seat.

Our lives stopped as he came into the shop to pay his bill. Figo, the Portuguese patron saint of the people, was greeted by dozens of high school kids from his hometown. Some of us shouted. Some of us took pictures. Some of us were wearing his jersey and got autographs. Some of us were captivated by awe. We called our parents. We told all of our friends who missed the whole thing because they were asleep on the bus. It was, without exaggeration, the event of my high school years, standing in the same candy aisle as an icon, getting change from the same cashier (maybe our change was the same money he had!), hearing and feeling the energy of his fame, his worth, his power.

“

He will tend his flock like
a shepherd; he will gather
the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his
bosom, and gently lead
those that are with young.

This is how Jesus comes into our world. Isaiah 40:9-11 is the call to receive Him on those terms. *"Behold, the Lord comes!"* The words of great news: *"Behold he comes with might! His arm rules!"* Jesus comes with might. This passage makes it clear; prepare to be afraid.

Now, you might be thinking, "That sounds scary! Jesus doesn't enter the world as a powerful King ready to make judgment and to rule. Doesn't He actually come as a cute baby born in a birth story worthy of the entire blogosphere?"

In the incarnation, God's transcendent power becomes imminent power. The extraordinary receives ordinary swaddling cloths. But don't be fooled. He arrives as King. Jesus isn't born weak, but mighty. The otherness of God doesn't disappear but comes close. He walks into the world—our world. Our mundane tasks are enveloped in His presence. Now, this is fundamental; the glory of Christ's incarnation is good news.

The weight and power of darkness is not too much for Jesus.

The sinister shame of sin is not too much for Jesus.

The powers of this world and all its injustice is not too much for Jesus.

He is the greatest and He will be victorious. His fame is above all others. His worth exceeds them all. His might, judgment, and will overcomes this decaying world. You're right. That's scary. God's transcendent power becomes imminent power.

How do we respond to this incarnation?

1. We Herald the Good News of the King.

Christmas creates missionaries. "Go up, stand up, lift up your voice," Isaiah says. Be strong and bold and tell the cities, "Behold, your God!" We shout the news of a Savior who *can* and who *will* save. We become highway signs pointing to the One who comes. Just as I tripped over myself telling my friends about Figo, we go into the world to tell about Christ's coming. We become heralds, royal announcers, who tell this news well with clarity, strength, but also with tenderness, which leads us to the second response.

2. Curl Up into the Arms of the Shepherd.

"He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young." Isaiah 40:11

This is the mystery of incarnation. God with us means He is mighty, certainly, but also that He is unyielding in His love for us. We become heralds of this news. We also curl up in His arms. The glorious arms that defeat evil, sin, and death are the same that gather us close. This is equally frightening for many of us. Can I trust Him? Can I place myself, my family, my well-being within His care?

In my years trying to live on mission within the context of a community of disciples, I've learned to cling to these truths of the incarnation, that God's concern for me and my soul is central to the gospel I'm proclaiming. When the Scriptures tell us we're to be heralds of the Good News, it's good news for us, too! We proclaim a message that is for us.

Furthermore, Jesus' coming brings awe in both His power and His care. He comes with the power to make the world new and the power to love. The transcendent love of God has become imminent. How do you receive the gospel as you proclaim it? How do you proclaim a gospel you've received?

A HUMBLE BABY?

Day Seven

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
are only a small village among all the people of Judah.*

*Yet a ruler of Israel,
whose origins are in the distant past,
will come from you on my behalf.*

*The people of Israel will be abandoned to their enemies
until the woman in labor gives birth.*


Micah 5:2

Yesterday, we talked about the glorious arrival of God. Here is the mystery of a God who comes in awe and might to conquer all sin, death, and evil in the birth of a baby...born like you and me. Mary experienced the cursed birth pains as she delivered the Son who would set all free from the penalty of sin. Jesus was born like you and me, amidst chaos. In the moments after His birth, He had to be cleaned and swaddled. In the coming days, He had to learn to receive nourishment from His mother through breastfeeding. He had diapers that needed to be changed. He likely fell asleep tied to His parents as they walked home. The One who would walk on water had to learn to walk like the rest of us, stumbling, crawling, and clinging to our father's pinkies. Jesus was a vulnerable, dependent child. The phrase of the angels, *"born this day,"* must alarm the senses when we allow it to sink in—Savior in a swaddle.

One of my favorite authors and the original "ragamuffin," Brennan Manning, in his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, writes this about the mystery and our response:

Pious imagination and nostalgic music rob Christmas of its shock value, while some scholars reduce the crib to a tame theological symbol. But the [humble and needy] at the stable tremble in adoration of the Christ-child and quake at the inbreak of God Almighty. Because all the Santa Clauses and red-nosed reindeer, fifty-foot trees and thundering church bells put together create less pandemonium than the infant Jesus when, instead of remaining a statute in the crib, he comes alive and delivers us over the life that he came to light.

We hope in a Child. We hope a helpless baby can restore all things, even us. God plans with purpose, from centuries past, for this Child to overcome the world.

A collection of Christmas-themed items is scattered on a white, wrinkled cloth. In the top left, several brown envelopes are stacked. To the right, there is a ball of white twine and a small white mug. In the bottom left, two heart-shaped cookies are visible, one decorated with white icing. In the bottom right, a brown envelope is partially visible with the words "Christmas Greetings" written in cursive. In the center, a brown envelope is open, showing a card with the text "Merry Christmas and all the best for a great 2017".

But in your hearts honor Christ
the Lord as holy, always being
prepared to make a defense to
anyone who asks you for a reason
for the hope that is in you; yet do
it with gentleness and respect.

1 PETER 3:15

Do We Reflect Our Savior's Humility and Power in Our Lives?

In Acts 2, we find ordinary people sharing meals in homes while surrounded by *"signs and wonders."* In 1 Timothy, Paul commends us to *"live such quiet and simple lives among the gentiles."* In Peter's eloquent passage on suffering and serving Christ in his first letter, he quickly adds, *"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."*

The incarnation of humble hope in Jesus calls us into a life of humility and hope, too. As Christ came into our world, so should we enter our neighborhoods living ordinary lives with an extraordinary hope. Would your neighbors observe a humble people with a quiet strength? Would they see people marked by the humble and awe-inspiring arrival of the King of glory? Or, which is often the case, would they find frantic Christians coming to and from their house living a busy life at a church building? Does your life demonstrate a Good News which comes in the form of a dependent baby and a mighty King?

MOURNING WITH HOPE IN A TRAGIC WORLD

Day Eight

Christmas can be a time of lights, trees, parties, and decadent food, but it is definitely a season of grief and sadness. For some, it's the grief of a lost childhood; the holidays remind us of all the brokenness our young lives were immersed in. For many, Christmas is a strong reminder of the death of a spouse, parent, or child. Christmas was the last time my wife spoke with her mother.

Throughout these first days, we've looked back at God's faithfulness in fulfilling every promise of hope He gave His children concerning Jesus. The first prophets boldly proclaimed God's coming amidst vast consumerism, greed, and a society that seemed "well off." Then, in later years, prophets declared this hope amidst a broken society, exile, and confusion. As the people grieved the loss of everything, the prophets said things like, *"Prepare the way of the Lord! The Lord will gather his people! The King will come and rule with justice and all will be made right."* The Psalmists also wrote in the same time, however, *"The Lord watches over us!"*

Advent is a moment that pushes us into this odd kind of mourning—a mourning with hope. Grief or mourning described in the Scriptures challenges our notions of grief. It isn't a Hemingway-esq burying of all emotions and denial of pain. It isn't a journey to "getting over it" or moving on. On the other hand, it's not a constant groveling in that pain either. Often, we're prone to make our grief the central thing about ourselves and the central thing about God. We belittle people's attempts to speak words of life, encouragement, or truth. The Scriptures don't tell us how to grieve, but they tell us what we possess in our grief. The Bible tells us of the accompanying presence of hope.

Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14:

And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died.

And then in 1 Peter 1:3-6:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.



The incarnation of God in Jesus guarantees hope as a possession in every trial and at the foot of every grave of every fallen saint. The core of your mourning contains a lasting hope in Christ's arrival, His death, His resurrection, and His return. This hope doesn't expel weeping, often it welcomes it.

When you are informed, as Paul says, of the hope of Christ, or when you've received the inheritance of hope, as Peter describes, you see the world more clearly. You see the fractured marriages, you see the pain of loneliness, the injustice of poverty, the horror of war, and all of creation itself cracking under the weight of pressure of human sin. You see those things, knowing this is not how Jesus intended His world to be. You also see those things and know that, through the sacrifice of Christ's life and in the great wealth of His love, all of this will be made new.

I invite you to spend time reflecting on this question: What hope does this Christ-Child Almighty God bring you? Where do you need that hope? How will you respond when it arrives in the ordinary and the humble?

WHAT IS PEACE ON EARTH?

Day Nine

At the center of the angel's announcement on the first Christmas night is this phrase found in Luke 2:14; it's what Linus quotes at the end of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*: "Glory to God in the Highest, and peace on earth towards men." "Peace on earth" sounds so trite that most of us would rather ignore it. What kind of peace? Whose peace? **And for those that experience the pain of this world in real-time, the promise of peace on earth, even from the voice of angels, seems void on arrival.**

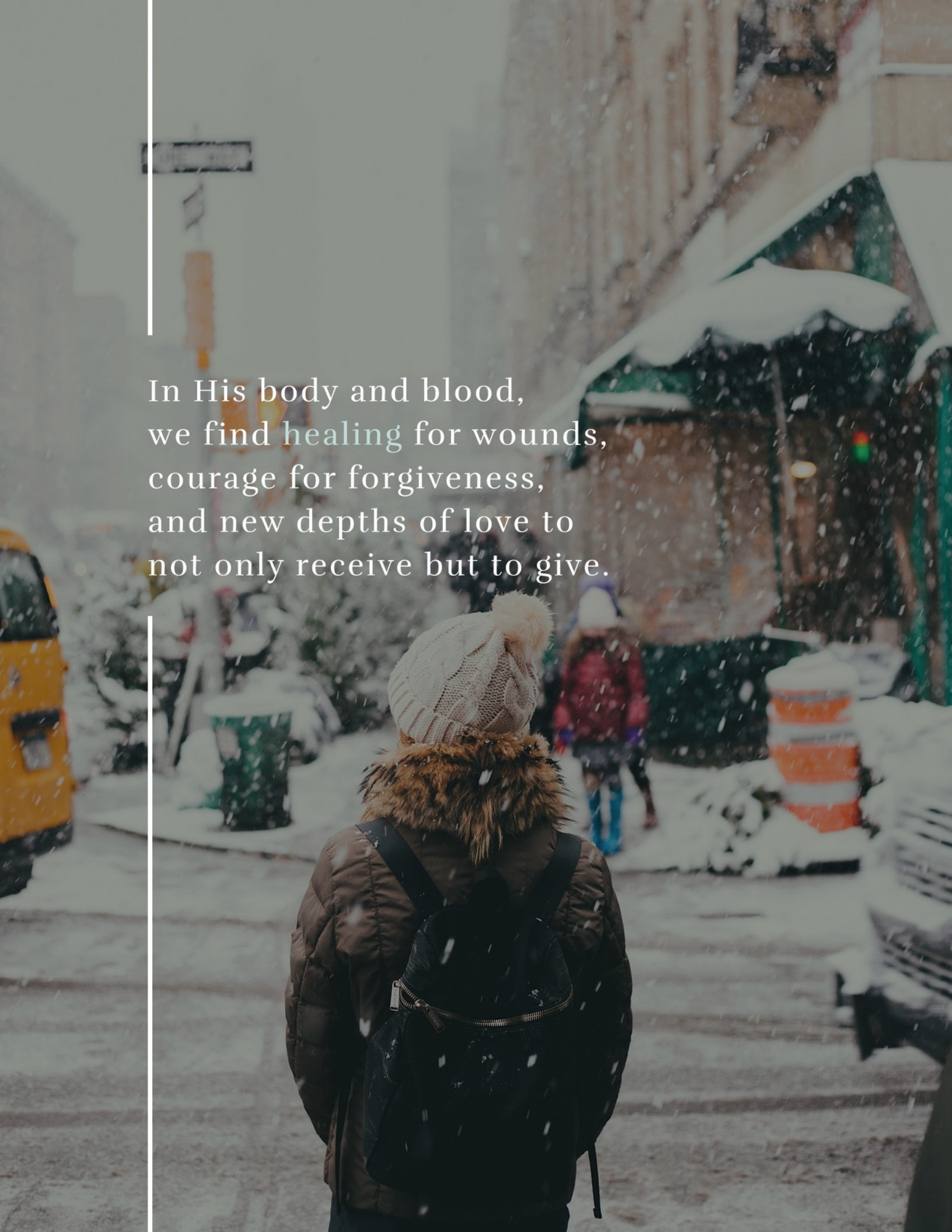
In U2's song, "Peace on Earth," released at the turn of the century, they put words to what I often feel. The lyrics go in part like this:

*Heaven on earth
We need it now
I'm sick of all of this
Hanging around
Sick of sorrow
Sick of pain
Sick of hearing again and again
That there's gonna be
Peace on earth*

*No who's or why's
No-one cries like a mother cries
For peace on earth
She never got to say goodbye
To see the color in his eyes
Now he's in the dirt
Peace on earth*

*They're reading names out over the radio
All the folks the rest of us won't get to know
Sean and Julia, Gareth, Ann and Brenda
Their lives are bigger than any big idea*

Jesus, can you take the time

A person wearing a brown puffer jacket, a black backpack, and a white knit hat with a pom-pom is walking away from the camera on a snowy city street. Snow is falling heavily around them. In the background, there are snow-covered trees, a yellow taxi, and a person in a red coat. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting an overcast day.

In His body and blood,
we find healing for wounds,
courage for forgiveness,
and new depths of love to
not only receive but to give.

*To throw a drowning man a line?
Peace on earth
To tell the ones who hear no sound
Whose sons are living in the ground
Peace on earth
Jesus, in the song you wrote
The words are sticking in my throat
Peace on earth
Hear it every Christmas time
But hope and history won't rhyme
So what's it worth?
This peace on earth*

These questions—What's it worth, and what is this peace on earth?—I believe, are the questions of this cultural moment. **They aren't intellectual; they're visceral.** They're emotional. Does Jesus make a difference on this earth? Does heaven touch earth? Will anything stop peace? Most of my neighbors and friends are, like Bono, tired of hearing about it every Christmas time. Sick of sorrow. Sick of pain. Sick of not knowing what to say to those whose sons are in the ground.

So, what do the angels mean when they sing, "*Glory to God in the Highest and peace on earth to men?*" What is it worth? I think most people answer this question in three ways:

Is Peace an Absence of War?

Peace in this concept is no more war, battle, shooting, weapons. It is a cessation of conflict between nations that creates violence. Essentially, we just all get along. We put our weapons down and cable news channels go out of business. This is found in the Bible throughout the Old Testament. We even read in a previous reflection about the lions eating alongside cows. Elsewhere we hear of weapons for death turned into gardening tools. The nations of the earth ending their wars with one another is *part* of peace on earth. The child born in Bethlehem will bring about an end to wars. But that's not all this peace on earth is worth. Jesus doesn't establish a United Nations, NATO, or a peace won through the principle of mutual annihilation. Honestly, most of us would settle for that value of peace on earth.

Is Peace an Absence of Conflict with Each Other?

Christmas and the internal sentimental demands create the perfect environment, not for peace, but for conflict. Spouses disparage each other's abilities to decorate cookies, presents drain the bank account, and stress grows as you consider the bubbling family disunity that will be on display as you gather at your parents' house. Does the peace on earth the angels announce vanquish the relational unrest? These micro-battles between persons are as self-evident as geopolitical ones. Does the arrival of Jesus throw us a line in redeeming the shame and guilt between

humans that has fermented since that weary day in the garden when Adam and Eve saw themselves as naked and blamed one another? Yes. **Jesus removes the walls of hostility as He bears our shame in His body and blood.** Jesus gathers us from the domain of darkness and places us in the holy communion of saints centered on His rescue. **In His body and blood, we find healing for wounds, courage for forgiveness, and new depths of love to not only receive but to also give.**

Is Peace an Absence of Division Between Us and God?

In the hymn, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," you proclaim this idea: "Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled." Yes. Peace on earth reconciles us to God. No longer are we enemies of God. No longer opposed to Him, but we are made new in Him. No longer slaves. Now we are children of God at peace with our Creator.

But peace is not merely an absence of war, conflict, and division. It's more!

Peace Means Flourishing World and Humanity Under God

What the angels sing about is not just an absence of conflict but the presence of God with humanity in such a way we experience life—abundant, overflowing, rich life. It obviously requires a removal of evil, sin, and conflict. That's the process, not the payoff! God isn't emptying the world of pain when He arrives in a cradle, He's filling the world with His glory and life!

Peace is a Person

Lastly, and this cannot be ignored during Advent, Peace—the shalom of God—is a Person. Jesus' birth means Peace has come to earth. As we'll discuss more in a few days, "*He himself is our peace*," Ephesians 2:14 Jesus' arrival brings peace into the world. Heaven came into a weary world as peace and "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Not only is He our peace, but the incarnation is what brings peace. God and sinners reconciled in Christ, through His body and blood. The incarnation ends wars, creates a community, brings us close to God, and ushers us into a thriving world where God reigns and gets everything He wants.

As we enter this second week of Advent, I invite you to consider, where are you preparing room for Christ and His peace?

A CHILD AND BIG GOVERNMENT

Day Ten

On May 19, 2018, Prince Harry of England married Meghan Markle in Windsor, England. The event was marked by the usual fanfare of such weddings: notable people, extravagant clothing, international media, commentary, vows, a sermon, a bridal veil, and love. There were a few notable or unique things that happened: Meghan walked herself two-thirds of the way down the aisle until her future father-in-law, Prince Charles, walked with her the last third, but by no means "gave her away." Furthermore, Meghan was the first mixed race (being half black and white) to marry into the Royal family. Even more unconventional, she also wasn't of nobility, had been divorced, was an actress, and an American. Even though Harry is quite far from the throne and all of those previously mentioned factors, this wedding became the most-watched royal wedding in history. More people watched this wedding than William and Kate's, and more than his father's wedding to Lady Diana. Most ordinarily, however, it was a wedding.

The morning after, a journalist for an international news magazine wrote an article with this headline: "This Wedding Changes Everything!" The journalist went on to note everything I just mentioned and expound on how the ceremony was transforming international politics, racism, sexism, and even religious strife all in one swoop. Implied is this: elections, education, fame, power, laws, military, Hollywood, or even weddings can heal our broken world.

However, the other headlines from that day in the United States were about the president being subpoenaed, a shooting at a school in Texas, and the falling apart of nuclear talks with North Korea. And yet, a wedding in Windsor had changed everything!

It's understandable to hope in that type of transformation—that variety of world peace. It's a lovely sentiment; the love and union of two highly famous people could change the world. After all, fame facilitates change. Plus, they are two highly educated and talented people, which, in our post-enlightened viewpoint, leads to the greatest types of change. Education, talent, and reason are the beginnings of world change! Add to all these factors ethnic and historical backgrounds, TV ratings, and the wardrobes and it's not hard to exclaim, "This Changes Everything!" Even though we all know it doesn't. The world doesn't work that way. **World peace doesn't arrive that way.**

Fame, education, talent, power, and personality do not solve the world's deep problems of injustice, evil, and war. In fact, we instinctively know this wedding likely won't change a human heart outside the two central figures who exchanged vows and their future children. Here lies the problem: If all the talent, power, fame, and beauty in the world can't defeat the anxiety, depression, anger, and angst within your own heart, how could it transform the world? What can bring it peace?

The promise in the Story of God says, a Child, a Son, and His government or rule. Isaiah 9:2-7 says:

A photograph of a narrow, cobblestone street in Amsterdam during winter. The street is covered in a layer of snow, with a few people walking in the distance. On the right side, there are tall, multi-story brick buildings with many windows. On the left, there are bare trees and a black lamppost. A canal is visible on the far left. The overall atmosphere is quiet and wintry.

The people walking in darkness

have seen a great light;

on those living in the land of

deep darkness a light has dawned.

ISAIAH 9:2

*The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.
You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.
For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.
Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.*

Everything on His Shoulders

Isaiah poetically introduces a Messiah who carries the weight of the world, meaning when Mary held Jesus on the first Christmas, she held the shoulders of Him who would carry the injustice of all humanity. The One who would increase joy. Who would be Light. Who would be victorious over death. Born to reign in this world. Jesus. The Son born able, willing, and purposefully set on bearing the burden of sin, death, and evil. The whole of everything wrong in our culture, politics, cities, is made right through Him and His rule. Through the ruling—or government—of all things rests neatly on His shoulders. He is the prince of peace.

Wherever He reigns, His thriving and flourishing will be there, too! His law is peace. A system transformed! He will uphold it from that time on and forever! The passion of Jesus will accomplish these things. His love for you and me will drive Him to this.

He is the One That Changes Everything

In January 2017, President Barack Obama gave his farewell address in Chicago in front of his loving family, his staff, colleagues, friends, and fans. In this speech, the Nobel Prize-winner, Grammy Award-winner, best-selling author, and leader of the free world who had spoken before the United Nations and commanded the most powerful army in the world said this: "What we desperately need in this country is a change in our hearts." After all the laws fought for, speeches given, fundraisers held, military actions taken, and negotiations won, the "Hope and Change" president looked into the eyes of his country and said, "Nothing will work unless our souls are transformed." **The former president acknowledged our government will not bring peace.** Something else must bring peace. We're just fumbling around in darkness. We need a different type of king. World peace will not be won through our systems. We need a King. We need a Child. We need a Son. We need a Prince. We need a Counselor. **We need light in this present darkness.** We need Jesus, and He changes everything!

HOW THE LONG EXPECTED JESUS CAME

Day Eleven

Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Mark 1:14-15

How does the King come? We know He comes to change the world. We know He was born into our world. But *how* does Jesus come? What is the manner, the posture, the practice of *Jesus'* incarnation? Returning to Mark's description of Jesus' arrival in Mark 1, right after the description that "Jesus came into Galilee," we hear He came "*proclaiming the gospel of God.*"

To the collective of humanity, He comes proclaiming the gospel of God. Jesus doesn't just come; He comes speaking. He comes announcing. In fact, the meaning of this word *proclaiming* gives the sense that this is what He was *saying over and over again*. This is His "stump speech" on the trail of global reconciliation. It's the topic at every meal. It's in His casual conversations. Mark writes that Jesus continued to talk about the gospel of God. What is that?

The word *gospel* simply means "important, heralded news." Perhaps most commonly used as the message shared by messengers (or evangelists) coming from the battlefield to update the villages and towns within the kingdom: "The king has won and defeated the enemy! All is well and the war is over and we can enter peace." A gospel is a newsworthy historical event that must be shared. **Not only is it "breaking news," but it's also news that changes the lives of the people the news is intended for, whether they hear it or not.** If you missed the announcement in the city square, the realities of the announcement still affected you.

Throughout history, there were many gospel proclamations of empire expansion. Each time, the news required a response and brings a change of life, worldview, and reality.

But Jesus doesn't come proclaiming the gospel of Caesar or Alexander the Great. He comes proclaiming the gospel of God. Here, He isn't the messenger that speaks on behalf of a higher power and a distant war. He's not just speaking on behalf of God, as priests and prophets do, He's announcing the arrival of God's victory that transforms the reality of the community He's entering into. **Jesus is proclaiming the news that God has come to us to defeat the kingdoms of sin, death, and evil and bring about his kingdom of grace, resurrection, and justice.**

This is important: Jesus is not making a promise, He's making an announcement with ramifications for everyone. **This announcement proclaims God's character, timing, and His coming to us.** It's good news for us, but it's about God.



THE KINGDOM OF GOD
IS WHERE GOD'S
RULE AND REIGN IS
UNCONTESTED.

The gospel of God declares His glory, fame, love, and actions taken through His character and power. The gospel is not about humanity, our sin, evil, or death. **It's about God and His unrelenting and just love.** The contents: "*The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand.*"

The Time is Fulfilled

The first phrase of the good news about God, in Jesus' ongoing proclaiming, is this: The story has reached its climax. It's not "get ready," it's not "wait and see" because it's here. All human history has been leading to this point. Every prophecy. Every longing heart. Every promise. The time is now. Jesus didn't just arrive to teach us how to live. He didn't come explaining the power of love. Jesus' arrival is the beginning of the renewal and redemption of all things.

The Kingdom of God is at Hand

The kingdom of God has arrived. The kingdom of God is where God's rule and reign is uncontested. The kingdom of God is where every wrong thing becomes right.

The Bible describes, in its opening lines, a world created by God, with God, for God, and for a thriving humanity enjoying the fruit of an incredible Creator who knows His creation and His creation knows Him. All of this is to God's fame and glory. Humans were in love with one another, given purpose, fulfillment, and deep community with one another in addition to unity with God. The cry for rescue is inconceivable in the opening pages of the Bible. But then, everything spirals out of control and from Genesis 3 onward, humanity collectively cries out for rescue, attempts to rescue itself through power and control, or attempts to find comfort at the cost of others.

The perils of humanity and our rescuing need is described in the Bible as liberation from sin, death, and evil. Or, the power of sin, the penalty of sin, and the product of sin. When Jesus says the kingdom of God is at hand, He's describing the rescue mission that begins with His arrival and is reaching into the depths of humanity's greatest challenge. ***The kingdom of God is anywhere His rule and reign exists uncontested.*** His kingdom is the thriving world He created that knows and dwells with Him. The law of His kingdom is hope, peace, grace, and love. All evil is banished and the presence of God reigns.

The refrain of Jesus' constant proclamation is: *That* kingdom reaches into our world. It's as if Jesus reminds us of the often utilized image in the poetry of the Old Testament: "Yahweh's arm is not too short to save!" **In the incarnation, we can see this promise made true as God reaches into our story.**

But also, when Jesus says, "the kingdom of God is at hand," He's noting His presence. The kingdom of God has arrived so closely you can touch it! The peace of God is within arm's reach! The Word of God has become flesh. "*For unto you a child has been born, a savior has been given!*" *Luke 2:11* Peace is not an idea, it's a gift of the good king who has arrived.

Jesus proclaims the gospel of God: He's come to restore what was lost through sin. He's come to *make* a way and *be* the way toward redemption. **On the cross, the hand of the kingdom that is reaching into the world is the hand that was pierced for our sin.** The same hand was given to restore the human heart by reaching into it and dealing with the power of sin. He's announcing the coming defeat of sin and the renewal of humanity. He's announcing the kingdom described in the prophets and the garden described in Genesis. He's announcing the reign of peace.

How does your life proclaim the gospel of God? See, let's not miss the implication of the incarnation of Jesus and our calling to display the gospel. How does the kingdom of peace get extended in our neighborhoods, towns, and cities? **Would those passing us by describe our coming and going as "proclaiming the gospel of God?"** Are we making known the fulfilled time and the good news of God's kingdom?

THE KINGDOM THAT DIVIDES

Day Twelve

Growing up, my family spent each night of the holidays sitting beneath the glow of the Christmas tree and watching Christmas movies. We watched the original *Miracle on 34th Street* and the "new" *Miracle on 34th Street* (which I now realize is 20 years old). We watched the trilogy of *The Santa Claus*. We watched multiple versions of *A Christmas Carol* and romantic comedies that vaguely take place during Christmas like *While You Were Sleeping*. Each movie ends with lovely similarities: kissing, comfort, warm homes, snow, and singing. They end with Christmas as it was meant to be. This, we might imagine, is peace on earth! Shalom!

As we've examined earlier, that's what the angels sang to us, peace on earth, but Jesus also makes some rather confusing claims about how He came. In fact, He says very blatantly in Matthew 10:34-36: *"Don't think I came to bring peace on earth! I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household."*

On first blush, you might notice a few things. One, if Jesus came to get sons and fathers and mothers and daughters and in-laws to be against each other, mission accomplished! Two, Jesus is divisive. **His kingdom doesn't come with perfect snow and hugs gathered around the Christmas tree.** The sword of Jesus' life and existence puts a wedge in the world. But Jesus doesn't stop at that quote. He goes on to say this:

"Whoever loves his father and mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

Family isn't everything. Your parents and your children are not everything. In fact, they aren't worthy of your devotion. Jesus will not allow you to put your hope in your parents' approval. He will not stomach your worship of children, their success, or their presence. He will not settle for a Christmas card. **He demands full devotion.** He demands that you consider what God thinks of you. He is either the greatest gift you could ever receive or He's not with you. Either you give everything you have and make all consideration for His will, purpose, and kingdom, or you haven't really seen it yet. But that's still not the end of the quote. Jesus goes on:

"And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

You must lose your life. You must do the calculus and the cost-benefit analysis with regards to your soul, personality, story, gifts, resources, time, energy, family, and money. **Is Jesus worthy of your life?** In our church, Soma Los Angeles,

A close-up photograph of blue spruce needles, showing their fine, needle-like structure and silvery-blue color. The needles are densely packed and branch out from a central point. The background is dark and out of focus, emphasizing the texture and color of the needles.

MATTHEW 5:9

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called
sons of God.

we often talk about our gospel identity: that we're transformed by the gospel and given a new identity in Christ. What Jesus is describing here is this: Will you give up your identity as a mother, father, daughter, son to make way for your new identity in the gospel as My son, My servant, My ambassador? **Will you surrender your self-made identity around your job, accomplishments, nuclear family, political party, causes, and schedule to make way for an identity marked by the cross of Jesus?**

Jesus doesn't come to bring a false peace where we continue to worship our family's view of our lives. **Jesus came to restore you to the one love, one hope, one Lord.** The arrival of Jesus' peace carries a choice: Is He worthy of everything, or is He worthy of nothing? Is Jesus King over everything, or is He King over nothing?

The Call to Submit All to His Reign!

After Jesus rose from the dead, He gathered His disciples together before He ascended into heaven and He made this declaration in Matthew 28:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

When you gaze at the nativity scene, do you see the King with all authority in heaven and on earth? Do you see His rule and reign of everything below your feet and everything above it? Does He carry more weight than your parents?

How will you answer that call to live your life under His complete authority? To live with Jesus as Lord? To submit your life to *Him*? Warning. If you do submit it all, you will not only experience life, but there will also be many who get angry because you no longer worship them. Even then, you'll be a peacemaker.

In the Beatitudes found in Matthew 5, Jesus says, *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."*

Blessed are those who find and make peace. While adoring and following Jesus creates a wedge in this world, and Jesus' command for full submission ends your life, it actually creates peace. What will Jesus call you to do as your King? Love your neighbor. What will Jesus demand of you? **Find your rest in Him.** What will Jesus command you to do? Forgive others, push back darkness, care for the wounded, welcome the stranger into your life and home, and lead your family to do the same. How blessed are we to call Him Lord, that He would send us into the world pointing to Him—the One who enables the soul to feel its worth. **That is a different kind of peace.**

WE'VE BEEN BROUGHT NEAR

Day Thirteen

We all have a complicated relationship with the Church. It's a ruckus communion of saints. It's for many a place of quarreling, a place of scheming, a place of power, and even for those same people a place of essential family. Our histories are that kind of mixed bag. Church—who we're called to be—is all of us.

The first Christian church service was on Christmas Eve beneath a chorus of angels and surrounded by shepherds who came to see, touch, and behold the Savior. Angels from heaven and shepherds from fields.

As soon as Jesus came into Galilee preaching the good news about God, He began calling disciples. He called fishermen and tax collectors. He called the ordinary and the outsider. He formed the relational and tangible environment of hope, faith, mission, love, and joy we call the Church. **Jesus, even from birth, created a new humanity that wasn't formed by salaries, ethnicity, geography, laws, worthiness, or intelligence.** It's formed by Him. Centered on Him. It's a new humanity. Paul describes this formation of a new humanity in Ephesians 2:14-17:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

He Himself is our Peace

He is Himself our peace. The incarnation of Christ is *our* peace—our very own. Furthermore, in His flesh, He sets aside the commands of tradition and regulations, He tears down the dividing wall between insiders and outsiders, and He removes the hostility. **This new humanity of love is formed through His presence on earth, not in a tablet or temple but in this earth.** It's why communion is such a marvelous marker at Christmas Eve services: In it, we remember the birth of Jesus as a baby, He had a body. He had blood. He had vital organs, a brain, a need for nourishment, He was God with us! **But that baby, with body and blood, born in Bethlehem, would one day be given for you and me.**

It Was His Purpose to Create One Body

And in that reconciliation, we wouldn't be welcomed into a club but into a new humanity, a new family. He did this to create a unified people. A people reconciled to one another through His death. He wasn't just born to set His people free but to make us together His people. **He came preaching the gospel of peace to you and me**—to those who were far off and to those who were pretty close, to the older brothers and to the younger brothers!

A photograph of a city street covered in snow. Cars are parked along both sides of the road, and trees are heavily laden with snow. The street is flanked by brick buildings. The overall scene is a quiet, wintry urban landscape.

For he himself is our peace, who has
made the two groups one and has
destroyed the barrier, the dividing
wall of hostility.

EPHESIANS 2:14

Christ Creates New Community Out of Our Mess

Despite all these tools and ideas, you cannot create a community that bears with each other in love. In fact, I can guarantee there will be awkwardness, empty promises, lies, disappointments, and mini disasters. Despite all of your attempts to clarify the gospel and the implication that we ought to love one another, the people you lead will not. Your community, more often than not, will feel like it is only a few steps away from falling apart.

This disappointment often brings out the hero complex in leaders. As they help shape a community and begin to watch people grow in caring for one another, they may be tempted to wrap up each person's story by themselves. As things go poorly for different members or the whole, they rush to solve things. They force conflict resolution meetings, interventions, and tell people what to do next. When things still go poorly, they blame themselves. **All the while they've lost sight of the Christ who called them to community.** The Savior who forms it. **The God who leads it.**

Other leaders approach this disappointment by looking for new recruits. They look at the chaos of their missional community and conclude, "If only I had some serious radical Christians, this would work. These people just don't get it." In the words of Eugene Peterson: "There are no green beret Christians." While you covet people who "get it," God has given you a few sorry saints to simply love. **Not to control and not to dismiss, but to love the way Jesus loved His disciples.**

Church, don't miss out on the transformative joy of growing in love for your fellow brother or sister. Surrender your ideal of community. When you do, the pressure is off and you find Christ forming His people. **Allow the gospel of peace to transform your community.**

HEALING OF THE NATIONS

Day Fourteen

My favorite Christmas movie is *Joyeux Noel*. It tells the true story of a Christmas Day truce in the trenches of World War I between the Germans, French, and British. The cost of World War I was a lost generation, a horrible war that many hoped would have ended war itself. **But in the midst of this war came a moment of worship and joy across the nations.** On Christmas Eve, 1914, the two sides bent on destroying the other, began singing in their own languages "Silent Night" and "The First Noel." The officers later met in "no man's land" to exchange whiskey and cigars. A British soldier, Private Frederick Heath, recounted the evening this way:


"How could we resist wishing each other a Merry Christmas, even though we might be at each other's throats immediately afterwards? So we kept up a running conversation with the Germans, all the while our hands ready on our rifles. Blood and peace, enmity and fraternity—war's most amazing paradox. The night wore on to dawn—a night made easier by songs from the German trenches, the pipings of piccolos and from our broad lines laughter and Christmas carols. Not a shot was fired."

By dawn, the soldiers found Christmas trees and walked across the barbed wire to celebrate, sing, and worship. They played soccer together. Chaplains and priests of both sides led a unified Christmas service.

I love this movie and true story, because it so tangibly describes our current moment in redemptive history. War still rages while we worship Christ's first coming. Conflict and pain exist while we live as peacemakers. Battles are fought while the church grows up in the love that created it. There are moments when the weapons are put down at the remembrance of Emmanuel. The first Christmas creates peace on earth, that is true. But in Advent we long for the coming peace and Christ's second coming.

The Coming Peace

One day, "The nations will inquire about Jesus and the world will be filled with the knowledge of *him*" Gospel saturation will happen. One day, there will only be plowshares...no spears. Jesus' reign and rule will be uncontested. He will be the ruling prince of peace without enemy. His reign is marked by healing, too. It's the healing of the nations. We've received the love of God in measures we cannot understand and yet there's still more to come. And so, we respond to the Peace of Christmas with a longing for the next, with the understanding that we will find ourselves on battlefields until that day comes.

A warm, rustic Christmas scene. In the background, a Christmas tree is decorated with lights and ornaments. To the left, a wooden table holds various toys, including a nutcracker and a small boat. In the foreground, a wooden crate is filled with wrapped gifts, and a burlap sack lies next to it. A wooden toy train and other small toys are scattered on the floor.

For the earth will be filled
with the knowledge of the
glory of the Lord as
the waters cover the sea.

HABAKKUK 2:14

Becoming a People that Say: “Come, Lord Jesus, Come!”

The anthem of Advent is the phrase from the end of Revelation: “*Come, Lord Jesus, come!*” Come quickly! We hope and long for the restoration. For the ending that is to come when everything is made right. Where evil is judged and where grace abounds. Where God dwells with his people!

What does it look like to become people who pray, “Come!”, to be the Bride or the Church that says “Come!”? It means endurance and faith. It means courage amidst war. It means speaking for justice and living with mercy. It means putting little stock in building our kingdom here and all investments on building the eternal kingdom.

WHEN THE SOUL FEELS ITS WORTH

Day Fifteen


This past week, each reflection has focused on the theme of peace and the kingdom Jesus' birth brings. It all seems so wonderful. The birth of the saving King, so glorious. The highest glory has come to us!

When I imagine the birth of Jesus and His closeness to the arms of Mary, I struggle to get over the significant worth He's placed on our world, on His Church, on you and me—that He would come. That He would enter in. That He would consume my story. How do we respond to it all?

We respond with Remembrance and Humility

What Mary sings at the news of Jesus coming into the world, gives us a glimpse into a response in Luke 1:46-55:

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



And the shepherds
returned, glorifying
and praising God for
all they had heard
and seen, as it had
been told them.

LUKE 2:20

We Respond by Going, Seeing, and Telling

Then, after the angels told the shepherds, we see their response which was filled with movement, wonder, exploration, and declaration. In Luke 2:15-17,20,

"When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them....And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

The Heart, Mind, and Soul Worships

In the already-arrived and in the soon-to-arrive peace of Jesus, our whole selves worship the King of glory. Before you move onward this season, I want to invite you to meditate and imagine these moments. Imagine yourself hearing of the coming peace on earth. Imagine yourself seeing the King in a cradle. What do you see, what do you feel, what do you hear, who are in you light of the Christ Child?

THE MEANING OF JOY

Day Sixteen

This Advent season has been a delight for me as we've walked through hope and peace. Now we turn our gaze toward joy. Our modern dictionaries define joy as a *feeling* of great happiness. It's essentially pleasure *plus*, or *extra* good vibes. That's not what's meant by joy in Scripture. It's not an exaggerated happiness. It's completely other. Beyond a feeling, it's a possession, a posture, and a response to reality. And so we dive into this complex theme of joy.

But before we talk about shepherds and choirs of angels and a manger, we must talk about a specific character. The epitome of Advent. The caricature of preparing room: John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus. Through his life, we learn at least in part, the meaning of joy to the world.

The Preparer of the Way

John the Baptist's story begins with his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were faithful, righteous, and longing people. They were expectant, like many of the people in Israel, that one day, God would send the promised rescuer; that after 700 years of being conquered, exiled, and ruled, God would redeem them and rule their lives. Zechariah and Elizabeth were also longing people, longing for a child. They are in the pantheon of biblical couples who struggled through the pain, sorrow, and roller coaster of infertility.

Then, in the midst of unmet expectations for a nation and a couple, an angel appears to Zechariah—even as he's performing the task as a priest of reminding God of *His* promise. This angel makes a new promise. The time is ready. God will accomplish what He set out to accomplish. Get ready. It's coming. Not only the Rescuer, but a son to Zechariah. And this son would be like the prophets of old and he would come as the precursor to the Messiah.

John the Baptist was that promised child. His life carried special instructions and special purpose. His life was predicted in Isaiah 40:3 to be a voice crying out in the wilderness. John the Baptist was born to be that voice.

He was to be like Elijah and he was to remind his people who God is and who they are to be. He was to call them back to worship. His entire role was to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. He was to be the pointer and the marker of the coming hope and peace of God. Can you imagine that kind of life? Talk about great expectations. The son of parents that longed for a child for decades! The promised son from an angel to be the fulfillment of promises from the great prophet Isaiah, and to live a life in the pattern of the greatest prophet, Elijah. But, that's exactly what he did.



Behold, the Lamb of God,
who takes away the sin of
the world!

JOHN 1:29

He called people into the wilderness to turn towards God. He called them to a life of repentance of sins. Tax collectors, shepherds, and villagers went out to the desert to be baptized as a sign of repentance and longing for the coming Messiah. This is one of the strangest pieces of Jesus' ministry: It rested on the foundation built by John the Baptist and all the prophets before him. Jesus doesn't arrive in a vacuum. He doesn't create a movement out of nothing. No, the way to the hearts of the people was paved by John the Baptist. He was a lone voice. He cried out. He faithfully preached.

His proclamation and life purpose from birth was to point people to the Rescuer, the Messiah. And when his moment came, he didn't waver. As Jesus approached him at the start of His ministry, John declared, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" John 1:29 He's the one we've waited for! Go, follow Him! He's the one the human heart was created to adore, know, and be near. You've repented; He will restore. Not long after this amazing moment, John is arrested for resistance to oppression and wicked leadership.

What started as a long promised life ends in a jail. His followers continue on, but his ministry is at a dead end. After the crowds are gone and the highs of ministry fade, he wonders, "Will God do this thing? Is Jesus really the one?" He sends some of his faithful disciples to Jesus to ask Him this question, "*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*" Matthew 11:3

He's actually much like his father Zechariah, who when he heard from an angel that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child, said, "How do I know this will happen? Can you give me a sign?"

John the Baptist is also much like his predecessor, Elijah, who wondered to God, why have you abandoned me—even after he had withstood the pressures of a divine shoot-out with the gods of Jezebel. Elijah checked himself into a cave to simply die. He sat there waiting for something from God.

John the Baptist, like his father and like his hero, found himself longing and doubting amidst the trial of his life. While his life began with promise, his mission thrived, even in the desert, and his key moments in life were handled with great success (he correctly pointed to Jesus and saw many people he led to repentance follow Jesus with belief); now, however, the oppressors he expected Jesus to conquer shackled him into a cell.

John the Baptist captures my imagination and heart because, in his captivity, he reflects my heart, moments of my story, and probably yours, too.

I'm sure you've known trials amidst mission when, through circumstances beyond your control, you see the unstrategic unraveling of everything you've worked to build. Bridges to the homeless destroyed. Relationships with neighbors abruptly over. The mission God called you to comes to a dead end—even after thriving opportunities that

were God-given. Now, nothing is happening. You're not making the imaginary cover of "Missional Community Magazine." You might ask, "Jesus, are you and your kingdom the one I longed for, or should I look elsewhere?"

I'm sure you've also made sacrifices. You've welcomed people and children into your homes until the moments of celebration surrender to the way of grief. You might say, I was giving! I was generous! I gave everything! I answered the call and here I am walking worthy of that call! "Jesus, are You and Your kingdom the One I longed for, or should I look elsewhere?"

You may find yourself in a desert season where the voice of God seems unintelligible and His hand invisible. After years of knowing His love, you can hardly utter a phrase of worship to Him. "Jesus, are You and your kingdom the One I longed for, or should I look elsewhere?"

In those moments, we often take our place in the lineage of John the Baptist. John the Baptist isn't jealous of Jesus. He isn't frustrated with his cousin. He simply wants to know, is Jesus and His kingdom the real deal? Is this really the kingdom? Is this what it feels like? This low, this defeated, this humiliating?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, pastor, writer, and casualty of WWII, wrote to this very reality from within a concentration camp in his Christmas sermon, "God in a Manger":

*...just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. **Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment.** No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives.*

See, the birth of Jesus, this announcement and reality of joy, nails this truth into the foundation of the world: God is in the mess. God is in our mess. He's in our community's mess, our nation's mess. He was born not just figuratively but literally into the low, the vulnerable, the disastrous, and the unmet expectation.

Jesus responds to John's question by continuing to heal—amidst the mess—and then affirms John the Baptist's identity as His messenger. Jesus goes on to tell the crowds around Him that John the Baptist is more than any other prophet. His life and his purpose didn't have a match. The man who ate bugs, led a nondescript revival in the desert, and now awaits death at the whim of a false king is exactly what God meant and how God meant him.

Returning to Bonhoeffer, he goes on to write:

God travels wonderful ways with human beings, but he does not comply with the views and opinions of people. God does not go the way that people want to prescribe for him; rather, his way is beyond all comprehension, free and self-determined beyond all proof. Where reason is indignant, where our nature rebels, where our piety anxiously keeps us away: that is precisely where God loves to be. There he confounds the reason of the reasonable; there he aggravates our nature, our piety—that is where he wants to be, and no one can keep him from it.

*Only the humble believe him and rejoice that God is so free and so marvelous that he does wonders where people despair, that he takes what is little and lowly and makes it marvelous. And that is the wonder of all wonders, that God loves the lowly.... God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. **He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them.** God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken.*

God chooses people and performs His wonders where we least expect. God in a manger. God is near the lost, unseemly, weak, and broken. And this, Church, is joy. These are the wonders of His love. God is near you in the jail, in the hospital, in the foster care system, in the pastor's office, in the waiting, in the welfare line, and on the comfy couch in an isolated home on a nice, paved street. God performs wonders. He comes, and no one can keep Him from coming. Because to you a Child is born, a Son is given. Jesus has come to the ones we would least expect—you and me. Joy is found at the dead end, even the dead end of a mission where the longing for another heaven greets the present of heaven on earth.

JOY TO THE WORLD, GOOD NEWS!

Day Seventeen

I'll never forget where I was when I first heard the news: LeBron James was coming to Los Angeles to play for our Lakers. King James was going to come! After years of trying to read between the lines, listening to rumors, and honestly suffering through some really terrible teams, the hopes were being fulfilled. As the season approached, the fanfare increased. The skyscrapers of downtown L.A. became full-length billboards to LeBron. The *L.A. Times* did a ten-page spread about his first game. Ticket prices sky-rocketed as everyone wanted to see his first home game. Mass media was everywhere. I live three miles from the stadium, and I could feel the energy from my living room. The king had arrived! I cannot hide this fact—I'm so happy about it! But here's the reality: The hope for LeBron, the announcement of his coming, and his arrival doesn't compare to Christ's...even in stature, excitement, and fanfare.

I often hear pastors and Christians opine the arrival of Jesus as if it was nondescript, irrelevant, quiet, and understated. What we mean is, he wasn't born "culturally" famous and relevant. But Jesus was born cosmically glorious. This is what the angels sing, "Glory to God in the Highest!" His birth was the most glorious. The birth of most renown. *The birth of history.*

Yes, it happened in a small town in a conquered country that essentially served as the highway underpass of the Roman Empire. Yes, it happened to a poor family who was subject to the rule of a distant emperor. Yes, it happened outside a hospital. Yes, we cannot conceive, through our modern, Western eyes, of a birth more horrifying. But it was the most glorious. I think Luke wants us to see exactly that as he tells the story. In Luke 2:1-10 (NIV), he writes:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the

town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

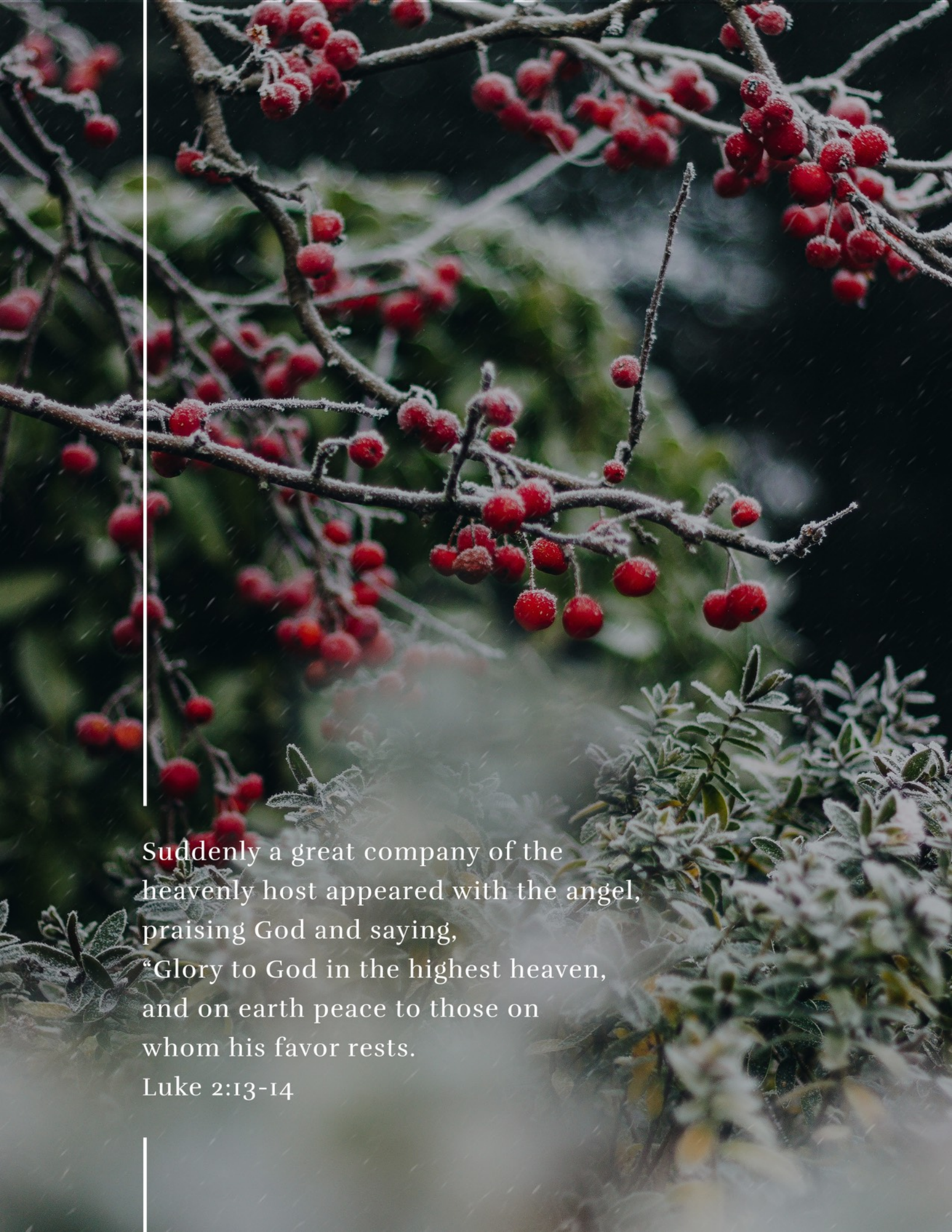
Comparison of Kingdoms

The story begins with Caesar, the Roman world, and a governor with complete power. Caesar had the power to call on the entire world to be counted so he could know how many people belonged to *him*. And, the world obeyed. Imagine that power to command the nations to return to their hometowns and declare themselves a subject to you. That phrase: "Everyone went to their own town," is a phrase of complete devotion to Caesar and his rule and reign. It makes me think of Isaiah 9:6, "the government will rest on his shoulders" and there will be no end to His government. Reading the first few paragraphs of this story you can't help but think, "Wait, is Caesar the mighty god and prince of peace?"

In fact, I cannot help but reflect on my heart, and perhaps yours too, that kind of power is so attractive. I might even say, more appealing than the power that is to come in the life of Jesus, because it's a power I can (theoretically) achieve apart from anyone else. If Augustus can do it, I can surely rule a kingdom on my own. Our love affair with Caesar and his empire continues to this day. We long more for the coming power through an election than the already arrived power of Jesus.

Luke goes on to say in pragmatic terms that it was under the rule and power of Caesar that Jesus was born. Jesus was not simply born with a distant ruler over Him, but that lord controlled even where Mary and Joseph went and when they went there. Caesar is lord over this baby. While much is made of the birth in a manger and surrounded by animals and without a place to stay, let me just say this—that's how most of the world is born. Jesus was born into the class that is ruled, not the ruling class.

But then, an angel appears to the shepherds. The glory of the Lord shone around them. The glory of the Creator and Sustainer of the universe surrounded them. The narrative shifts dramatically from a man's power to the power of Yahweh. Heaven on earth. It doesn't matter if Jesus was born in a palace; the angel appearing would have dwarfed anything the nobility tried to pull off. No kingdom, empire, red carpet, platform, or stadium the wealthiest of nations could build would ever amount to the "glory of the Lord" shining around them. This King's arrival shattered the divide of heaven and earth. The shepherds were terrified, as they should've been, and as we should be, because the framework of our world just changed. No one predicted Augustus' birth 700 years before. No poems were written about the governor of Syria. No mention of the kingdom of Rome from visions 500 years before. But here, on this day,



Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on
whom his favor rests.

Luke 2:13-14

that long expected promise comes fulfilled. This is good news.

Good News Causes Great Joy

The angel says, *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."*

And with that, the kingdoms and authorities of this world shrink. The Savior has been born. Messiah. Lord. The most happy and heralded news to be spoken. The angel is confident. The news he delivers causes joy to all people.

C.S. Lewis wrote often on joy. He described multiple experiences where he would have a sudden, piercing pang of longing — a bittersweet ache and yearning for something far-off, other-worldly, and unnamed. True joy, as Lewis presented, is the aching for something beyond this world. It's the yearning deep within for a sense of a home we've never been to. It's a longing for a relationship that hasn't started.

When the angel says, *"Today a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord,"* the home we've longed for has arrived, the healing we couldn't even name now has a name, the relationship we were made for has begun. In fact, He was born to us! That's great joy.

Born Unto You This Day!

I've been in three delivery rooms. When the babies appeared and cried, nurses took them and cleaned them off gently and then handed these babies to me like a precious present. I have no idea what the volume was like in that sterile environment, but I couldn't hear a thing. Each time I found myself whispering, afraid, overcome, and delighted. They were born to me.

God has come toward you, toward me, toward the world. It's the greatest news. Jesus, born a Savior to set the world free from the bondage of sin. Jesus, born a King to conquer death. Jesus, born Lord to defeat evil. There's never been a more spectacular birth, more prominent news.

The story of humanity shifts in Luke 2:7, *"she gave birth to her firstborn, a son."* In fact, the most important part of your life and dominant plot line in your story is this: What will you do with the baby born in Bethlehem? Jesus takes over your story. And it's great news and it causes indescribable joy.

SO GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

Day Eighteen

We tell the stories that matter most to us and our world. The stories you tell at parties, over dinner, and even in small talk have two overlapping qualities: You like them *and* you think the people around you will like them as well. The stories we tell reveal what matters most to us. Families have stories that are so important they get told over and over again. The way into the family is to know them. One of my family's revered stories happened last year.

Last November, our first Christmas in Los Angeles, we found, after much research, a farm only an hour away that allowed you to cut down your own Christmas tree. So, we loaded the kids, a good friend, and my wife's aunt into our van and drove out of Los Angeles to fulfill our family's destiny. The farm was nice and we found a good tree, cut it down, and carried it down the hill. They measured how tall it was, we paid, and a nice teenage boy who worked there carried it to our car and tied it on our roof. And then we were on our way back home over the dry, rolling hills of U.S. Route 101. It was a beautiful day and drive with a healthy soundtrack of James Taylor and Mariah Carey. Then, as we were driving 70 miles per hour through traffic we heard something on the roof. Out of the back of our van we saw it—our tree tumbling behind us. Mirela (my wife) shouted, "Our tree!" and our children turned in their seats and saw what we all saw—our \$90 hand-picked tree rolling down an L.A. freeway. Our oldest daughter wept, "This is the worst Christmas ever!" Our second cried, "Let's just go to Target and get a fake tree!" Our son finally realized what had happened and just cried. I was in shock. Amidst the wailing, Mirela and I tried to figure out what to do. I wasn't about to go back and get another \$90 tree and I wasn't going to Target either. Mirela decided the best thing would be to go back and try to get what was lost, to redeem the very tree that bailed on our family Christmas.

Reluctantly, I turned around. We drove three miles looking for our tree before circling back around to see what was, surely, just a remnant of it. Our children were filled with some glimmer of hope. I was certain we would add salt to their wounds when they saw the trampled and destroyed tree. But, there it was, sitting neatly on the edge of the left-hand lane and fortunately in a small stretch where there was a shoulder and space to pull our van off to the side of the highway. Then, in my finest and dumbest moment as a dad, I ran down the highway, grabbed our tree, ran back, and shoved it inside our van. I had saved Christmas. The children cheered, the singing continued, and we haven't stopped telling the story because it makes us happy and those we share it with laugh. It invokes a response, a memory, and for those of you listening, it brings you into my world and my family.

The good news announced by the angel in Luke 2:10 is a story that causes great joy for all people. It's a story that gets told often.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands kneading a piece of light-colored dough on a dark, textured surface. The hands are covered in a fine layer of white powder, likely flour. In the background, several dark-colored cookie cutters are visible, including one shaped like a heart and another like a star. The person is wearing a light blue, ribbed long-sleeved shirt. The overall lighting is soft and focused on the hands and dough.

LUKE 2:10

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.

Angels and Shepherds Tell the Story

The storytellers are angels—creatures from the kingdom of heaven—and shepherds—creatures from the wilderness. The angels only share the story once. They go to the shepherds, scare them, declare the good news of the birth of a child, and where to find Him. The shepherds respond by racing to find and see this Savior and baby for themselves. In fact, they tell each other, "Let's go and see this thing that has happened!" (Luke 2:15 NIV). This is important. The good news and the story is historical. It's an event that has occurred and now they are going to see it themselves. That's the power of the angels' story. They tell people who respond by going and seeing. They enable space and they give direction; this is where you will find salvation, glory, and peace. Go there!

How often do we tell that story with that kind of invitation? "Here's the good news of Jesus. Come be part of my community to see Him for yourself! Here's where you go to find that love and forgiveness." I'm convinced one of our biggest weaknesses in evangelism is not just telling people the story, but telling them where they can continue to look for Jesus after we've told them. We struggle to invite and direct them to those spaces where Jesus is on display.

But the angels aren't the only messengers. The shepherds go and find the baby, and after they have seen Him, they spread the word. All who heard it were amazed! Shepherds became like angels. They became newsmen. But they also returned. The shepherds went back to Jesus. They went out telling and they came back praising. They gazed at Jesus and told others about His coming. They made known the glory and peace of God.

This is why Christmas matters in the Church. We need to be reminded of the story of Jesus and we need to be reminded of the rich joy in sharing the story of Jesus.

The gospel is a story, not a list of facts. It is the story about God redeeming, rescuing, and recreating His creation. The story of God is about Him taking it upon Himself to save us from death and bring us to life. The gospel is the true story and only trustworthy account for what has been done to redeem the world. The story is good news. The gospel is the compelling story that doesn't fall flat on meaning, the story that satisfies our longings for purpose and joy. It is the greatest story because it instructs us on how to live with faith and in close relationship with God. Furthermore, it creates a community. The story of God makes a new people characterized by grace, because the story is about grace. The community is centered on God because the story is about God. This is a story the world must hear. We, like the shepherds, are lowly and unworthy, and God not only comes to us but works through us. He raises us to the incredible position of telling His story throughout our town, neighborhood, and world.

EMMANUEL

Day Nineteen

Christmas is one of those strange times when you sing a lot. It's also a time when you oddly sing words in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and all sorts of languages. A favorite, I think, is the song "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." I've noticed most people really love the refrain, "*Rejoice, rejoice.*"

But what is that word really about? What does it have to do with joy?

In Matthew's Gospel, Joseph receives a dream about the birth of Jesus. An angel comes to him and tells him the whole thing, and then also tells him that he should call Him "Emmanuel," meaning "God with us." In this, the angel quotes Isaiah 7. We've read a lot of Isaiah in this reflection series, but this one is the strangest. The Old Testament can be weird!

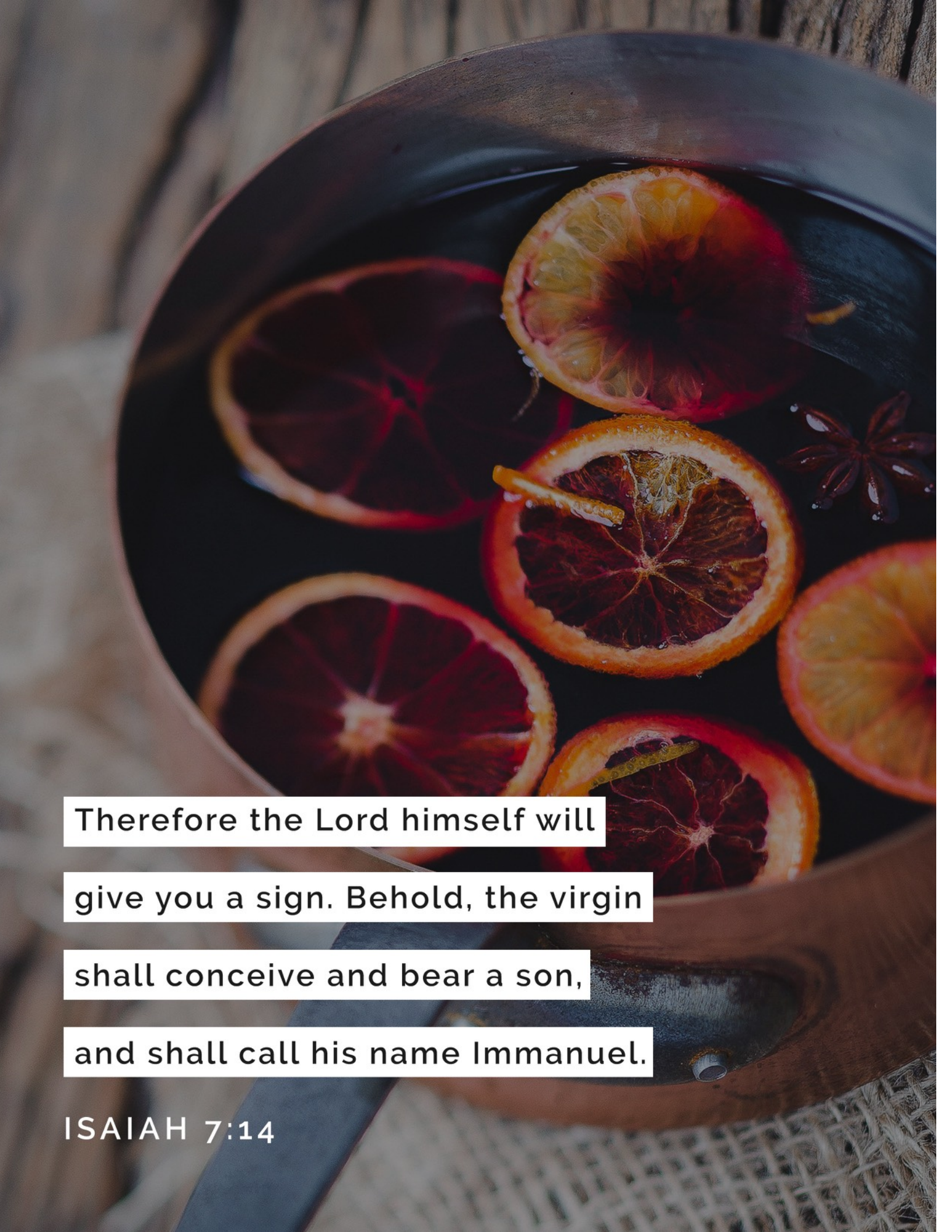
Isaiah 7 centers around the king of Judah, Ahaz, and a massive, geopolitical drama: the most powerful army known in human history bearing down on the three small kingdoms of Palestine: Syria, Israel, and Judah.

Syria and Israel became allies and wanted to force Judah (that's Ahaz's kingdom) to join. If he wouldn't join their alliance, they would invade and crush them and take the kingdom as their own. The king, though, is stuck considering his next move. Maybe he should join the big dog in the region and gain the spoils after the dust has settled against the other two. Or maybe he has to join an alliance, but then, what good is it to be king if other kingdoms are dictating your life? And how faithful can his people be to their calling?

Ahaz is left wondering, "Who can I align myself with? Who will be with me while the powers around me build, while the walls come crashing in, and while the chaos erupts?"

Then Isaiah comes to the king saying, "Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart grow faint." He goes on to say, "These kingdoms will fail. You will be okay." But Isaiah ends his pep talk with these words. "If you are not firm in the faith, you will not be firm at all."

Isaiah says what God, through His prophets, has always said: Trust in God. Have faith. Remain in an alliance with the God who established your life, your kingdom, your reign. He is the trustworthy One of immense power. Don't play politics of fear.



Therefore the Lord himself will
give you a sign. Behold, the virgin
shall conceive and bear a son,
and shall call his name Immanuel.

ISAIAH 7:14

God says: Trust Me! I've established your people. I made your kingdom. You have nothing apart from Me. Trust that I am in this with you.

Then, God says, "Ask Me for a sign as high as the heavens or as deep as hell. I will give you a sign so you can trust Me!"

Ahaz responds, I will not. There's a law that says not to. He refuses the sign, the call to trust. (Side note: I wonder how often we use religion to avoid God and do what we want and continue in our despair?) Ahaz didn't want a sign from God. Often, we're more comfortable with a world in which God isn't involved.

God replies, I will give you a sign anyway! It will be a baby boy who will refuse evil and do what is good. He will *know* the good. Those other kingdoms will vanish. Oh, and the boy's name will be, "God is with us," because God will be with you. God is moving toward you.

My sign, God says, will be from heaven, and it will go as low as to break the gates of hell. God not only reached His arm into the world to bring justice and lovingkindness, but he also became the embodiment of justice, hope, peace, and lovingkindness. This is Emmanuel.

Tim Keller writes that "the incarnation is how God becomes soft." God's sign is to make Himself touchable. Vulnerable. Killable. Emmanuel from the womb to the cradle to the tomb, God in this mess with us. Experiencing it, knowing it.

Emmanuel is essentially what I think we want from our deepest friendships and relationships, and especially from God, isn't it? We want God to know, understand, and be present in "this" with us. That is what God is saying. I've got you. I'm with you.

For us, the sign is not in the words of a prophet but in the child born the Savior. It also joins two things we often separate, trust and joy, into one singular reality: God with us. In God's presence, trust overflows. God in our midst invokes joy.

When Jesus commissioned His disciples, He ended by saying, *"And, lo! I am with you always, even to the end of the age!"* (Matthew 28:20 NASB)

God with us this day and forever after. God with us as we live our ordinary lives. God with us in community. God with us on mission. He fills all things and He joins together joy and trust in His presence. How do we welcome God with us?

THE TRUE LIGHT

Day Twenty

I haven't found a suburban light show, a boat parade light show, or the lights in a fancy mall in Los Angeles to compare to the Christmas lights of Lisbon, Portugal. My home city truly rises to the occasion as they stream intricate lights across the narrow streets. Blankets of sparkles fill the air above the ancient streets. It's an image to behold and the place to be. You can't simply drive past these lights; you have to get out and walk around. You soak up these lights and smell freshly roasted chestnuts. All this to say: one, my childhood was better than yours, and two, light is beautiful.

The True Light

While the other Gospel writers made note of the star in the sky, and the glory of the angels shining on shepherds, when John wrote his preamble to his Gospel, he chose light as a key image for the coming of Jesus.


In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1-5 NIV)

Then, a few lines later:

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:9-14 NIV)

The Light of God appeared to us in darkness. The Light came into the world. He came to make children born of God. The Word became flesh and dwelt with us. In Jesus, we have seen the glory of God, full of grace and truth. What a truth to base your entire life on.



In him was life, and the life was the light
of men. The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:4-5

Proclaiming Life as Complete Joy

As John wrote 1 John, he began with this:

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete." 1 John 1:1-4

He says, We've seen it! We've touched it! Life! God was with us and God is with us. Now, John and his friends are writing and proclaiming this reality of God made flesh to others as a source of joy for themselves! John also quotes Jesus saying to His disciples, "You are the light of the world!" Matthew 5:14.

John was a remarkable disciple who picked up on incredible images. But for John, light was central to the identity of Jesus and the entity of life. Not only that light is core to who we are as His disciples (in that image and identity), but there's no greater joy than to declare the gospel of Jesus. There's no greater joy than welcoming others into the fellowship and communion of saints.

This shatters much of our expectation of joy in this life. We might gaze at a fancy feast as a picture of joy. We might imagine a new home as joy. Even in super spiritual terms, you might imagine a big church service as joy. But for John, as a light in the world, there's no more complete joy than proclaiming the reality of God made flesh! The mission of God comes with a joy indescribable. Do you want joy? Pursue the kingdom! Do you want joy? Be a light in the darkest of places in your city.

While you look ahead to the new year, I trust you will see many obstacles. I invite you to choose the joy of sharing the wonderful news of great joy for all people. Join with the angels who share that news. Join with the star that points to Christ's coming. Be people who, for the joy of following Christ, make *His* life known.

FUTURE VICTORY AND PRESENT JOY

Day Twenty-One

We find ourselves between two arrivals—the first in Jesus in Bethlehem and the second as He comes again. We stand between resurrection and restoration. That's precisely why this season is so important; it locates our hope, peace, joy, and love. It locates it in the historic gospel of Jesus and the coming that we await. Our joy is full as we look to the manger and our joy can be even more full as we look to His certain kingdom and the feast we will share when the Bride and the Bridegroom are united. Revelation 19:7-8 speaks of this reality.

*"Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready;
it was granted her to clothe herself
with fine linen, bright and pure."*

End of World War II in England

It all reminds me of stories from the end of World War II and how it was celebrated in England. The war in Europe didn't end suddenly. It was long and drawn out. The allies, especially after liberating concentration camps across Europe, would not stand for anything less than complete and unconditional surrender. At the same time, in all practical senses, the war in Europe was over once the allies broke through the lines in western and eastern Germany. Victory was secured and victory was inevitable through the sacrifice, courage, and fortune of the British, Canadian, American, and Russian soldiers. And yet, the Nazis held on. Even after repeated bombings of Berlin and the capturing of 1.5 million soldiers on the western front, the Nazis refused to surrender. Even after Mussolini and Hitler's deaths, the war did not end. The war wasn't over, but the victory had been won. Such a strange time.

In England, which had been bombed for years and lost thousands of young men to the war, they made preparations for the day of victory. Groups of citizens gathered the materials for flags and parades. Bar-keepers ordered and saved beer, whiskey, and champagne. But not a single bottle was to be opened until the news rang out of complete victory. They, in perfect English fashion, delayed the exuberant celebration until the perfect moment. Yet, as historians explored this moment, they found the quiet joy amongst the people. The resolve of the assured end of war brought smiles, peace, and levity to the entire world. The war was won but not over. The celebration had begun in hearts, minds, conversations, and even a few bars here and there, but none of those parties compared to that day on May 9, 1945 when the war was completely over.



REVELATION 19:7

Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready;

This is where we are between the cradle and the new city. Jesus was born Savior and King. The victory has been won while the war still rages...but rest assured the war is won. There are two great verses from the old Christmas hymn "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" that call us into that kind of joy. These verses remind us of the comfort and the victory.

God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen

*God rest ye merry, gentlemen
Let nothing you dismay
Remember, Christ, our Savior
Was born on Christmas Day
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray
O tidings of comfort and joy
Comfort and joy
O tidings of comfort and joy!*

*"Fear not, then," said the Angel
"Let nothing you affright
This day is born a Savior
Of a pure Virgin bright
To free all those who trust in Him
From Satan's power and might."
O tidings of comfort and joy
Comfort and joy
O tidings of comfort and joy!*

Let's live all of life with that comfort and knowledge of the victory that Jesus has defeated sin, death, and evil!

LOVED FROM THE BEGINNING

Day Twenty-Two

One of my favorite Christmas memories came five years ago when Mirela told me she was pregnant with our second child. I was overjoyed, amazed, and humbled. When that daughter was born, we named her "Maitê," which means "beloved." We named her that because it was something we need to be reminded of, that we are His beloved. And it was an affirmation of her identity, too. But mostly, her name reminds us that she was born amidst God's clear and transformative love poured into our marriage and our lives.

Story from Our Marriage

Six years ago amongst a missional community meal, my wife and I shared more honestly than we ever had. We were somewhat nervous, but mostly relieved. We had just come out of the shadows. Our marriage was in trouble. We were in trouble.

This was the night we told our community how bad it was and that we needed intense marriage counseling. The days leading up to our public confession of mess were filled with interventions from fellow leaders and a painful conversation in which I asked Mirela, "Have there been good times in our marriage?" She responded, "Some, but they don't last long." She had been fighting for my attention for quite some time. Our marriage had endured lots of pain we simply raced past: the loss of a parent, deep financial hardships, the U.S. immigration system, and doing ministry in the core of a city that wanted nothing to do with the Church.

The bulk of our married life had been spent leading communities, doing ministry, planting a church, and pretending to have a good marriage. This was our fourth missional community to lead. We had already sent three communities out. I had already led trainings on how to 'do' missional community. This was the moment I finally felt like I belonged to a missional community. It was the first moment we truly asked something from any community. We needed childcare, we needed funds for counseling, and we desperately needed prayers.

We spent the next year simply participating. We weren't the leaders anymore. Mirela and I have never been the same. That community was never the same either. This honest moment ushered in a sort of caring and loving I had stopped expecting from those I was in "community" with. Looking back, I realize that I had finally become a burden and I had become a brother. We sought the gospel together. Mirela and I shared what we were learning in counseling. People saw our marriage transform right before their eyes. Our community paid for months and months of counseling. They watched our daughter. They regularly asked what was going on. Beyond this, each couple examined their own marriage. Mirela and my learning and growing was theirs, too.



I hope He lands in your life
and that the Spirit reminds
you that your name is **beloved**.



Furthermore, it was in this season that I saw the power of simply pursuing love for God, love for one another, and love for neighbor. Emboldened by counseling and my community, I began to share what God was doing in my life with friends and neighbors. In telling them about my mess, crazy things began to happen. Neighbors wanted to talk about Jesus more. They wanted to come to our church's worship gatherings. They wanted to hear how we saw God's presence in our mess.

Side note: when people ask me if missional communities work, I look back to this story and say, "Yes, they do." This one was vital in nudging me to love God, love His Church, and love my neighbors.

Beyond all of that, though, that time in our marriage taught us both two remarkable things: We are a mess and we are deeply loved. So we named our daughter, Maitê, or beloved. Knowing the love of Jesus changed our marriage.

You are Loved

There's obviously a lot to talk about in regards to Christmas. There are a lot of logistics to figure out. But, when we gaze at the Child in the manger, and the Savior born to us, I hope you will find the love of God. I hope He lands in your life and that the Spirit reminds you that your name is *beloved*. I also pray that as you walk into the frantic last days of Advent, you take stock of the people He's called you to love and receive love from.

LASTING REDEEMING LOVE

Day Twenty-Three

On these last days of Advent, we turn our gaze to the love embodied in the crib. The incarnation carries into our world not just hope, peace, and joy, but Christ brings with Him a love of unending depth. As Sally Lloyd Jones writes in *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, "A never-ending, never-giving up, always and forever love." Paul Miller describes what happened in the incarnation this way, "Love walked among us." How does a baby love beyond smiles, sweet smells, and long sleep? The angel declares the reality of God's love that first Christmas Eve, "*Unto you is born this day, a savior.*"

Jesus is born Rescuer. Born to rescue us from a world made wretched through sin, death, and evil. Born for the world and to save the world.

Jesus Born Savior

Returning to Isaiah, as we have often this past month, we find the passion of Jesus predicted in powerful poetry in Isaiah 52-53. Regularly read on Good Friday, this poem in Isaiah reveals the intent of Emmanuel. Let the words sink in as you consider Christ born into this world to redeem it.

*See, my servant will act wisely;
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
Just as there were many who were appalled at him—
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being
and his form marred beyond human likeness—
so he will sprinkle many nations,
and kings will shut their mouths because of him.
For what they were not told, they will see,
and what they have not heard, they will understand.
Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.*



Hebrews 12:2

FOR THE JOY SET BEFORE
HIM HE ENDURED THE CROSS,
SCORNING ITS SHAME,
AND SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT
HAND OF THE THRONE OF GOD.

*Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.
He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.
Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.
After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,*

*because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors. Isaiah 52:13-53:12*

The Suffering Servant, the King of Glory, comes to be with us in sin, and to take on the sins of men. The love of God compels God to suffer and die so that Immanuel, God-with-us, can be a forever reality. There are three clear signs God loves you without end: the swaddling cloths of a newborn baby, the bloody cross, and the empty tomb. There is one clear definition of the love with which God has loved us all: Jesus. He is amazing love.

Martin Luther says what most of us might say at the realization of Jesus' incarnation and the love He brings into the world:

*"Were earth a thousand times as fair
beset with gold and jewels rare
she yet were far too poor to be
A narrow cradle, Lord, for thee."*

Humanity isn't worthy of this love, it appears.

Saving You Through the Cross Was His Joy!

The writer of Hebrews 12:1-4 responds to our sense of undeserving love this way as an encouragement to persevere, *"For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God"* Hebrews 12:2.

Do you hear that? Jesus endures all that is described in Isaiah out of a pursuit for joy. Jesus chose joy, and it was you. It was for the defeating of shame for you. He reigns to bring you life. He died to vanquish your sin, and it was for joy.

All of this is summed up in Charles Wesley's brilliant poetry and can be, for us, an anthem to heaven and prayer toward every part of our cities:

*Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,*

*hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.*

*Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.*

GOSPEL FEAST

Christmas Eve

Our Advent traditions have become numerous: we cut down our tree at the Beck family farm in the shadow of Mt. Hood; we make cinnamon rolls for our neighbors; we go ice skating at the mall; I take the girls to see *The Nutcracker*; and we go on a hike through the snow and forest on Christmas morning. Between all of these moments, we experience the normal hustle and bustle of America drinking hot chocolate, shopping, wrapping, and many times traveling. The most revered and treasured tradition, however, is our Christmas Eve feast.

This family tradition pre-dates our marriage when my wife and her mother would welcome in anyone without a family to be with and without a place to go. This meal was important to my late mother-in-law because it depicted generosity, family, and the entire message of the gospel. Our Christmas Eve meal is the most spiritual and religious moment of our entire holiday season. Mirela prepares great food from appetizers to dessert. We buy the best beer, the best wine, the best whiskey. We decorate our home and we welcome in friend, stranger, and acquaintances. I remember our first year in Portland saw us welcome a couple we met on the street searching for live music, our landlord, and friends from long ago. Each year we see a different collection, and yet each year is the same; we have a feast on the evening we celebrate God's arrival. There's hardly anything more appropriate in our worship. More than hymns, more than sermons, and even more than candles, we see God's arrival to us at a table with other people.

Our Longing for the Feast

Food is significantly religious. It is through food that Adam and Eve rebelled. The first biblical meal is the perversion, pollution, and de-creation of all God had made. Adam's feast ushers the world into chaos. Through food, humanity enters a groaning and waiting for wholeness, restoration, and peace. Sin—everything that is unkind, unmerciful, destructive, wicked, lonely, murderous, and mortal—has its birth in that first meal. Through Advent, we weep over the consequences of Adam and Eve's meal in which they doubted God's goodness and believed God to be withholding. Advent is necessary because of the separation caused by sin.

Advent is the season we observe the agony of war and hope for peace. We aspire to hope while we acknowledge our own despair. We long for love while confronting our inability to receive love from another or muster the courage to love another. The world watches for God's light, peace, joy, salvation, and love to break into our world. We wait for the abundance, blessing, and eternal life of God that overpowers our sin and cleanses us. It was through a meal that creation fell apart, and it's through a meal that God is restoring all things, including us.

The Arrival of the Gospel Feast

You've likely never heard an Advent or Christmas sermon on Isaiah 25, but it is a deep song of arriving hope and peace to the world.

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.
It will be said on that day,
"Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the Lord; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. Isaiah 25:6-9*

Isaiah points us to a moment when the waiting will be over. When God will gather all people for a rich feast, an incredible celebration. It's in that gathering in that shared feast that we will see the swallowing up of death, the removal of mourning, the extinguishing of condemnation, and the tearing of the separation between God and humanity. This is the powerful moment of hope's arrival. Symbolically and powerfully it happens over a feast. The moment is a communal meal. God gathers a diverse multitude of people at the meal. We wait for the arrival of God to us. We celebrate His coming to us.

Waiting for Communal Advent

Our waiting is also for His binding together His people. Far too often, we view our holiday seasons and Advent meditation as individuals. It is exclusively for our families and for ourselves. Nothing breaks this isolation and ushers a communal response to Advent like a meal. At the table, we share our stories, we listen to one another, and we experience grace. The New Testament describes this act as "breaking bread" and invokes a giving and receiving of relationship in the most simple and unspoken of ways. The communal meal is a spiritual discipline.

Every shared feast begins through arrival. Individual responsibilities, schedules, and to-do lists collide into a shared agenda of celebrating God. The worries, struggles, fears, and happy news of each member comes rushing through the door. Your lives are hurried until this point. Your lives are physically separate until this moment and yet God gathers you together. Communities are physically united by the table you gather around, the meal everyone consumes, and under our common prayer recognizing God's grace.



Behold, this is our God;
we have waited for him,
that he might save us.

This is the Lord;
we have waited for him;
let us be glad and
rejoice in his salvation.

ISAIAH 25:9

Christmas Communion: Christ is the One We've Waited For

Jesus holds up bread and wine during His last meal with His disciples and says it is His body and blood. Food and drink become the taste of the gospel. While bread has an association with abundant life that surpasses biblical imagery, in Christ it becomes the sufficient sacrifice. Wine, too, outside Christianity, is seen as a sign of blessing, goodness, and often associated with blood. However, in Christ, wine becomes the image of blessing, goodness, justification, and cleansing that comes through Jesus' suffering on our behalf.

What cannot be missed is Jesus' choice for a meal to be our remembrance of the gospel. If the gospel forms community, sharing this gospel feast ought to be as often as we get together. Jesus called us to know Him and His sacrifice through a meal. When we eat the bread and wine, we commune around this truth.

Charles Wesley penned some important words for this gathering and eating in worship. In this hymn, Wesley reminds us we are called to remember the first arrival of God and open doors of welcome for God's coming in.

*"Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;
let every soul be Jesus' guest.
Ye need not one be left behind,
for God hath bid all humankind."*

We regularly sang that at our church in Portland, Bread&Wine. Not only do we remember the feast, but we also hold this truth up to all people as an invitation to all humanity to come and be the guest of God. This is an anthem for us and the church we aspire to be. A church that welcomes every soul as Jesus' guest into the most meaningful of tables. Our invitation to those in our city is not simply to dinner parties but into the family of God, into union with Christ. As we welcome the poor and powerless into our community meals, and as we share the crucial nature of the elements of communion, we realize we are the sinners coming. We are the ones in need of His body and His blood. In communion, we hold up bread and wine to one another and say, "Jesus is the one we've been waiting for. This is our God who swallows up death. Let us rejoice in this salvation that has *come* to us."

Christmas Celebration

Sing hymns, read devotionals, pray prayers, and light candles today and tomorrow. All are good and right responses to what we have hoped for and what God has certainly accomplished. Do not neglect the table where all can come and be Jesus' guest. Do not neglect a communal celebration that reflects the magnitude of God's arrival. After all, as Tim Chester writes, "Jesus didn't run projects, establish ministries, create programs, or put on events. He ate meals." How will you see Christ at your table today and tomorrow?

ARRIVAL OF ENOUGH

Christmas Day

A few years ago, I ran a 5K on Thanksgiving with my whole family—three kids and two strollers. As we crossed the finish line the announcer said, "Welcome the stroller team!" The race was through the heart of the city of Portland and over two of the prominent bridges that connect that city. As I pushed my daughter and trudged along through the rain and wind, my legs grew tired. They ached, and I kept pushing forward, but I slowed down. Then, I realized my "jog" was the same speed as my walking. My daughter shouted, "Go like a rocket ship!" But I was spent. I stopped and let her run alongside my wife, and I walked a few hundred yards across the bridge before picking up my jog again and finishing out strong alongside my wife.

I wasn't strong enough to make it the whole way. I didn't have the endurance to push my daughter the entire way. I was weak. In those two hundred yards on the bridge, I looked out over the city, our city, and in that moment I prayed, "God, I'm not strong enough to save this city, to help it, to endure, or to push people to you." This prayer is evidence of God's grace. So much of my time in Portland was spent running hard, pushing, striving, and attempting to be enough. The sin of this is not simply the delusion, but the rebellious stealing glory from God and proclaiming the "gospel of Brad." Repentance began on that bridge with me praying, "I'm not enough; You are."

This is the expectant Christmas prayer of all who serve Jesus as King. It brings us to the point of recognition that we are not enough. We know our world is in need of peace, hope, and love, and yet it is revealed to us that we are not enough to bring it to ourselves, let alone our city.

Jesus, even as a baby, was more than enough for the world. This is the power of the incarnation. The story of God becoming a baby is also the story of God becoming King. John's incarnation narrative, John 1:1-14, differs from Luke and Matthew. In it he simply writes, *The Word was made flesh*.

We are Servants to the Son who was Born King

Jesus was born into this world with nothing to prove. He was born the King of kings and the Prince of peace. The invitation to the shepherds that night was to come and behold the promised one and salvation of God reaching into our world. This is the same invitation to all who become citizens of that kingdom: behold the King!

God's first coming transforms us from refugee to citizen of the kingdom of God. We were once bound to the kingdom of darkness, alienated and estranged from God. Now have been transferred into the kingdom of glorious light. No longer do we scavenge for a place in this world. No longer are we resigned to being our own king. No longer do we establish earthly kingdoms. Instead, Christmas reminds us we have found our home in Jesus our King, and our lives are shaped by life in His kingdom of compassion, grace, forgiveness, love, and hope.

Isaiah 25:9

It will be said on that day,
“Behold, this is our God; we have
waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the Lord; we have waited for
him; let us be glad and rejoice in his
salvation.”



As we wrap up this series, I want to remind you of the vision we set ourselves on: that we would prepare room in our hearts for "God with us" as we live our identity in Christ in the ways He has called each of us to.

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing."



SATURATE
RESOURCES