O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL

Sunday

Each year, we see depictions of the manger scene in various shapes and sizes. Some are wooden, others ceramic. Some are inflatable in a front yard, and others are small ornaments decorating a tree. Still others are performed by actors and actresses, occasionally with live animals and even a baby. Unfortunately, the plethora of images has often diminished how we view that moment. Imagine back to that fateful night. Imagine a scared mother and father struggling to find any place to stay, even among the animals.

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.”

Luke 2:10-11

Imagine the pain of the birth and the cries of excitement when they see their child’s face for the first time. Imagine the rush of adrenaline when the shepherds were frightened beyond belief at the sight of angels and then the calming peace that came with their message. Imagine them running to nearby Bethlehem while three wise men traveled from afar to follow the king’s star.

Can you picture it? Can you picture the excitement and anticipation? Can you picture the wonder of it all?

It is this sense of overwhelming joy that should fill our hearts whenever we see these manger scenes—a combination of fear at the thought of God coming to earth and then calming assurance at the message that He has come to save the world.

As we prepare for Christmas, let’s set our hearts to this moment, remembering the story of the birth of our Lord.

In the coming weeks, we will have the opportunity to turn through the pages of Scripture and join in the excitement of those saints as they met Jesus for the first time. We will read the story of Zechariah, who was going about his work when God broke in, or Mary, a simple young girl whom God had chosen for an incredible task. We will see individuals like Peter and the woman at the well who met Jesus during his earthly ministry whose lives were changed forever. And we will see those who encountered the risen Christ, both in Scripture and beyond, such as the women at the tomb, Paul, Augustine, and C. S. Lewis.

In each case, they met Jesus and adored Him.

As we enter the Advent Season, where is your heart? Can you remember when you first met Jesus? Can you recall the excitement of that day—the joy that arose from meeting the King? Can you join with the choirs that will be singing throughout the coming weeks, “O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord”?

Ask the Lord to meet you where you are at this moment and take you back to where you were as we get ready to greet Him once again this Christmas.
You never know how a day will go.

On the morning of the most important day of his life, the priest Zechariah had no idea what lay ahead. Throughout his life he had been brought up in the study and practice of the Law. He routinely participated in the rituals of worship and sacrifice, so when it came time for his division to be on duty and he was chosen “according to the custom of the priesthood” to burn the incense, anything out of the ordinary was not expected.

But then it happened. An angel appeared before him—such a sudden apparition of otherworldly proportions materialized right in front of him that fear reached into his chest and wrapped its fingers around his heart, squeezing it ever so softly. And then the angel spoke.

Before we move on from here, think about how silent God had been among his people. For hundreds of years, there had been nary a word nor messenger. No prophet had given any instruction or correction or exhortation, so for Zechariah to see an angel and then for him to speak…that was astounding.

And the message that the angels spoke is something that Zechariah couldn’t believe. “Guess what?” Gabriel told him, “your prayer has been answered.”

Do you think that at first Zechariah had to go through his mental list of prayers? Was it for that pain in his knee? Maybe it was a conflict with that neighbor? Or Elizabeth’s health? A promotion? A vacation? The hope of a child was so far in his past I wonder if he even considered that one as a possibility.

“Your wife Elizabeth will have a boy, and you will name him John.”

“What?!?” The shock must have flowed through him so that he hardly remembered to keep listening.

“And not only will you have a son, but your son will be incredible, set apart, and the one who prepares the way of the Lord’s salvation.”

It was too much to handle—the sudden apparition, the angelic voice, the old hope that had been allowed to die. Now the angel awaited his response.

“Well, are you sure you mean us? I mean, Liz and I are kind of older and our window for kids has passed.”

But Gabriel didn’t change his tune. In fact, he told Zechariah his name, explained his position as the messenger of God, and then demonstrated the authority of the message by telling him he would be mute until the birth of John. And then zap—his voice was gone.

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.

Luke 1:68

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Monday (cont.)  

Probably not the way that Zechariah had imagined his day would turn out.

We know how the story goes from here. Elizabeth became pregnant and gave birth to John. The whole extended family was so excited to see this new addition that they had assumed the baby’s name would be that of his father, but Elizabeth and Zechariah insisted that his name be John, just as the angel commanded. The whole crowd looked to Zechariah for confirmation, and at that very moment, his voice returned.

Don’t you love Zechariah’s first words? It had been a little over nine months of total silence, and you know that he had built up plenty of things to say to others, but his first inclination, his first response, his first words, are praise. “Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed,” Luke tells us, “and he began to speak, praising God.”

Zechariah’s song that follows is a proclamation of God’s power. It tells of his mercy and ability to overcome His people’s enemies. As he closes, he reflects on the future ministry of John and the coming of the Lord and His salvation.

Zechariah never expected to encounter news about Jesus when he woke up and went to work, but it didn’t matter to the Lord. He appears in our lives according to His timetable, not ours.

The question is, are we ready? Do we wake up with the expectation of encountering Jesus? Do we long for that moment when He will break through our day? Or do we act like Zechariah and scoff when He does?

For Zechariah, it meant nine months of silence and then overwhelming praise. Let’s try not to go the long way around. Let’s prepare to praise right now.

READ: LUKE 1:5-25, 57-79
There was nothing remarkable about Mary. I imagine that she was faithful to know the Law, and I’m sure that she kept the Law to the best of her ability. She may have been attractive, or she may have been plain. She probably had friends who giggled and laughed with her as they all pulled water from the well. She was a simple Jewish girl, typical of most girls her age. Scriptures do not indicate anything “special” about her—that is prior to the announcement.

As a young woman, she had been betrothed to a young carpenter, a good man named Joseph. You can imagine her excitement at the prospect of the upcoming marriage. You can see her laughing with her friends on her way home, suddenly going silent as she nears Joseph’s home, shyly smiling at him as she passes by, her friends prattling on about chores and life in general. Maybe she was nervous about leaving her home, or maybe she was ready to begin her own family. Regardless, the day drew near for the wedding celebration she had always wanted.

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

*Luke 1:38*

Then Gabriel appeared. “Hello, Mary! You are about to become one of the most important women in history. Are you ready?”

Of course, Mary takes a step back. Interestingly, she isn’t “gripped with fear” like her cousin’s husband, Zechariah. Maybe because she had heard of his experience, or maybe because her heart was ready for the announcement.

“Mary, God loves you and because of that, He has chosen you to give birth to His Son, Jesus, heir to the throne of David and a kingdom that will never end.”

Mary has a natural response—“How, since I am a virgin?”

This is where the story gets interesting. From the surface, she responded just as Zechariah did, “How?” But Gabriel’s response shows that there was something significantly different behind her question.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you. Nothing is impossible with God.”

You notice that Gabriel didn’t make her mute? She wasn’t taught a lesson in this moment. Instead, she was given an explanation.

What was different? Perhaps the heart was different. We don’t know whether Zechariah had a proud heart or an unbelieving heart since Scripture never states as such, but Mary—Mary had a humble heart. Her response: “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

What an incredible statement of humble acceptance. She recognized the messenger, heard the message, and accepted the future, all in one simple reply.

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Of course, we see more about Mary in the rest of the Gospels with the birth of Christ and his life as a child. We see her at the start and at the end of Jesus’ public ministry. We know that she was cared for by the disciples and honored for her faithfulness.

But in this moment, we see a humility like no other. In her song that is recorded in Luke, she says, “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.”

It is likely that she was referring to her humble origins because, after all, there was nothing remarkable about her, but I think that she was wrong. I believe that God looked upon Mary and saw her humble heart. He saw within her a servant who was willing to take on the task of a scandalous pregnancy, dealing with the questions and looks from others, the scrutiny of it all—and would say simply “Yes.”

When the news of Jesus appeared to Mary, she naturally responded to humility because she had a humble heart. What about your heart?

Do you have a heart willing to say yes no matter what? Do you have a heart that will listen to the call of Jesus and follow Him wherever it may lead? Are you ready to say yes?

As we look to the birth of Jesus, let’s prepare our hearts for the call of Jesus. Let’s humbly say to him, “I am the Lord’s servant, and whatever you want to do, Lord, I am ready.”

**READ:** LUKE 1:26-56
We don’t know a whole lot about Joseph. We know his profession—carpentry. We know his genealogy—a son of David. We know his plans—marriage and fatherhood. We know that all those plans changed when he heard of Mary’s pregnancy.

“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commended him and took Mary home as his wife.”

Matthew 1:24

Matthew is really the only author to take the time to provide Joseph’s perspective in the story. It makes some sense because Matthew’s narrative is about the coming King Jesus, and his genealogy focuses on Joseph, but it is interesting that so little is written about Jesus’ stepfather.

What we do know about him, however, is incredibly significant.

First, we see Joseph’s heart—he was a righteous man. When he found out about Mary, he could have exposed her to ridicule and persecution. After all, she was pledged to be his wife, and now she is telling him a story about giving birth to a child, and not just any child, but the Son of God. How outlandish does that sound?

Instead, he began to make plans very quietly to call the marriage off before it went any further. Put yourself in his shoes, and his choice does seem honorable.

Second, we see that he was obedient. Whereas the angel appeared to Zechariah and Mary in person, for Joseph it came in a dream.

“Joseph, God wants you to change your plans. Mary is telling the truth, and the baby she carries is special. In fact, this is all fulfilling what you have read from the prophets. And when He arrives, call Him Jesus, because He will save people from their sins.”

Then Joseph woke up and obeyed.

So simple and straightforward. Unlike the previous encounters of Zechariah or Mary, Joseph had no questions. He simply obeyed.

Mary came to live with him. They got the home ready, and he helped to care for her during the pregnancy. And when the baby arrived, he didn’t insist on a family name. He didn’t call him Jacob after his father or David after the great ancestor or even Joseph after himself.

No; instead, he did what was commanded of him and named Him Jesus.

Joseph heard the word of the Lord, and Joseph obeyed the word of the Lord.

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JOSEPH

How are we doing with that? How often do we hear a clear command from the Lord and instead question it? Do we come up with a world of excuses about why it just won’t work and why our plans are better than his plans?

Or do we obey?

In preparing our hearts for advent, we must begin with Mary’s heart of humility, but that has to be followed by Joseph’s willingness to obey.

READ: MATTHEW 1:18-24
We experience new things every day. We may try a new restaurant or hear a new song, or maybe it’s the new app that you discovered or a quicker route to work. Often, the new becomes so mundane that we don’t even realize it is new.

But then there are those times when the new changes everything, and in your heart, you feel a well of excitement that you just can’t contain, and you have to share the news with everyone.

“So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.”

Luke 2:16

Remember those moments. Now multiply them by a thousand, and you have close to what those random shepherds felt.

There they were, minding their own business when suddenly the angel appears. By now in the Christmas story we see this is the fourth time an angel appeared on the scene—first to Zechariah, then to Mary, and then to Joseph. That makes sense. Each of these individuals had a major role to fill in the life of the Savior. But these guys? They are just shepherds, outcasts in society, always suspected of theft, physically dirty from a life lived outdoors, spiritually unclean for failing to follow the Law.

They were lying down in the dark with their sheep when—boom! The night sky lit up, and then began a roller coaster of emotions. First, terror….not just fear, but terror. Then probably confusion….I mean, they had never seen an angel before. Afterwards came the questions or maybe the surprise—“A Savior is born?”—followed by the amazement as the heavenly choir entered the stage and began to sing a song so melodious that they become excited.

“Let’s go now!” they exclaimed to one another.

Hurrying to town, they almost couldn’t believe what they had seen. That sense of overwhelming excitement just bubbled over, and everyone they saw, they told. They were unable to contain what they knew.

You really can’t top that experience. An entire band of angels came and started praising God and saying,” Glory to God in the highest.” These guys were told about the coming of the Lord, and they were able to see Him that evening. Amazing! What they saw, what they experienced, what they felt—they had to tell.

But perhaps that experience can be topped. After all, the shepherds had to go home at some point. They had a great story, but they weren’t able to live within that same story. They couldn’t stay with Mary and Joseph, and they couldn’t take the baby or the angels home with them.

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For those who have believed in the baby, though, the experience is even better. This great story, of God revealing His heart to the world, happens every time we open the Scripture and sense the power of the Spirit. The witness of the baby happens every day when we know that we have the privilege to let Jesus live in our hearts. We never have to walk away from the manger scene because it is present each and every day for us.

Shouldn’t that excite us? Shouldn’t the truth of the everlasting story cause us to be overcome with excitement?

This Christmas, let the excitement flow, and let that excitement compel you to spread the word about all that you have seen and heard about this child. And when you do, people will be amazed. They were amazed 2,000 years ago, and they will still be amazed today.

READ: LUKE 2:1-20
Think back to a recent adventurous trip you may have taken. Maybe it was to a park to see a spectacular view that everyone has talked about. Or it was to go to a restaurant you saw on TV that is in some out of the way location. Or maybe it was to a flea market booth that is only open once a month. You had a particular vision in mind that you felt that you just had to see.

“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.”

Matthew 2:11

Now ask yourself, how long would you journey to see this? Are we talking about a day trip? Perhaps a weekend visit? Surely you wouldn’t go more than a day or so if that was the only thing you planned to do.

What if you only heard about this place as a rumor and hadn’t actually known anyone who had been there? I imagine that you would probably be less likely to hop in the car and travel any more than a few hours, and only then if you had the time.

When the scene opens up in Matthew 2, we see three men who gave up their daily lives for an unknown length of time to travel an unknown distance to an unknown land to find an unknown king. This level of unknown would cause any one of us to give up the trip, but they didn’t. They were compelled to discover this vision they had seen. They persevered until they came face to face with Jesus.

We know very little of the Magi that Matthew describes. We know they are from the east, perhaps having a Babylonian origin. That would make sense given the connections to Daniel’s time in Babylon and his work as an adviser in the land. Yet, Matthew doesn’t give us any lineage of these individuals. He just tells us that they showed up randomly in Jerusalem and began to ask a question.

What was the question? Well, they saw a star and asked what it was all about. Astrology was a common practice during this time, and the movement of the stars, according to this practice, foretold of various events, including the birth of kings. However, it must have been some incredible sight to have compelled them to travel to see a King of the Jews, a subdued race under Roman occupation.

When they arrived, their question caught the attention of Herod, who had been appointed King under Roman rule in order to continue to keep Israel under control. So scared about his political standing, Herod immediately tried to figure out what was going on and called all of his best minds together to have them pour over prophecies to determine where the new king would be born. One little town came up – Bethlehem.

Herod, being very conniving, pulled the Magi aside in a ruse to figure out exactly when the baby was born, so that he could snuff out any rivals to his house. The Magi, unaware of the political mess they had stepped into, explained the timing of the star, and Herod proceeded to tell them what the prophecies said and sent them on their way.

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THE MAGI

Friday (cont.)

So let’s think about this. We have three men, going about their daily studies in the East, and they see a star telling about a coming King of the Jews. They set off for a journey that could have lasted months with no end in sight. They finally arrive at the capital of Israel and get pulled into a political debate they didn’t see coming. They then are told about a vague prophecy talking about a ruler who was a shepherd. And then they set out again.

How would you feel at this stage if you were in their shoes? This is the part of the journey where at least one of us would suggest that we cut our losses and go find a new place to eat. Or give up on the dream and just head back. Not these guys. They carried on.

Moving on from Jerusalem, the star appeared again (note that Herod’s information was actually not needed…God was going to get them there regardless) and led them directly to the house.

I imagine standing in front of the house, checking their notes, looking back and forth to each other, unable to hide their smiles, and then deciding who gets to knock on the door. And when they knock, they enter and see…a child.

Let’s take a moment to soak in the scene. The Magi, who come from palaces in the East, travel all the way to Israel to a small town on the outskirts of the capital to some small nondescript house and see a young child with a young mother. We might have thought we made a mistake. They didn’t. They found exactly what they had been seeking.

Overjoyed, they entered, bowed down, and worshiped the child. Don’t you love how Matthew includes this scene in his Gospel? The other writers do not, but Matthew, whose entire Gospel can be understood as the inauguration of King Jesus, makes sure to show how all of the world will come and bow at the feet of the Savior of Mankind. These Gentiles were strangers to the Kingdom, but God includes them in His story. Amazing!

As we think about these Magi, these strangers who risked life and limb to bring gifts to a king, let us ask ourselves if we have that same level of perseverance. Remember, they hadn’t seen Jesus. They didn’t know the Scriptures. They hadn’t heard about the angels coming to Zechariah, Mary, or Joseph, let alone had they been told of all that Jesus would do in His lifetime. Yet they persevered to see Him….and only see him just that one time.

What are you willing to give up to see Jesus? What are you willing to spend just a moment with Him? Or do we balance our level of devotion only compared to our level of inconvenience? Too often, the littlest things stop us on our journey of seeking the King. Nothing stopped these men, and we should heed their example.

READ: MATTHEW 2:1-23
Christian artist Ron DiCianni has painted numerous, moving scenes from Scriptures, including the Creation of Man, the Prodigal Son, and the Resurrection. For me, the most moving portrait is Simeon’s Moment. The scene is simple enough. All you see is an old man holding the small baby Jesus. There is no temple scene. Mary and Joseph aren’t there. And you barely see Jesus’ face. Overplayed on the image is a map of the world, which brings so much significance to the scene, as the Savior of all mankind has appeared. But what moves me so much is a single tear.

As you look at Simeon’s face, you see a man whose joy is uncontainable. He is holding His Savior and shouting for joy, so much so that a tear is streaming from his eye. Looking at the painting, you can’t help but be moved to tears as well.

When I read this scene in Luke, I think of this face.

It had been 40 days since the birth of Jesus. Surely some news from the Shepherds had spread, but it doesn’t appear that anything is too out of the ordinary. Mary and Joseph obeyed the Law. They circumcised their son and named Him Jesus, and then they set out to the temple in order to consecrate their firstborn male to God by offering a sacrifice. All very customary.

Unbeknownst to these young parents, God had been working in the life of two of His servants, Simeon and Anna. Luke does not give many details about these two faithful saints. Simeon is called a righteous and devout man, who had been promised by the Lord that he would see the Messiah before he died. Anna was a long suffering widow, a prophetess who stayed in the temple constantly praising God.

I love how Luke describes the scene. Simeon was likely not planning to go to the temple that day (or maybe that is me reading too much into the text). But the Spirit “moves” him to visit. I am sure that he went on a regular basis to the temple, but something special compelled him for this visit. As Luke was researching the history of this encounter to write his Gospel, you can imagine finding out that little nugget, and he thought, “I have to include this!”

The Spirit says to Simeon, “Simeon, I have a surprise for you. Head to the temple and see.” So he did. And what did he find? As soon as Mary and Joseph headed into the temple, Simeon grabbed up the baby and began to praise God.

He cried, “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:29-32).

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Can you see his utter joy? Can you see the tears streaming from his face as the promise he had long been given finally came true? He had been able to see the salvation of the Lord.

Simeon actually gives them a prophecy that is a little disturbing…how Jesus would cause the rising and the fall of many in Israel and how a sword would pierce Mary’s soul too. Simeon had fulfilled his calling. He had endured.

But it doesn’t end there. Anna comes along and also holds this precious child. With joy that must have matched Simeon’s, she proclaimed how the child would bring about the redemption of Jerusalem.

Anna and Simeon. Two saints who had been given a vision, and they saw the vision come true. Yet, can you imagine their journey to see the vision? It wasn’t that the Lord gave them a sign and the next day it came true.

Anna thought her life was set as a young wife, and then seven years into marriage, she was a widow, with nobody deciding to marry her. She could have given up, thrown in the towel, cursed God and died. But she didn’t. She endured to see something greater, believing that God was a good God to be praised regardless of the circumstances.

And Simeon. He had been told by God that he would see the Messiah. How many days do you think that he woke up hoping to see this come true, only to go to bed with nothing? Yet he wasn’t disappointed. He carried on, clinging to the promise of God.

They both endured, and so should you and I. The Advent season reminds us that we can wait with great anticipation for the promises of God, because unlike other promises, God actually will come through. God didn’t abandon these saints, and He won’t abandon us.

How do we know that? Because He sent us Christ, the greatest promise ever given. Hold fast to the promises of Christ and look forward with unrestrained anticipation to the celebration of the gift of God.

**READ:** LUKE 2:21-40
JOHN THE BAPTIST

Maybe it’s your brother or sister. Maybe a parent or a friend. Maybe it’s you.

But we all have that person in our lives who will tell us with total conviction that something great is going to happen. It could be the super fan of a sports team who is convinced that “this is the year,” despite all the evidence to the contrary. Or maybe she discovered the newest oil or superfood to cure all the ailments we face daily. Or that person who found a book that changed his life and can change yours too. We all know these people.

“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

John 1:29

The theme that unites them is a belief that they have discovered an unknown truth and they cannot keep it silent. They are compelled to share it. It is as if silence will destroy a part of them. So they tell others. They tweet, write blogs, text, call, interrupt, and at times even stand on furniture to have their messages heard.

Welcome to the world of John the Baptist, someone who cannot help but talk about his conviction.

We first heard about John when Zechariah, his dad, encountered the angel who told him to start preparing a baby’s room, and we first discovered his role when Elizabeth, his mom, met up with Mary, and John leaped for joy, even while he was still in the womb.

Now we see his full ministry, preaching and baptizing in the wilderness. As John declared to those who questioned him, he was, as Isaiah put it, “the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’” (John 1:23)

And John was no small preacher. He brought in crowds to hear his sermons and flocks of people to repent and be baptized. John was a big deal, so much so that the authorities in Jerusalem sent investigators to determine his motive and message. In the midst of all of this hoopla and attention, John didn’t change his message.

Have you ever thought about what compelled him to stick with his message? John hadn’t yet been told that Jesus was the Messiah. He had seen little evidence to tell him that anything would change. In fact, any clear thinking individual would have told John that it was pointless to proclaim anything because the Romans were clearly in charge, as were the Herodians and the Pharisees. Life wasn’t about to change, so tell people to get used to it.

Yet he remained singularly focused, telling people, “This year is different so get ready!”

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With all that in mind, can you imagine what he must have felt when he saw Jesus approaching him? Was it relief? Surprise? Wanting to tell people “I told you so”?

I think that it was a sense of fulfillment.

John had, quite literally, waited on the Lord, and the Lord showed up. According to Matthew, John even tried to redirect the Lord when Jesus came to be baptized, but Jesus insisted that John continue on his mission. As he came up from the water, God broke through the silence and declared to all of those gathered the same message in essence that John had been sharing, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:13-17)

As we think about John the Baptist and his witness during this Advent season, two ideas come to mind.

First, do we share the same conviction that he had? In looking to December 25, are we convinced that the celebration of Jesus’ birth is just a reminder of his second coming? Are we willing to give up everything we own to announce to the world that “this year is different”? If not, then why not?

That brings us to the second idea: do we really believe John’s message? John’s conviction pushed him beyond critics and commentators to continue with the singular statement, “People get ready.” John did this because he knew Jesus was coming. He didn’t hope that Jesus would come or think that it might be possible for Jesus to show up. He knew deep within his bones. He knew that he was born for that one purpose to proclaim a reality that Jesus was really coming.

Do you believe that Jesus is real and will return one day? Or in your heart of hearts, do you sometimes believe that this Christmas story is just a story, some type of nice tradition to carry on with our families?

Search your heart as you prepare for Christmas and ask the Lord to reveal what is really going on inside. And when you discover where your heart lies, heed the message of John. Prepare the way of the Lord, because, people, He is coming!

READ: JOHN 1:19-34
Something was different this time, and Andrew knew it.

He had visited the wilderness before after hearing about an eccentric preacher calling people to repent, and when he did, he discovered a message he hadn’t heard before, a message that took him down a new path. We don’t know how long Andrew would have called himself a disciple of John, but he identified himself as such… until this new voice came along.

“The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, 'We have found the Messiah.”

John 1:41

The day before, John had been preaching as normal when Jesus approached to be baptized, a dove appeared, and a voice came out from heaven. Amazing… and Andrew probably missed it. The next day, John sees Jesus again and tells the crowd that Jesus was the lamb of God, and Andrew wasn’t about to miss out again. So he left his mentor and followed his Master.

Think about this shift that happened in his life. Andrew had already left his daily routine to follow some guy in sheepskins eating honey and locust. I am sure his family expressed some concern with this move. Maybe they were afraid he was joining a cult, or perhaps they knew Andrew was an especially sensitive spiritual person. Regardless, Andrew left his life to join up with John, and then abruptly he leaves John to follow a random man from Nazareth. Why?

Something was different this time, and Andrew knew it.

So what was different? I think that we get the key in what Andrew did next. He went to his brother Simon, whom Jesus renames Peter.

So far in the story, we see John refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God. We hear the voice from heaven call Jesus His Son. And we see others refer to him as Rabbi. But what is the first thing Andrew says to his brother about Jesus?

“We have found the Messiah.” Can you imagine getting that text message from your brother?

Andrew saw Jesus for who He was, before he was ever told. Andrew knew this man wasn’t just a good teacher or a great leader, he was the Messiah—the anointed one, the promised savior of Israel, the servant who would be king. Jesus was here!

Not much is written about what Simon Peter and Andrew spoke about along the road as Andrew brought Peter to Jesus, but I doubt that they spoke about family matters or the fishing business. Andrew was focused and determined. You can almost see in his eyes the same spark that was in the eyes of the shepherds some 30 years prior. You can hear in his heart a melody line ringing “O, Come let us adore him.” You know that he was ready to leave everything for this man. And he did.

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What about Peter? Don’t you love how Peter immediately meets Jesus in this scene, and Jesus turns his life upside down? Jesus renames him, and Peter accepts. The name you were presented with in the temple, it’s changed now. Boating business, doesn’t matter. Family back home, they will be okay. Everything is different.

In Andrew and Peter, we catch a glimpse of ordinary men who knew life was more than just their business. Andrew was a seeker, and Peter was a doer, but both yearned for salvation. And when they met Jesus, they dropped everything to obtain it.

Jesus spoke of the parable of a hidden pearl in a field, and how when a man discovered the treasure, he gave everything he had to obtain the land and gain the treasure (Matthew 13:44-46). Andrew and Peter could identify with this story.

For the outside world, they probably were considered crazy for throwing away their lives and fortunes to follow Jesus, but they knew, even if they couldn’t fully explain, that the treasure of following Jesus was worth more than anything they possessed or could ever earn.

In preparing for Christmas, where is your heart? It isn’t enough to just listen with the crowd. Remember, hundreds of people came daily to listen to John preach. Andrew wasn’t special in that sense. And like those people, hundreds read their Bibles, attend services, and do lip service to love God. But when the Messiah shows up, they stay behind.

Don’t stay behind. Ask God to make your heart like the hearts of Andrew and Peter, who joyfully left everything to follow the Messiah. Run with them to meet and adore Christ the Lord.

READ: JOHN 1:35-42
Emotionally and spiritually speaking, social media can perhaps be the most dangerous place in the world. Beyond the obvious issue with inappropriate images and content, the danger lies in the dark world of comments. For every like or comment of support, there are trolls ready to explain why what you like is the dumbest thing in the universe and even worse, why your personal existence is worthless. Social media provides a never ending fountain of criticism. And criticism can hurt.

That is why I like Matthew. Matthew just seems immune to it all.

“As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at a tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow me,’ he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.”

Matthew 9:9

We all know the plight of Jewish tax collectors in the first century. They were hated. If Matthew had a Twitter account, it would list a handful of friends and a ton of folks commenting on every post.

@Mattchew17: Looking forward to another great sunrise in the city!
Reply: @fisherboyz: sure you are…so you can steal all of our money
Reply: @gideonismyhomie: you call yourself an Israelite? You are a worthless Roman wannabe
Reply: @disco_asher: why don’t you do us a favor and die?
Reply: @Pharisee1: unclean!
Reply: @Zacheaus2: Hang in there Matt.
   Reply: @fisherboyz: you too! You both should go take the first boat to Rome.
   Reply: @disco_asher: you both are a waste of air

You get the point. The life of tax collectors wasn’t pleasant, and in many ways, they set themselves up for this type of response. They made their living off the backs of the poor and supported an oppressive government run by Gentiles. Tax collectors were traitors and thieves. But Matthew didn’t seem to care. He had heard it all before.

So there Matthew sits at the booth, collecting the usual taxes and then a little extra off the top. People passed by him daily, refusing to make eye contact with him and making snide remarks as they dropped their coins in his cup. And then came Jesus.

You almost wonder if Matthew, who had no doubt grown numb to every passerby, felt something different when Jesus approached. Did he feel the eyes of Jesus rest upon him? Did he have an odd sensation as he saw this Rabbi with his disciples? Did he know what was about to happen before Jesus spoke? Maybe. Maybe not.

“Follow me.”

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Two simple words. Nothing spectacular, but something incredible.

Matthew’s whole life had been immune from people telling him what to do. He had heard it all—people telling him to die, to quit his job, to give money back, etc. But when this Nazarene told him to follow him, he did. He left. He got up and walked away from his old life.

Matthew didn’t care about what others would say. He didn’t worry about how his boss would react, and he didn’t think about what his friends would do. He didn’t think about whether he was giving in to the religious leaders or instead rubbing something in their face. He ignored the commentators and listened to the only voice he needed to hear—“Follow me.”

In the following scene, Jesus is at Matthew’s house, and Matthew is introducing Jesus to every other person in his life who had been considered unclean and cast out, and Jesus talks with them. As usual, the Pharisees balk like trolling commenters.

@Pharisee1: Just heard that Jesus is eating with sinners. Typical

@Pharisee2: Birds of a feather. LOL!

@Pharisee3: Some teacher…can’t even recruit decent students

Like Matthew, Jesus doesn’t worry about the commenters, but he does answer them in such great fashion.

@SonofMan: Might need to check your heart and read Hosea 6:6.

@SonofMan: The sick need a doctor, and I am here for the sick.

Matthew knew he was sick. Even if he ignored the naysayers in his life, he knew something was wrong, and when he heard Jesus’ voice, he immediately followed.

Do you know that you are sick? Have you responded to his voice?

This Christmas season, as you walk through all of the materialism that accompanies the season, picture yourself like Matthew, sitting in the marketplace, surrounded by the wealth, power, and possessions, and listen for the voice of Jesus beyond all of it.

And when you see sick people, like Matthew, who probably could use friends over enemies, consider being Jesus in their lives and pointing them to the Messiah who bids us all to follow Him.
Faith is a tricky thing, and blind faith is nearly impossible. Why? Because we live in a world of skepticism and broken promises.

Just think about how many times we have heard politicians promise to change the world for the better, and an election cycle later, nothing has really changed. Or the infomercials that describe the latest, greatest device to lose that belly fat, and yet months later, the belly fat still remains.

“The centurion replied, ‘Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed.’”

Matthew 8:8

In the 1800s, the nation was replete with individuals selling whatever cure or treatment they could, all packaged in glass bottles and advertised as nerve tonics, cold treatments, kidney cures, and of course, the infamous snake oil. Snake oil arrived in the United States in the mid-1800s along with Chinese railroad workers who brought with them some medicine from home, including a salve made from the oil of certain snakes in China that helped to ease inflammation. When certain people in the states saw this, they sought to replicate the concept and made their own, taking it from a simple external treatment to an internal medicine that cured everything from hair loss to stomach ailment. Thus we have the idea of “Snake Oil Salesman”—people who promise healing but never deliver it.

While “Snake Oil Salesman” as a term only began in the late 1800s, the concept has been around forever, and it would have been familiar to a well-trained Roman soldier, whose job was to oversee 100 armed men. As the man in charge, he had to know whom he could trust and whom he could not. He had to know that when he gave a command that it would be carried out without his needing to confirm that the task was completed. Very little could get past these men, and they never fell for charlatans or hucksters. They dealt in the world of cold hard facts.

So why did this man of war come to Jesus? Because he believed.

As Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion approached him with a simple request: “Please heal my servant.”

This wasn’t the first time that Jesus had heard such a request. He had been bombarded during his ministry with those who needed healing. Just previously, in Matthew, we read that he was healing throughout the region, and people were bringing to him folks with every kind of disease—those suffering with severe pain and seizures, those who were paralyzed, and those who were demon possessed.

What makes the centurion’s request different is what the man didn’t bring with him. Every other person brought the one who needed healing. They believed that Jesus’ power only extended to the point of Him seeing the person or touching the person.
THE CENTURION

The centurion left his servant at home.

Don’t you love Jesus’ responses in this exchange? The centurion left his servant at home, which meant a trip to the house for Jesus and His disciples. You can imagine some of the 12 were thinking, “We have no time to deviate from our course,” and others would have thought, “why should we help a man so connected with the Roman oppression?” And yet Jesus doesn’t care. He is willing to go anywhere. “I will go and heal him,” Jesus replies.

The centurion stops that plan dead in its tracks. “No need to do that. First, I don’t deserve for you to come into my house. More importantly, you have authority over diseases, and all you have to do is say the word, and he will be healed.”

How does Matthew describe Jesus? He was astonished. Astonished!

Why? Because of what the centurion brought with him—faith. According to Jesus, this centurion provides for us an example of faith unlike anything seen in Israel.

Today, as you take the time to prepare your hearts for the coming celebration of the Christ child, take a look at what you are bringing to Jesus. Are you bringing faith like the centurion? Do you believe that regardless of your request, Jesus can bring you an answer? Do you acknowledge Him as having authority over not only disease, but also relationships, circumstances, and the future?

Or in your heart do you think of Jesus as some type of snake oil salesman—selling a false promise that couldn’t possibly be true?

If you were to ask the centurion, he never had a doubt. He didn’t know all of the mysteries of faith in Jesus, but he knew one thing—Jesus was who He said He was, and He can bring healing.

Jesus replied to the centurion, “Go! It will be done just as you believed it would.” And right then and there, the servant was healed.

What do you think His reply will be to you when you approach Him with the faith of a centurion?

READ: MATTHEW 8:5-13
Some stories become all too familiar that we lose the wonder of the moment.

For example, when we see the movie about the underdog team whom everybody counted out, we know what will happen. At the last minute, the impossible will take place, and they will win. It’s fun, but it’s predictable.

“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”
Luke 7:47

These motifs become so standard and so familiar that we often just expect it to happen and thus we rarely get caught up in the story.

It’s sad when we do the same with the Bible. We hear about Jonah going into the sea, and then we expect the large fish to spit him out. We see Elijah and the prophets of Baal, and we aren’t amazed when he fills the altar with water and God consumes it with fire. When Jesus goes into the tomb, we know what happens next. It’s one thing to have good biblical literacy, but there are those times that we absolutely miss on the glory of the moment.

I think this happens when we read about Jesus’ anointment at Simon’s house. This scene is depicted three times in the synoptic Gospels and also a fourth if you include John’s account of Mary anointing Jesus in a similar way during the Passion Week. For the purpose of today’s devotion, I want us to focus on the account that Luke provides.

Jesus is invited to have dinner at the house of a man named Simon. We do not know much about Simon. Matthew and Mark claim this is Simon the leper. For Luke, he describes Simon as having a connection with the Pharisees. Regardless of his background, we can see from the scene that he was probably a good man who was curious about Jesus, but still had to keep up appearances.

Out of nowhere, a woman enters the scene bringing an alabaster jar of expensive perfume. So far, so good. We shouldn’t be surprised. Then she does something so incredibly odd. This uninvited woman, who was clearly known in town for a sinful life she had lived, began to wash Jesus’ feet with her own tears.

Why? Who let her in? Why would she even think to do that? What is happening here? But it gets more shocking.

She breaks the perfume and begins to anoint his feet with the perfume.

You can almost hear Simon’s mind whirring. Wait. Does she know how expensive this is? It costs up to three months at least to purchase something like that. In fact, this was likely a family heirloom that in many ways was her only possession of any value.

Who does she think she is, coming in here uninvited? And doesn’t she know her reputation? There is no way that she will find a suitable husband. I doubt her family would take her back in. That perfume at least gave her some financial security as she gets older. And she is wasting this on Jesus’ feet? What does she think she is doing? What man wants perfume all over his feet?

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Now do you get the shocking nature of this story? Her actions are ridiculous and utterly reckless. And that’s the point.

Those present felt this sense of shock, and they questioned Jesus about it.

Jesus simply answered, “Simon, someone who is forgiven more than they could imagine will love more than they can imagine.”

You see, this woman knew her life. She had no delusions of self-righteousness as the Pharisees had, and she had no delusions of self-reliance as the Disciples had. She knew who she was, and she knew that Jesus accepted her just the same.

The woman’s love toward Jesus was so much that she abandoned everything that she had, everything that she owned, everything that she was, just in order to worship her Savior.

That is what I call sacrifice, a reckless sacrifice that doesn’t hold onto anything.

As we enter the Christmas season, who are you in the room? Are you sitting with the Pharisees? Are you full of biblical knowledge and doctrinal purity but lack any heart? Are you sitting there eyeing Jesus and waiting to pounce on Him when He says something that goes against your worldview and then portray utter disdain for the “sinful” woman when she enters the room?

Or are you the Disciples? They were shocked as well. They spent all of their time with Jesus, but every one of them could easily have gone back to their day jobs. They loved being with Jesus and seeing his miracles, but none of them ever sacrificed their time to take care of getting water for Jesus’ feet.

Or are you like the woman? Are you fully aware of the depth of your sin and the vast measure of his love? Is your heart so full of gratitude that you cannot help but sacrifice lavishly for your Savior? Are you ready to abandon everything—your reputation, your friends, and your financial security—just to spend time with Him at His feet?

If we look at the scene, only one person had the correct response to Jesus—reckless love as shown by sacrifice. But there’s something about sacrifices—they hurt when given, and it isn’t a sacrifice if it doesn’t hurt.

This Advent Season, ask the Lord to reveal to you your depth of need so that you can better understand the greatness of His love for you. Ask Him to help you pour out the alabaster jar in your life so that you can become a fragrant perfume during Christmas and beyond.

**READ: LUKE 7:36-50**
Throughout this Advent Season, we have been using the theme “O, Come Let Us Adore Him,” and we’ve been exploring the lives of individuals when they first met Jesus. Today, we turn to one of my favorite moments of discovery—the Samaritan woman and her encounter with Jesus at the well.

“Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’”

John 4:28-29

To best understand what happens in this story, we need to think about it as one of those before and after photos. You know the ones that I am referring to…we see them all of the time on the infomercials. Whether it is for acne treatment, hair products, or a fitness system, you see the person in bad shape in the “before” image, and then the “after” image looks like a new person. The message—buy our product, and you will be just like this person.

Enter the Samaritan woman. Let’s call her Sharon. First, we know that according to Jews during Jesus’ time, the Samaritans were considered traitors to the Jewish bloodline and not worth their time. Second, Sharon was a woman, and in that day and age, that meant she was more in line with property than with her own personhood. So when meeting anyone, Sharon already had two strikes against her.

And then there is strike three. She has had an exceptionally bad life when it comes to men and relationships, and it is no secret to the town. In fact, she spends most of her time away from the crowds so that she doesn’t have to deal with the scorn and shame. In short, she is hopeless. Three strikes, and she wants out. Here is Sharon’s “before” picture.

Enter Jesus on the scene. He is tired and hot and only wants a drink of water. He has been moving with his group from town to town, and even though he was gaining a following, He didn’t stick around to enjoy the popularity.

Sharon wasn’t wanting to meet anyone that day. It was at the hottest time of the day, so she hoped to get to the well and back without being noticed. No such luck she realized as she turned the corner and saw some random Jewish man sitting there. In my mind, I can see her holding off for a minute before approaching, hoping to wait him out. But he didn’t move, and she had to get on with her day. Or maybe she was so jaded by this point in her life, that she didn’t care anymore about what people said.

Regardless, she approached the well, and Jesus breaks the ice. “Will you give me a drink?”

What happens next is both wonderful and humorous all at the same time. She tries to get out of the request by deflecting, and Jesus, who would have been incredible at tennis, continues to volley back questions, peering into the depths of her soul.

They cover topics such as the Jewish/Samaritan divide, the living water that everyone seeks, and eternal life and how to obtain it. By this point in the conversation, Sharon must have been feeling pretty good about herself. She was having a great conversation, and not once has this stranger found out about her past. Until…

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“Go, call your husband and come back,” Jesus asks her. We know why Jesus did this. He probably had a slight smile on His face, but she didn’t know. She was floored.

“He knew,” she thought. “Someone told him. Everyone talks about me! I can’t have a life here anymore! Here goes the only genuine human interaction I have had in years.”

She scrambles with a quick answer, “I have no husband,” trying to deflect again or perhaps excuse herself from the scene. But Jesus doesn’t let up.

Jesus continues to reveal to her how much he knows about her life, but she doesn’t run, and she doesn’t really deflect. Instead, she asks about how to worship God.

Jesus must have loved this moment as he continued to explain more and more, and then something changed with her. She begins to make connections. “I know about a Messiah who is coming. He will explain all of this to us.”

Can you see the smile on Jesus’ face and the shock on her face when he told her, “I who speak to you am he.”

Amazing! The Messiah who was to restore Israel and save His people was standing right in front of her, and he wasn’t sending her away. In fact, He told her everything about herself, and yet He stayed right there. The great I Am remained.

This same I Am speaks to us today in the same way. When we draw close to Him, he reveals our darkest sins and accepts us as we are.

Do you understand that today? Do you understand that it is your sin, not your good works, that draws you close to Jesus? It is understanding your total need for a Savior that changes your life?

Look back to the text and see her response. She is so ecstatic that she can’t contain herself. She runs off, leaving her jar, and she begins to tell everyone without any hesitation.

She tells the same people whom she had been avoiding her whole life that she met a man who knew everything about her and loved her anyway. She becomes one of the first evangelists in the New Testament! This is the “after” picture, and she doesn’t look the same at all.

Which image are you this morning—the before or after? If you are the before, give up the hiding and stop covering up your past and embrace a Messiah who has come to save you. If you are the after, then live as someone who is changed.

Spread the word the Christmas season about a man who knows everything that you ever did, and loves you anyway. This is the Messiah!

READ: JOHN 4:1-32
We’ve come to the end of our look at people who first met Jesus during his earthly ministry with a man who first met Jesus on the cross—the thief.

The scene is a difficult one to bear. Here is our Lord, whom we have seen from birth, bringing life and hope to the world, being beaten and forced to march to his own execution through the streets of Jerusalem, like a lamb going to slaughter. The creator of the universe was going to experience death at the hands of His creation.

“And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’”

*Luke 23:42*

And then there are two criminals. We know nothing about their crimes, and we really don’t have to know. All we know is that it was heinous enough to necessitate execution.

Thankfully, Luke provides us some additional insights into the hearts of these men.

After a group of Roman soldiers mock Jesus, one of the criminals decides to join them: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” Can you hear the hardness of heart in this man? He was on the cross, dying, and still his lips were dripping with anger. He is almost deriding Jesus while at the same time blaming him.

Maybe this criminal had heard of Jesus and knew about his miracles. Maybe he had seen firsthand some of the people who had been lame and now walk, or the blind who now see. Maybe he even knew of folks who claimed Jesus raised the dead. We don’t know, but it is likely he knew of Jesus; after all, he mocks Jesus by calling Him the Christ who should save Himself.

In contrast, we have the other thief. Like the first thief, this man knew something about Jesus. He knew the stories, and he probably had been aware of the trial of Jesus—how He was brought before the priests and Pilate with trumped up charges. Maybe he remembered how Jesus entered the city only a week prior in triumph, surrounded by crowds, only now to see those crowds turn on Him.

So much must have been going through this man’s mind, and when the first thief mocked him, he mustered up as much strength as he could to respond.

Remember how Crucifixion worked. Those executed by this method basically suffocated to death, as they grasped at air before they could no longer breathe. But this man didn’t care. While the first thief was compelled by anger to speak, this man was motivated by something else entirely.

Taking some of his last breaths, he shot back at the first thief. “Don’t you have any sense about you? Don’t you fear God? We knew the law, and we broke the law. We deserve this, but He doesn’t.”

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THE THIEF ON THE CROSS

Do you see the confession? What an amazing moment. This man, with no hope whatsoever, admits to deserving the death he is facing. He doesn’t blame others or blame God for it. No. He admits that he got himself into this mess that he absolutely deserves.

The man meets Jesus for the first time, and he sees immediately the depth of his own sin and the innocence of Jesus.

And then, he does something even more extraordinary—“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Of course, we all know that the tomb doesn’t hold Jesus. We are aware of the resurrection that is coming, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the return of Jesus some day. But this man couldn’t have known of any of it.

Why would he pray that prayer? If I were in that spot, I hope that I might have defended Jesus and confessed my sin, but I certainly wouldn’t have followed it up with asking this man who is dying to remember me in His kingdom. That’s just ridiculous. Jesus was about to die. What kingdom could He possible have?

But the man met Jesus and knew something extraordinary—Jesus was a King regardless of the circumstances or what the future held. And as such, He worshiped the King of Kings.

What about you? As we approach the time to celebrate the birth of the King, do you come with the bitterness of the first thief? Do you seek to blame others for your circumstances or blame God for His lack of care or concern?

Or do you own your mistakes and your problems? Does looking at this innocent man on the cross, or the innocent baby in the manger, demonstrate all the more your total sinfulness and His total holiness? Do you see the gap between your righteousness and the righteousness of the Lamb of God?

If so, confess the sin and call out to Jesus. The second thief did, and the answer he received was life changing.

“I tell you the truth (don’t we love it when Jesus starts this way), today you will be with me in Paradise.”

The second thief only expected death that morning as he marched to his crucifixion. What he found was life.

May we all cherish the life given through our Savior.

READ: LUKE 23:32-43
We are ten days away from Christmas morning.

Do you remember what Christmas morning was like when you were a child? For many of us, it was an evening of anxiety and anticipation followed by an early morning rise, rush to get down the stairs, and wide-eyed excitement at the sight of the tree.

"Suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him."

Matthew 28:9

Now, imagine the same level of anxiety and sleeplessness, but no anticipation. Imagine no rush to get down the stairs and no wide-eyed excitement. This is the feeling of the women who visited the tomb that early Sunday morning. They had no expectation and no hope. All they had was a sense of duty to get through the day. And then everything changed.

As to be expected, the Gospel writers each tell the story a bit differently. For Matthew, he focuses on two women, Mary Magdalene and the “other” Mary, who appears to be the wife of Clopas, Jesus’ uncle, which would make the “other” Mary Jesus’ aunt.

Both of these women had met Jesus along the way. For Aunt Mary, she had known Jesus since He was a little boy and had watched Him grow up. Along the way, she became a believer, and according to the early church historian Eusebius, her son, Simeon, Jesus’ cousin, became a leader in the Jerusalem church.

For Mary Magdalene, Jesus changed her life entirely. According to both Luke (8:2) and Mark (16:9), Jesus and Mary first met as she was suffering from demon possession. Jesus did what He always does, demonstrate power over all of creation, both seen and unseen, and cast out all seven that were within her. The Gospels do not tell us the story of this deliverance, but you can only imagine the relief and peace that accompanied that act. Mary could breathe again, and she gave her life to follow Jesus.

In the Matthew account, we see these two Marys the day of the burial of Jesus. They followed Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb, and sat there opposite of the grave as the stone was rolled into place. Can you hear the silence? The two sat still. Perhaps Aunt Mary, as aunts do, tried to begin to discuss plans for the Sunday morning.

“Mary, I’ll go ahead and bring some of the spices. If you have anything to bring, let me know, and we can meet here after the Sabbath at dawn.”

Mary Magdalene just nodded, her eyes swollen.

And so the two left. They participated in the normal Sabbath day ritual, although their hearts weren’t in it. After all, how can you celebrate a religion whose leaders just sentenced your Lord to death? And how can you make sense out of what He told you about the Father and the coming Kingdom when He lay cold and dead in a tomb? But they were faithful women, and they did what they had to do. “Just push on… one step in front of the other,” you can hear them say.

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THE WOMEN AT THE TOMB

Before dawn even broke on Sunday, the two woke up, got ready, gathered their belongings, and made their way to the tomb as the silence of Friday continued that morning.

Without warning, an earthquake struck, and an angel appeared, saying those wonderful words that angels always say; “Do not be afraid!”

Note the almost humorous moment in this scene. The armed men, trained soldiers of the highest level, stood like “dead men” so scared they couldn’t budge. But not the women. They were certainly frightened, but women are tough. Aunt Mary had seen all sorts of things in her life, and Mary Magdalene dealt with seven demons. They didn’t cower in fear; they listened with hope.

After hearing the angels instructions, they ran to tell the disciples, and suddenly Jesus appeared. “Greetings,” He said.

The Marys had spent so much time with Him over and over again, but this time was different. He looked different. There He stood only with simple scars on his hands and feet, but no other indications of the crucifixion. He didn’t just get up and walk out of the tomb, still battered and bruised. No, He was resurrected!

And how do they react? As they should…they worshiped Him.

We want to reflect on this moment in the Gospel, not to think about the crucifixion, although that is certainly a wonderful moment, but rather think about the wonder and the excitement when these women became the first to see Jesus in His resurrected state. They saw Jesus as He is even to this day. What an amazing thought!

While they were silent heading to the tomb, they couldn’t stop shouting and celebrating on the way back. Think of the best Christmas days ever, and multiply that by infinity, and you have something of an inkling of their excitement. If the song had been written then, they would have been shouting it to the disciples, “O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!”

We are now 10 days from Christmas. Do you share any level of their excitement? Do you understand that we worship the same risen Lord whom they saw? Has His resurrection reset your life?

As you prepare for December 25, ask the Lord to restore unto you the joy of your salvation this Christmas season. Ask Him to help you understand the wonder of that moment and how that moment can be relieved over and over again every day in our lives.

After all, we serve a risen Savior. Let’s run alongside the Mary’s proclaiming to everyone we see that He is here!

READ: MATTHEW 28:1-10
You better not pout. You better not cry. You better watch out, I’m telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town.

Every year, amidst the various Christmas songs, we hear this classic one. The jingle is both a celebration and a warning to children, and it is a tool for some parents to keep their little ones relatively well-behaved as the Christmas season approaches. At the heart of the tune is a story of people whose lives are measured by their adherence to a set of rules...a law if you will. Be nice, and you will get presents. Be bad, and you will get nothing.

“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord for whose sake I have lost all things.”

Philippians 3:7-8

Can you imagine how Saul of Tarsus would have loved this song? He would have been amazing at keeping the Santa Claus code. In fact, he would have been warning other children to straighten up their behavior, or he would have written letters to Santa to let him know how other children were being naughty. Yes, Saul was that child.

As Saul walked along the road to Damascus, he believed in his heart of hearts that his righteousness provided for him a special responsibility from God to hold others accountable to the Law. His job was clear. He sought to bring order among those rabble-rousing Christ followers—clearly rebels worshiping a false god.

This work to rid the world of Christians wasn’t an isolated incident. It was a deep part of his DNA. He was ruthless at keeping the Law, and he reflected on that fact in his letter to the Philippians. He claimed to be a Hebrew of Hebrews, zealous for the Law, and faultless in regard to legalistic righteousness. And because of this devotion to the code, he had status and notoriety.

Yet his world changed along the road. Go back to the text in Acts, and see the progression of what happens to Saul. At the beginning of the chapter, he is threatening, he is obtaining letters, and he is persecuting the church.

Suddenly, the script was flipped. A light appears, and Jesus speaks. Without warning, Saul became passive, and the Lord took the active role. To demonstrate the point even more, Saul doesn’t say a word in the passage. Even when Ananias visits him, all we read are the words from him, not Saul. Saul almost becomes a bystander at this point. There is nothing that he is bringing to the table in the midst of his salvation.

And isn’t this the point? Jesus burst into Saul’s life and upended it, and all that Saul could do was listen and believe. In this moment, Saul discovered a life he could never have imagined. Within no time, all of the pieces of his worldview came together. Later on in his ministry, he even began going by a different name to almost signify the drastic change. The old man died, and a new man—Paul—took his place.

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The change came at that moment when he saw Jesus for the first time.

Saul had spent his whole life stacking up his actions against the requirements to the Law, comparing himself to everyone else, and believing that his righteousness brought him salvation.

Does this sound like you? Are you busy compiling mental lists to demonstrate your status? Do you believe that if you have enough friends, wealth, possessions, talent, or titles, then somehow you are special and therefore worthy of being called a child of God?

Saul thought that way, but that changed when he met Jesus. You see how Saul didn't begin arguing with Jesus on the road? He didn't bring out his scrapbook of accomplishments or pull up his 401K. He didn't turn to his contact list of important friends or show his followers on Instagram. He didn't even pull out his letters from the high priest!

He only saw and listened to Jesus. That’s it. Nothing else.

The same goes for each one of us. Just like Saul, we need to see the glory of Jesus and be in awe of who He is and recognize who we are. It is Jesus’ resume, not our own, that establishes our identity. Without Him, we are stumbling around in the darkness. But with Him, we see the light.

Have you looked and listened to Jesus? Let me ask this again—have you really looked and listened to Him? When you do, you are changed. When you surrender yourself to Him, He changes everything. What a wonderful gift to receive this Christmas!

Or maybe you did meet Jesus along the road when you were younger, and your life was changed. Have you gone back to singing that old tune, thinking that the Santa Claus code of righteousness is what makes you ok?

Paul would tell us otherwise. “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.” (Philippians 3:7)

This Christmas season, let us all commit to laying down our symbols of status, whatever those may be, at the foot of the manger and adore our Savior, Christ the Lord.

READ: ACTS 9:1-22 & PHILIPPIANS 3:4-8
We have spent time this Christmas season looking at moments when people have met Jesus for the first time, whether that be at his birth, throughout His ministry, or after His resurrection. As we close out our thoughts on biblical figures, let’s take a moment to explore an encounter with Jesus that was like no other—John’s vision on Patmos.

“Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last, I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys to death and Hades.”

_Revelation 1:17b-18_

It is always daunting to open the Book of Revelation. Filled with imagery and apocalyptic language, the writing has been a source of various debates throughout centuries. People argue over the symbolism, the meaning, and the prophetic nature of it all.

Yet at the heart of the book is a simple message that can often get lost—Jesus wins.

Our passage opens with John, praying on a Sunday morning on the island of Patmos. An old man by this time, John had lived an incredible life. You can imagine that he might have woken up that morning and reflected on it all.

He was a fisherman and had a tight-knit family. Throughout his life, he had an unusual drawing to all things spiritual, and perhaps he was a regular attender at the synagogue, staying afterwards to talk with the Rabbi. His mom was involved in his life as well, and his brother, James, was always there by his side.

One day, he heard about a strange prophetic figure in the Jordan wilderness talking about the coming Kingdom. Interested, he and James headed off to listen to this preacher. They were immediately struck by this man’s passion and clarity, and they identified themselves as sinful and in need of a Savior. The two pledged to follow the teachings of this John the Baptizer, that is until the day when John met Jesus.

The brothers might have been there the day Jesus was baptized, or they heard about it later, but when they themselves saw Jesus, they left John and became followers of Christ. For three years their lives were filled with wonder as they witnessed the miracles of Jesus and heard His teachings. They both grew closer and closer to Jesus, sensing Him to almost be a part of their family.

When Jesus was taken away and crucified, they were heartbroken, but John stayed the course and pledged to care for Jesus’ mother as if she were his own. The pain of that day and days that followed must have been unbearable. They had lost their first teacher, John the Baptist, who had been beheaded, and now they lost their second teacher who had also been slain. What could they do next?

Then Sunday came. Jesus rose again, and everything changed. The sorrow and heartbreak turned to joy and laughter, and a man who was committed to Christ but never stood up in front of people became one of the most powerful witnesses in the Early Church. He began congregations and visited and shepherded them. He wrote letters of encouragement and exhortation. He debated heretics and sought to keep the church on the right path. He even took the time to write a Gospel about all that he had experienced throughout His amazing life.

_(continue to the next page)_
So when he woke up that morning, exiled on this Roman prison island, he must have thought that he had really seen it all. But he hadn’t.

“Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches.”

The voice came from behind him, booming with authority and power he had never heard before, but something about it was so familiar. Turning, he was petrified at what he saw. “Is this Jesus?” he thought.

Unlike the last time that he saw Jesus, some sixty years prior, this vision wore a priestly robe, with a golden sash he had never seen before. His hair white was as snow, eyes blazing with fire, and feet glowing bronze. This Jesus was more powerful, magnificent, and glorious than anything John had ever seen. Can you imagine the feelings that had to be going through John?

And don’t you love how Jesus responds? “Do not be afraid.” The Lord knows us so well. Every time that He reveals Himself to us, whether it be through the angels in the Old Testament, angels in the New Testament, or here in Revelation, He always leads with that line—“Do not be afraid.” In fact, every time God continues to reveal Himself to us, whether it be through Scripture, prayer, a special message we hear, or just a still small voice, He says the same thing—“Do not be afraid.”

Of course, it’s easy for someone to say that, but do they really have the authority to keep us safe? Well, Jesus does.

“I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One.” I think that is a pretty hefty résumé, but He doesn’t end there.

“I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!” Boy, that’s a solid claim. Nobody else can say that.

“And I hold the keys of death and Hades.” That seals the deal!

The Jesus that John met that day was Jesus the Victor. He was the Jesus who stood above the problems and the worries of life. He was the Jesus who had defeated all things, even death.

And guess what. This vision of Jesus wasn’t a temporary thing. John didn’t make it up or look into some future state of Jesus that hasn’t happened yet.

No, the Jesus who John saw, clothed in majesty and glory, with the earth as His footstool and holding the keys to life and death—this Jesus is our Jesus! So as we prepare our hearts for Christmas, let’s remember that the Jesus we see in the manger is also the one walking among the golden lamp stands. The humble child is our victorious King.

Let us fall down in awe and worship Christ Jesus, our Lord!

**READ: REVELATION 1:9-18**
Christmas has taken on various meanings these days. Whereas for many years, it was a moment of reflection on the birth of Jesus, today, it is a time of parties and presents and almost unbridled revelry. Materialism fills the airwaves, and people party almost to excess.

*Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*

*Romans 13:14*

Prior to the church establishing December 25 as the celebration date for Jesus’ birthday, Romans celebrated it as a pagan holiday, filled with hedonistic activities. Perhaps our world has come full circle.

Today we focus on a man whose life was wrapped up in this type of wild materialism—Augustine of Hippo.

Augustine was born into a split religious home in a small town in North Africa in 354 AD. His father, a Roman official, held to traditional pagan rituals, while his mother, Monica, was a stout believer, continuously praying for the salvation of her family.

As a young child, Augustine showed incredible academic promise, and his parents provided him various education opportunities. Since learning came so easy to him, he spent a good bit of his time in frivolous activities and indulging in whatever carnal pleasures he could find.

Continuing in his lavish lifestyle, he headed to the city of Carthage along the path to become a lawyer or public official, just as his father had done. He excelled in rhetoric and consumed the writings of Cicero and other classical Roman authors. He also took for himself a concubine and through that relationship had a son.

But something still lacked in his life. So he went from the writers of rhetoric to the philosophers of Rome, becoming a student of Manichaeism, which is a dualistic worldview that saw everything as a fight between the light (spirit) and the darkness (physical). Accordingly, salvation could only be achieved by abstaining from all things physical and focusing solely on rational thought and purified rhetoric. For nine years he studied with this group until he finally felt that all of their answers to life left him hollow.

Next, someone introduced him to Neoplatonism. This new outlook helped answer some of his questions, but many others arose, and he continued to have a nagging feeling that something was missing from his life. And he knew what it was, Jesus.

His mother had continually prayed for Augustine, and he knew all of the answers, but his heart wasn’t willing to give up on his ambitions and pleasures. He wrote that often he prayed, “Give me chastity and continence; but not too soon.”

The back and forth dragged on and on until finally he could take it no more. One day as he was spending time with his friends, he broke and ran away from them to take solace in a nearby garden. As he sat on a bench, with a Bible in front of him, he heard a simple voice calling out, “Take up and read!” It sounded like a child’s voice, perhaps from a house around the corner, but he couldn’t see anyone.

*(continue to the next page)*
So he did what the voice said and picked up the book and read it. And his eyes came to these words in the book of Romans, chapter 13: “Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.”

Can you see the look on Augustine’s face as he read this? Here he was, struggling with whether or not to join the faith of his mother, a faith that he had seen first-hand direct her life and the lives of many others, but a faith he had continually rejected. For him, Jesus was merely a run-of-the-mill teacher. Sure he was famous, but he wasn’t special, and his followers were no better.

Besides, he loved his life, or so he thought. Reading the passage, he must have thought through his lavish lifestyle and all of the joys he thought he should have received from it but didn’t. Every act of debauchery just left him more and more empty. This was a truth that he had to face. And then he found his answer as he continued to read.

“Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

In that moment, Augustine stopped fighting. In that moment, he ceased trying to fill his life with empty pleasures and surrendered to God. In that moment, he met Jesus.

“I had no wish to read further, and no need,” Augustine explained. “For in that instant, with the very ending of the sentence, it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away.” (Confessions, Book 8)

From that moment forward, Augustine committed his life to the cause of Christ, becoming one of the most influential Christian leaders throughout all of church history. And all of that happened because he discovered a simple truth, we are broken without Jesus.

One of the most famous lines in his Confessions sums it up perfectly: “For Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee.”

In the midst of the clutter and materialism of Christmas, ask yourself if you are restless. Are you wandering around trying to fill that hole in your heart with friends, money, power, influence, relationships, or anything else?

Even believers struggle with this issue. And that is why we should use the example of Augustine, clothe yourselves with Christ.

When we surrender our all to Jesus, taking Him as our only hope, we finally find rest and finally find the love for which we all have been searching.

This December 25, don’t engage in the revelry as everyone else. Engage in the worship of the One who fully satisfies the longing of every heart. O come, let us adore Him!

READ: ROMANS 13:11-14
If you haven’t heard it already, you will soon. There will be that time when you are watching some random movie or television show and a character will start talking about his or her “faith.” Or perhaps it is a public official thanking various faith-based groups, or describing someone’s deep faith commitment.

“For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith, from first to last, just as it is written ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

Romans 1:17

Talk of faith becomes even more popular during the Christmas season, as we gingerly walk around the topics of Jesus and salvation with our unbelieving friends, family, and co-workers, all to keep the atmosphere light and jovial. So we keep faith generic.

But is faith ever generic? The very definition of faith seems to demand an object into which the faith is placed. And so we approach December 25 with a simple question, where do we place our faith?

This question haunted a young German monk in the 1500s by the name of Martin Luther. An exceptionally gifted child, Luther was driven by a strong-willed and hard-working father to make something of himself as a lawyer. Yet, Luther went a different path, enrolling in a monastic order especially known for its academic prowess—the Augustinians.

Luther took to his study of medieval theology with amazing tenacity, and as the Renaissance scholars of the day produced more and more texts of Scripture in the original Hebrew and Greek (the main text used by the church at the time was only found in Latin), Luther poured over those as well.

His intensity for study was outpaced by his intensity for spiritual growth. However, the drive behind this intensity was fear. Luther feared hell. He feared damnation. He feared God. And that is as far as he got. Just fear.

As he poured over Scripture, he sought to overcome fear through righteous living. Luther attempted everything he could according to the Church at the time to earn his salvation. He took the Lord’s Supper incessantly. He read Scripture constantly and remained steadfast in prayer. In the realm of good works, he engaged in that as well, and he had grown to become a stand-out monk and budding professor of theology. In short, Luther put his faith in himself.

Fear drove him, but not to holiness. Rather, it drove him to misery.

A student of Scripture, Luther often lectured on different books of the Bible at his university in Wittenberg. Among them came a lecture on the Book of Romans, which only multiplied his fear, especially as he read Paul’s use of Habakkuk 2:4—“the righteous will live by faith.”

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“This phrase was customarily explained to mean that the righteousness of God is a virtue by which He is Himself righteous and condemns sinners,” Luther later recalled. “In this way, all the teachers of the church except Augustine had interpreted the passage.”

For Luther, the righteousness of God, that for which he strove, was absolutely unattainable. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get there. In fact, he became all the more defeated when he realized that every bit of his strivings for God came from a selfish motivation—fear of judgement. How can one purely love and serve another when all they are doing is fearing their judgement? How can you put faith in that?

But then, the change happened.

“This misunderstanding continued until, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, I finally examined more carefully the word of Habakkuk 2:4: ‘The just shall live by his faith,’” Luther explained. “From this passage I concluded that life must be derived from faith.”

Luther abandoned his striving for righteousness and came to realize that the righteousness of God was the gift given to us, not a judgement upon us, and it is through faith—faith in the righteous gift of God—that we are made right with Him.

Through this revelation, Luther said, “the entire Holy Scripture became clear to me, and heaven itself was opened to me.”

Luther’s heart and life changed when he took his eyes off of himself and his own works and placed them upon God’s gift.

So what is God’s gift to us? His gift is the birth of Jesus, who was laid in a humble manger. His gift is the life of Jesus, who revealed the Kingdom to us. His gift is the cross of Jesus, through which we can receive His righteousness. And His gift is the resurrection of Jesus, and the knowledge that we too will be raised with Him.

This Christmas, avoid the generic faith. Avoid the faith that has no object at all or the faith that is only focused on yourself.

Instead put your faith in the same place where Luther and so many more have—in Christ. Only there will you find peace, and only there will you really begin to love and serve God.

**READ:** ROMANS 1:16-17; 3:21-26
Christmas is five days away, which means five days of scrambling to get everything done that you wanted to finish three weeks prior. Stores will have lines and lines of people, and every online shopper will be selecting the “priority shipping” option. The busy nature of life speeds up as we approach December 25.

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”

Romans 5:1-2a

Being busy isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Certainly, we need to avoid overworking ourselves, and we must strive for moments of rest and reflection, but when our focus is on the right things, busyness can be productive.

The trouble comes when the tyranny of busyness overwhelms us with everything but what is important.

This struggle particularly weighed on our focus of today, John Wesley.

John Wesley was born in in Lincolnshire, England, in 1703 to a very religious family. His father served as a local Anglican minister, strict and devout in his faith, and his mother was just as focused and strong-willed. Combined, they ensured that Wesley was busy at being a good Christian.

For college, he headed to Oxford and excelled in his studies, working his way to be a teaching fellow and also an Anglican clergyman like his father. He and his brother, Charles, along with other students, formed the Holy Club at Oxford, a group who strove for a rigid and focused devotional life as well as service to the poor.

Throughout his readings, Wesley always seemed to be drawn more to spiritual authors, such as Thomas à Kempis, rather than theologians, as if something in his soul longed for more than just rigid doctrine.

A few years into his time at Oxford, he headed to the English colonies in the New World to serve as a missionary in Georgia. Channeling the example of his father, Wesley sought to bring about order and piety to these colonists, who did not appreciate his actions nor his tone. To make matters worse, Wesley suffered humiliation through a broken relationship with a woman who chose to marry someone else. Frustrated, Wesley responded in anger, and he was slapped with a lawsuit for defamation of character. Unwilling to face the charges, Wesley fled the colony and boarded the first ship back to England.

The entire trip to the colonies was an utter failure for Wesley, except for a strange friendship he formed with a group of German-speaking missionaries known as the Moravians. These believers practiced a more heart-focused religion than did Wesley and his family, a religion very reminiscent of the writings Wesley had been drawn to during his time at Oxford. Throughout the voyage to Georgia...

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JOHN WESLEY

...the Moravians gathered for prayer and song and had an unusual peace about them. In fact, when the Atlantic threw storms in their path, Wesley cowered in fear and the Moravians bowed in prayer.

On his boat ride back to England, filled with disgrace from his actions, Wesley must have thought about this group over and over again. After all, he practiced a busy, devoted lifestyle, just like them, but he did not have their peace. What made them different?

Curious, he decided to look up a local Moravian there in London, and the two became friends. He also decided to attend some of their gatherings, and at one particular small group meeting on Aldersgate Street, he sat with the group as they began to read Martin Luther’s Preface to the Romans. In that moment, Wesley found salvation.

As he recalled, “About a quarter before nine, while [Luther] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed.”

Isn’t that a great phrase? I love how he puts that moment when the Spirit began to move. His heart was “strangely warmed.” Yet, it doesn’t end there. He doesn’t just have a warm and fuzzy moment. It isn’t that he was just in front of the Christmas tree and a special song came on the radio and he felt goosebumps. No, the feeling came because of a reality he discovered.

“I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for my salvation,” he continued, “and an assurance was given me that He had taken my sins away, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

Of course, Wesley had known of Jesus his whole life. He had devoted himself to the concept of Jesus and to the actions necessary to be a follower of Jesus. But he had never met Jesus…until that night.

When Wesley met Jesus, Wesley’s heart was melted, and his life was changed.

Did he become less busy? Certainly not. Wesley spent his life preaching throughout England, traveling some 250,000 miles and speaking more than 40,000 times. He wrote over 200 works, and he trained up a new generation of young preachers. He ushered in the concept of modern evangelicalism, and in many ways, English religious history in the late 1700s could rightfully be called the Age of Wesley.

What changed for Wesley? He not only placed his faith in Jesus, but he also trusted that the faith provided access to the Father. He embraced grace in his life and allowed grace, not works, to set his course.

In many ways, the story of Wesley reminds us of the story of Paul, and even Martin Luther. All put faith in their works, their status, their strivings. And all learned to count these as loss when they approached the manger.

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What about you? Have you approached the manger yet? Sure, you may have spent your whole life going through the Christian motions. You may have begun your own Holy Club or maybe have been engaged in incredible philanthropic activities. You may even stand up every Sunday and preach the Gospel. But have you met Jesus?

When we meet Jesus, we embrace the fact that we are merely sinners and He is a gracious Savior. When we meet Him, we bow down, just as the Magi did, and lay our treasures at His feet.

If you haven’t ever met Jesus, let me encourage you to pray to Him today and receive salvation. It is the best gift you will ever receive.

But if you have met Jesus in the past, yet your heart has grown cold and hardened, let me encourage you to pray to Him as well. When you do, your heart will also be strangely warmed in the knowledge that the Christ Child has come to save you, even you!

O come, let us all adore such a marvelous Savior!

READ: ROMANS 5:1-11
For those of us in Texas, we love winter, mainly because it is so short. We have a few ice storm storms and maybe a couple of days of snow, but for the most part, it turns cold for a few months and goes away…barely disrupting our daily lives.

“Then I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’”

Revelation 21:3

But for folks up north, winter is a different matter, especially long winters. I remember my second year in the Chicago area working on a master’s degree. It snowed in early November, and I didn’t see grass again until the end of March. What began as a magical experience became a dreary mess. It seemed like winter would never end.

In his famous children’s story, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, C. S. Lewis uses this image as a way to describe the dreary state of Narnia without its true King on the throne. Without Aslan, the world remained in a constant state of hopelessness.

This reality in many ways characterized Lewis’ life prior to meeting Jesus.

A native of Belfast, Ireland, Lewis lost his mother to cancer when he was ten years old, and afterwards his father withdrew emotionally from he and his siblings. Subsequently, his father enrolled him in a boarding school under the rule of a principal who had unknowingly suffered a mental illness and treated the children severely.

Given these harsh conditions, Lewis decided at about the age of 14 to reject the notion of God because the only god he experienced was a cruel and ruthless tyrant. For Lewis, it was better to be an atheist and remove God from the equation than to worship such a deity.

While he suffered immensely as a child, he found his escape in literature and would often create grand and imaginative stories with his brother, Warren. These included worlds filled with talking animals and long, illustrious histories.

In 1914, war broke out across Europe, and for 5 years, death and destruction became commonplace. At the age of 18, Lewis enlisted in the army, after only one year of college at Oxford. Experiencing every bit of the harsh realities of battle, he survived the war but suffered injuries both physical and emotional, including the loss of his closest friend, Paddy Moore.

After the war, he returned to University College in Oxford where he excelled in his study of literature. Soon, he was named a teaching fellow at Magdalen College and began to publish his poetry.

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He also befriended a fellow teacher named J. R. R. Tolkien, with whom he would take long walks discussing literature and philosophy in the evenings there on the college grounds. During one of these walks, Lewis’ heart began to change. A devout atheist, he began to question whether or not there really was a God, and by the evening’s end, he made his change to believing in a God, although not yet ready to embrace Christianity.

The turn to Christianity came some two years later in the most unlikely of places—the sidecar of a motorcycle. Riding with Warren to a zoo, Lewis claims that when he began the ride he did not believe in Jesus, and by the end, he did. That’s some interesting journey!

For Lewis, Christianity just made sense. It was as much of a heart change as it was an intellectual change. In fact, after his heart softened to consider the claims of Christ, his mind felt compelled to believe them. It was almost as if the winter was passing and spring had begun.

“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen,” Lewis once told a group of scholars, “not only because I see it but by it I see everything else.”

After his conversion, Lewis became perhaps one of the most influential apologists of the 20th Century, producing such wonderful works as *Surprised by Joy*, *The Problem of Pain*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and of course, *Mere Christianity*.

Perhaps his most popular work is his Chronicles of Narnia series, a magical tale of good overcoming evil, all serving as an allegory for the Christian life. The Christ figure in the tale is the incredible Aslan, the Lion King of Narnia whose absence in the second book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, had allowed the White Witch to step in and create a perpetual winter.

Yet as the heroes of the story—Peter, Susan, Edward, and Lucy—arrive in Narnia, things begin to change because “Aslan is on the move.”

In the book, the children are befriended by Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, who kindly took them in and provided assistance along the way. As they travel across Narnia, they begin to notice changes in the landscape as the harsh winter began to fade and a sleigh approached in the distance.

“Come and see! This is a nasty knock for the Witch! It looks as if her power is already crumbling,” exclaims Mr. Beaver, who is dancing with delight.

“Didn’t I tell you,” he continued, “that she’d made it always winter and never Christmas? Didn’t I tell you? Well just come and see.”

They were surprised to see on the sleigh Father Christmas, who came just in time to provide them gifts for the harsh journey that lay ahead. Christmas had arrived, and all would soon change!

Of course, we know the story from here, how Aslan’s victory over the witch came through a “deeper magic” that involved sacrifice for sinners and how Aslan’s resurrection brought new life to the world and all who trusted in him.
What a marvelous depiction of the change that overcomes our lives as Christ enters the scene and melts the coldness of our hearts.

He melted Lewis’ heart in the same way. Once a man who rejected the very thought of God, Lewis grew enamored with Christ and became one of the most outspoken and thoughtful apologists of the Christian world.

What is the temperature of your heart this season? Are you stuck in perpetual winter, never seeing the end? Then, friend, let me tell you, Aslan is on the move and Christmas is almost here.

This season, let the King of Narnia enter into your life and melt the snow. Let Him make all things new. Let spring arrive as we worship Christ the Lord!

READ: REVELATION 21:1-5
Two days to go, and we all have our lists. If we have the time, we check them twice, but most of us are just scrambling to get everything crossed off and done. In so many ways, Christmas becomes a season of anything but peace.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.”

*John 1:1-2*

That is why it is so important to take time during the Christmas season to stop, breathe, and pray. If we don’t, we won’t, and we will miss the meaning of Christmas amidst the twinkling lights.

As we spend the last two days preparing, let’s take a moment to reflect on the wonder of this season through John’s incredible prologue to his gospel.

“In the beginning was the Word.” Stop there and breathe that in.

Before all of creation...before any matter was formed, before any energy was expended, the Word—Jesus Christ—was.

Stop. Read it again. Let it sink in.

“And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.”

How amazing is that? Did you stop and really think about it? As I am writing this, tears are welling up in my eyes contemplating this simple fact—Jesus is God, and He came before all things.

So let me bring my bag of concerns, worries, and troubles to the table, dump them out, and look through them. Let’s see, we’ve got finances, house repairs, family gatherings, gifts, work stress, church issues, studies, broken promises, missed opportunities, hurt feelings, parenting challenges, time with my spouse...and that is just the stack labeled “mine.”

Let’s look over at this list, complete with societal sins and global chaos—war, famine, poverty, hatred, discord, terrorism, abuse—the list can go on and on and on.

Looking at these stacks is quite frankly overwhelming because nothing I can do will ever handle it all.

But that is when I think that before all of those stacks were formed and all of my lists were made, Jesus was....I can not help but cry with the Psalmist, “Why are you in despair, my soul? Hope in God!” (Psalm 43:5)

So before we move on to anything else, let’s just breathe in this simple fact: Jesus is before all things, over all things, and above all things.

Do we believe that? Do we believe in his authority over our situation?

Again, stop and contemplate that. Have you realized that the Jesus we have been celebrating and encountering for the past three weeks—the Jesus of Mary, Matthew, Paul, and Martin—is the eternal Jesus who is Lord over all things?

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So, let’s take some time today…maybe a good five or ten minutes…to just sit in silence and reflect on this wonderful truth.

Imagine your stack of worries, frustrations, and concerns on your kitchen table. Close your eyes and imagine them. Don’t be afraid to be overwhelmed.

Got that feeling? Do you see them?

Now, in this silence, picture Jesus sitting at the table also, looking over the stack.

Do you see His face? Do you see His eyes? Can you see any level of worry in them? Does He look frustrated or concerned?

He doesn’t, does he? You know why? Because He is the Word who has come before all of these things, and He is the Word who will be around long after all of these things.

When you see His face, did you notice something about your feelings? Did it change? Did that unusual peace come?

You see, when we look into the face of the Living One, when we gaze into His eyes and see His power, His strength, His glory, we know that everything will be ok.

That is why we are called to adore Him. It isn’t because He needs the attention. It is because we need the peace.

Stop, breathe, and pray. Live in His peace.

**READ: JOHN 1:1-18**
Christmas Eve, a day filled with final preparations and trips to visit extended families.

If you grew up like me, Christmas Eve was a time to spend with family. My grandparents, aunt and uncle, cousins, and any other relatives and family friends would gather at someone’s house, share a meal, and exchange presents. While Christmas morning was just my immediate family, Christmas Eve was for the entire family.

“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

John 1:12

As we stick with the John prologue, let’s keep this idea of family in mind.

You will recall that yesterday we spent some time in silence, breathing in the fact that our Jesus is also the Lord above and before all things. No problem is too big or overwhelming for Him. He has literally seen it all.

Today, let’s let our eyes head down to verses 10-13.

“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.”

I love the simplicity of John’s language while at the same time being so incredibly deep. He has already established Jesus as the creator of all things, in very essence God, and here he reminds us of this again. The world…the cosmos…all that ever has been and ever was…it was made through Jesus. Hallelujah!

Yet, John places that phrase between two very interesting phrases. First, as mentioned in verse 9, this Word had come to live among us. The news of the coming creator should have brought joy to all of creation. But that isn’t what happened.

“…the world did not recognize him.” How? How could they not see His glory? How could they not understand? How could they not believe?

And John goes on. “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”

The King returned to His land, but the hired hands, the servants of the land, those who themselves had no legal right to claim the land, rejected the King and threw Him out.

You might think that is the end of the story, but this is just the beginning of John’s gospel. Rejection isn’t the end.

“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name…”

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Before we move on from that, can you imagine back to the first time you heard these words? Think about the first time the earliest believers read these words. Can you sense the anticipation? The readers said, “What, John? What happened to those who believed?” They all were eager to know the rest of the story, and we should be as well.

“…he gave the right to become children of God.”

Just as we did yesterday, take a moment to let that amazing truth sink into your heart and let it penetrate your soul.

We believe in Jesus, and what does He do in return? He makes us children of the Most High.

Picture yourself at that house. Just as you would see yourself on a Christmas Eve with your family, think about Christmas Eve in your Father’s mansion. Imagine the food and the gifts. Imagine the music and the joy. Can you picture the decorations? Can you sense the excitement?

As you look around the room, you see brothers and sisters, some you have known your whole life, and others you have never seen before but somehow have always loved. This is your family. This is the family of God.

Because of the gift of Jesus, we are a part of this family. We are siblings with John, Mary Magdalene, Andrew, Simeon, and Anna. The Jesus who they called their older brother is ours as well.

So as you prepare to spend time with family, whether that brings about warm memories or trying moments, think through your larger family and how, thanks to the birth of our Savior, we are now children of God.

Praise God for this truth and worship Him today.

**READ: JOHN 1:1-18**
Merry Christmas!

For so many, there is something magical about Christmas morning. We have surprises awaiting us, as well as laughter and joy. It is almost like all things are made new as the dawn of Christmas breaks.

“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 1:14

This sense of newness brings us to our final devotion for the Advent season and perhaps one of the most incredible verses in all of Scripture.

Throughout our time together, we have been preparing our hearts for this day. We have seen individuals encounter the Savior and their lives were forever changed. Mary became a mother. Matthew became a disciple. John saw the future. Augustine overcame his past. Paul changed his name, and Lewis changed his view.

In each encounter is the incredible truth found in verse 14 of John 1.

Let’s take some time to walk through these lines. First, we see that the Word…that which was before the dawn of time…became flesh. Literally, it means that Jesus decided to come down and set up camp along with us.

He became one of us. He didn’t merely use the drive through. He didn’t FaceTime us. He talked with us, laughed with us, cried with us. He loved us enough to live among us.

And it doesn’t end there. John goes on to talk about the glory of the One and Only, a glory that he has seen and would stake his life upon. He explains that this glory is from the Father in Heaven, not a sideshow type of glory, but a glory whose existence is owed to God.

But just when you thought it couldn’t get any better, John slips this simple yet life-changing phrase into the mix: “full of grace and truth.”

“Full of grace and truth.”

Have you stopped to ever think about that phrase? Imagine those two elements put together. Jesus, full of all truth. He knows all things and sees all things. As the woman at the well can attest, He sees to the depths of our hearts. Matthew could say the same thing, and what about the thief on the cross? Think about Augustine and his life of sin.

All could claim that Jesus knew exactly who they were. They couldn’t hide. The truth called them out.

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But thanks be to God! It doesn’t end with just the truth. If we were left there, then we would have no hope and no future. Just like the characters in Narnia, we would be forever left in winter with no Christmas.

Yet Christmas comes this morning in the form of a baby in the manger, not only full of truth, but also grace.

The grace of the One and Only who looked beyond the Samaritan woman with five husbands and the live-in boyfriend. The grace looked beyond the persecution of the Church. The grace looked beyond failures, denials, and despair.

And that grace does the same for us this Christmas morning.

Jesus is well aware of who you are and brings the truth to bare. He knows your sin. He knows your envy and bitterness. He knows your failings and faults.

He knows how you lied a little to get your way. He knows how you padded your resume to get ahead. He knows that you lashed out in anger at your co-worker or child or spouse. He knows the struggles that you have every day to just get out of bed, or the struggles that you have to keep your mind from pollution.

He knows all of this…and…He still offers you grace.

Why? Why in the world would He do this?

Because He is the One and Only from the Father. He is the Word made flesh. He is the one who is called Emmanuel. He is the Savior of the World!

He is the Alpha and Omega, and every morning, He offers us grace after grace with no end.

This Christmas morning, will you acknowledge the truth and receive His grace?

If so, then let us all join in song!

O, come, all ye faithful, joyful, and triumphant! O, come, ye, o come, yet, to Bethlehem. Come and behold Him, born the King of Angels.

O, come, let us adore Him. O, come let us adore Him! O, come let us adore Him—Christ the Lord!

READ: JOHN 1:1-18
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