

ADVENT 2022



Madison First
United Methodist Church



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Rev. H. Grady Mosley, II, Senior Pastor

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CELEBRATING ADVENT

During the Advent Season each year we have the opportunity to celebrate anew the birth of the Messiah — God’s Son, Our Savior. While we often find hope, joy, love, and peace in reading the familiar Scriptures in Matthew, Luke, and John describing Jesus’ entry into our world two thousand years ago, may we also linger in the readings, seeking a renewal of our spirits and a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit.

The gospel writers remind us that Jesus entered into our world in a specific place and time, as the Son of a specific couple, and with a specific purpose. By following the events described in Scripture, we see that Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies spoken by the prophets of the Old Testament concerning the Messiah. Luke begins his gospel with the angel’s announcement to Zechariah that he would have a son who would prepare the world to receive the Messiah. He next describes the angel’s visit to Mary, the young virgin God chose to be the mother of His Son. Matthew picks up the narrative by explaining Joseph’s doubts about his upcoming marriage to Mary, and the angel’s visit that allays those doubts and leads Joseph to accept his role as Jesus’ earthly father. Luke describes the events that occurred on the night Jesus was born, including the angelic proclamation of the birth of a King to lowly shepherds watching their flocks at night. When the shepherds arrive at the stable to worship the babe in the manger, Luke tells us Mary treasured everything she experienced on that blessed night. To emphasize Jesus’ divine nature, John begins his gospel account not with the birth of the Christ child, but with the assurance that Jesus was God’s Son from the beginning of time.

In this study of the Christmas story, we will see how Jesus breaks through silence and disappointment, through the impossible, through doubt, through time, and through the darkness to bring us God’s greatest gift: The gift of a Savior who forgives our sins and gives us new life ... abundant life ... eternal life. Join us as we contemplate the blessings of the season and treasure the gift God has given us.

Deborah Mosley

and

Roberta Watson

Contributors:

Deborah Mosley is wife to Grady; mother to Brooks, Trey, and Paul; and grandmother to Thomas, Norah, Henry, and Judah. Deborah has been a media specialist and teacher in Gwinnett County Public Schools for twenty-three years. Grady and Deborah have been members of Madison First for thirteen years where she has held various teaching roles. Deborah wrote the Bible studies for weeks 2, 4, and 5.

Roberta Watson and her husband, Todd, joined Madison First eight years ago, and she has served as Director of Education since 2018. They are parents of two adult children. Roberta wrote the Bible studies for weeks 1 and 3.

Ruth Bearden and her husband, Rob, have lived in Madison for twenty-one years and raised their four adult children, James, Emily, Clayton, and John David, here at Madison First. Ruth wrote the devotional thoughts for Elizabeth and Mary for each week of the study.

Jim Killman is retired and lives on Lake Oconee. He and his wife, Lynn, have eight grandchildren and Waylon, the French bulldog. Jim wrote the devotional thoughts for Zechariah, Joseph, the shepherds, and John the Baptist.

Chris Cook and his wife, Robyn, have been members of Madison First UMC for twenty years. Chris is an artist and the owner of Madison Studios, a website design and marketing firm located in downtown Madison. Chris provided the artwork for the cover of this booklet.

Randy Gober began leading the casual worship service at Madison First in 2017. He and his wife Allison have two beautiful children, Peyton and RJ. Before being called to Madison, Randy spent ten years on the road in full-time ministry with southern gospel group, “Crystal River,” touring the southeast. He was also the worship leader at Winder Wesleyan Church for two years. Randy contributed to our **Message in Song** listings at the end of each week of study.

Kathleen Bryant is the Middle School Theater teacher at Morgan County Middle School. She is also the Choir Director for the traditional church service at Madison First. She has two girls, KK and Madison, and Pop Pop is her dad. Kathleen contributed to our **Message in Song** listings at the end of each week of study.

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JESUS BREAKS THROUGH DISAPPOINTMENT

Do you have any unanswered prayers? Most of us, at one time or another, have poured out our hearts to God, begging Him for something we desire above all other things. Maybe it was a second chance to mend a relationship. Maybe it was healing for a very ill family member or friend. Maybe it was for a new boss to rebuild morale among your co-workers. Maybe it was for a child. Sometimes these prayers have gone unanswered for weeks, months, or even years. Maybe during this time, your prayers have moved from hopeful expectation to quiet sorrow to desperation. Perhaps, at times, your disappointment has been overwhelming. And yet, you have chosen to trust God and His timing, confident that He knows exactly when to act.

MONDAY: LUKE 1:5—7

Silence. Oppressive silence. Since the days of the prophet Malachi, God had not spoken to the nation through His prophets. Approximately 400 years have passed, and during these years of God's silence, Israel has suffered under a string of oppressive foreign rulers for the vast majority of this time.¹ When the events in this passage occur, Rome rules over Israel and the Roman Senate has installed King Herod (Herod the Great) over all of Judea, including Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Herod was an Edomite, the



ESAU AND JACOB

These twin brothers were the sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Even while in the womb, they struggled against each other.

Genesis 25-27 details their conflict. After Jacob stole Esau's blessing, he was forced to flee to his mother's people in Paddan Aram because Esau promised to kill Jacob after their father died. Genesis 32-33 records Jacob's eventual return to Bethel and their reconciliation.

race descended from Esau, Jacob's brother. Many Edomites had converted to Judaism in the 2nd century BC. Because Herod and his father, Antipater, were close acquaintances of the Romans, they were favored with high positions in Israel.² Herod served Caesar and himself, leaving the Jewish nation to struggle against Roman oppression and pray for the Messiah to come and save them.

Week 1: Luke 1:5—25



BARRENNESS

During biblical times, barrenness was considered a sign of God's displeasure and punishment. As a childless couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth were disgraced among their peers. Since they no longer had any hope of bearing children, they were resigned to live under the weight of their disgrace for their remaining years.³

God has been silent among the nation, and He has also been silent in the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a faithful priest and his wife. Luke describes this couple as "righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly." Despite their years of prayer and faithful service, God has not answered their prayers for a child. His silence must have felt deafening to them. How their hearts must have ached with disappointment as they watched other couples welcome children of their own while they remained childless. As they accepted the condolences of well-meaning friends. As they heard others whisper about the possible reasons God might be denying them the blessing of children.

TUESDAY: LUKE 1:8–10

Despite God's silence, the Jewish people continued to worship and offer sacrifices at the Temple where the Levitical priests continued to serve. Five times each year, Zechariah left home to serve at the Temple in Jerusalem. By this time, the priesthood in Jerusalem numbered about 18,000, so priests were assigned special duties by drawing lots. After many years of service, Zechariah's likely once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to serve in the Temple occurred. Only he was allowed inside the holy place this day, where he placed incense on the altar. The aroma of the burning incense symbolized the prayers of the people rising up to God. As the incense burned, Zechariah prayed inside the Temple while the crowds of worshipers gathered outside the Temple to pray.



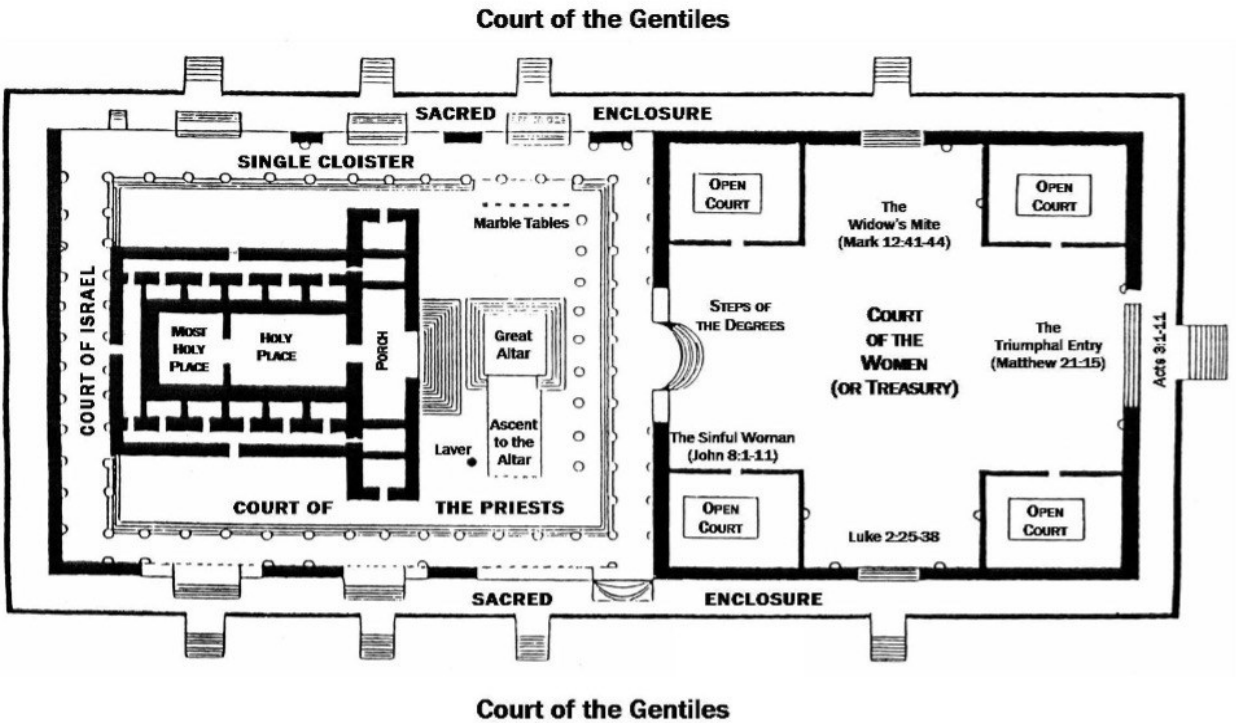
TEMPLE SERVICE

First Chronicles 24:1-19 lists the rotation of assignments established for the priesthood. Verse 10 says the eighth lot fell to Abijah, who was Zechariah's ancestor and the head of his priestly division. Abijah was one of the sons of Ithamar, the son of Aaron (the first priest and the brother of Moses). The priests' primary purpose was ministering to the LORD. Each day, they offered sacrifices, burned incense, and replenished the oil in the lamps on the lampstand. Once a week, they placed fresh loaves of shewbread on the table and consumed the old loaves. The priests also served the people by teaching them to love and serve God by following the Law.

FOR DISCUSSION

How might Zechariah have felt as he prepared to offer incense on behalf of the people?

Interior of Herod's Temple at Jerusalem



Source: J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Ministries*

WEDNESDAY: LUKE 1:11-17

After four centuries of silence, God chose this moment to speak. He sent an angel to tell Zechariah that his prayers had been heard and that he and Elizabeth will soon be the proud parents of a son! No wonder Zechariah was stricken with fear!

List below every detail this passage gives about John:

- v 14: _____
- v 15: _____
- _____
- v 16: _____
- v 17: _____
- _____
- _____



ANGELS

There are only two angels mentioned in Scripture by name: the archangel Michael (Daniel

10:13 and 21; Jude 9, Revelation 12:7-8), who is a warrior angel in authority over other angels, and Gabriel (Daniel 8:16 and 9:21, Luke 1:19, 26-27), a messenger of God.

The angel spoke immediately to allay Zechariah's fears and to assure him that God has heard his prayers for a child. This long-awaited son will bring great joy, first to his parents, and then to a nation who has waited centuries for the Messiah. Their son will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. Zechariah and Elizabeth will ensure that he is raised to fulfill God's very distinctive plan and purpose for his life. This son, whom they are instructed to name John, will be great in the sight of the LORD and will turn the hearts of the people back to God. He will go before the LORD to prepare the people to receive their LORD. Compare verse 17 with the last words spoken by Malachi the prophet.

PROPHECY FULFILLED

Malachi 4:4-6

⁴“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. ⁵“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. ⁶He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

Imagine! God's last spoken promise through Malachi was revealed as fulfilled in this very private conversation between Gabriel and Zechariah!

THURSDAY: LUKE 1:18-20

Zechariah responded to this announcement in much the same way previous men and women in Scripture had responded to some of God's great promises. Sarah laughed when she overheard the three visitors tell Abraham she would have a son by the time they returned the next year (Genesis 18:9-15). When Gideon was told he would lead the Israelites to defeat the Midianites, he asked, not once — but twice, for a sign of proof (Judges 6:36-40). Zechariah pointed out the obvious circumstances God would have to overcome and asked for a sign so he could be sure he had heard the message correctly. Zechariah's unbelief brought about an unexpected consequence. God's plan did not change because Zechariah expressed his doubts, but Zechariah would not be able to speak until the baby was born. He could not tell people about his conversation with the angel in the Temple. He would not be able to share with others the joy he felt in the coming months as Elizabeth conceived and carried his child. He would not be able to tell anyone the important role John would fill as the forerunner for the Messiah.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Have you ever been required to refrain from sharing exciting news with others?

How did you feel about having to remain silent when you wanted to shout with joy?

FRIDAY: LUKE 1:21-25

Zechariah had remained inside the Holy Place far longer than the people expected. They had probably ceased praying and begun worrying about what had happened to him. When Zechariah finally emerged from the Temple, he was forced to communicate with them using hand motions to explain something spectacular had happened to him. But hand motions alone simply couldn't convey the magnitude of Gabriel's message.

Ever faithful to his priestly duties, Zechariah completed his days of service and then returned home to Elizabeth. Surely he wondered how he could share with her everything the angel had told him. He would not be able to speak, and many people, especially women, of this time period could not read or write. As promised, Elizabeth conceived a child but chose to remain secluded for the first five months of her pregnancy. Why did she keep the news to herself? Did she fear miscarriage? Was she afraid no one would believe her? Instead of sharing her joy with other people, Elizabeth shared her joy with her husband and God. God's blessings were two-fold. The birth of John would remove their disgrace of childlessness. Later, John's ministry would prepare the way for the Messiah.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Why do you think God waited so long to respond to Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayers for a child? How did this delay serve a greater purpose?

If you are currently experiencing the disappointment of unanswered prayers and God's apparent silence, how could Elizabeth's story be encouraging to you?

If you've had a similar experience of receiving a long-awaited response to prayer, how did your faith grow during this time? How can you share with others what you have learned about waiting for God and His perfect timing?

FOR FURTHER STUDY:	
Luke 1: 57-66	Birth of John the Baptist
Luke 1:67-79	Zechariah’s Song
Luke 3:1-18	John the Baptist Prepares the Way
Matthew 11:1-15	Jesus Affirms John the Baptist
Matthew 17:9-13	Jesus Confirms Elijah has Come

JOURNALING AND PRAYERS

As you contemplate all you’ve learned this week, journal your thoughts and prayers to God.

THE MESSAGE IN SONG

The celebration of Advent is enhanced by worshiping our Savior in hymns and songs of praise. For each week of study, we have included a list of songs you might want to include on a personal playlist you can create by using your favorite musical service (like Spotify, iTunes or Amazon music).

Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus — Hymn 196	Trust in You — Lauren Daigle
Hail to the Lord’s Anointed — Hymn 203	Still, Still, Still — Austrian Carol
Blessed Be the God of Israel — Hymn 209	What Wondrous Love is This?
O Come, O Come, Emmanuel — Hymn 211	In the Bleak Midwinter — Gustav Holst and
Lift up your Heads Ye Mighty Gates — Hymn 213	Harold Darke

THROUGH ZECHARIAH'S EYES

It seemed that maybe God — YAHWEH — had forgotten me. The mystery and wonder of God's work in, through, and for God's chosen people has faded with the centuries, but I had followed in the footsteps of the special branch of Levites — the sons of Abijah, son of Aaron, son of Levi — who are set aside as priests to serve at the Temple. Even my name, Zechariah, has deep meaning: *Yahweh remembers*. I had remained faithful to the Law and performed my duties as a priest in hope that YAHWEH will remember Israel . . . and me. But I was getting on in years, and Elizabeth was barren; there would be no children to brighten our home, care for us in our old age, continue the family name.

The lots were cast and I was chosen to burn incense in the Temple. I was honored to fulfill the duties prescribed since the time of Moses. I would gladly perform the service, and get on with life. I would remain faithful and blameless with regard to the Law.

I was painfully aware of the fate of my namesake, the great prophet of the Scriptures. It was the old prophet who called out to Israel, "You will not prosper. Because you have forsaken the LORD, he has forsaken you." That prophet was stoned for his faithfulness. Even though I have not forsaken the LORD; I feel forsaken. Despite my prayers over the years for a child — a son to raise — God has remained silent on this point. I am childless.

So at the appointed time, I went to my duties as others prayed. I was met by Gabriel, the *Man of God*, with good news. My Elizabeth would conceive and bear a son! And not just any son, but a son who would bring many back to God in the spirit of Elijah. He will "turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous — to make ready a people prepared for the LORD."

But even so devout a man as I could not believe it. I was, after all, an old man, and Elizabeth was no youngster herself. As a result, I was struck dumb for my disbelief, my doubt, and I remained mute until the child is born. I do know that Elizabeth welcomed her pregnancy with joy, exclaiming, "The Lord has done this for me . . . He has shown His favor and taken away my disgrace" Unlike me, she believed. When she met the pregnant Mary, she said to her, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished." That blessing went both ways.

It is just like God to come to His people when they least expect it, bearing good news, blessings, and salvation that they do not expect. The Lord will break through even our disappointment because He always remembers His promises.

THROUGH ELIZABETH'S EYES

My name is Elizabeth, which means, *God is my oath*. You may know me as the mother of John the Baptist. He came along quite late in life. What a story that is! I grew up as the daughter of a priest, and then I married one. I suppose it was meant to be. Zechariah is such a wonderful man — a good husband and an honorable priest. How appropriate that his name means *God remembers*.

We have lived a good life and grown old together. We know each other as well as we know ourselves. When Zechariah left to serve at the Temple, I was feeling so discouraged. It seemed like life had passed me by. I felt such disappointment over a life that had not materialized. My life-long prayer was to have a child and that had not happened for us. It has been so hard all these years — the well-meaning advice, the sideways looks. Even worse, the whispers that suggested that I must have somehow disappointed God. I began to wonder if that was true. Yet, even in my sorrow, I saw the goodness of God in every day. I still trusted in His plan for my life. Perhaps God would yet use this impossible situation for something good.

I was watching for Zechariah late on that Sabbath afternoon when he was due to return home from the Temple. I saw him coming quickly across the field and, even from a distance, I could tell that something was different. He had been drawn to go into the Temple and offer the incense! When he came into the house, I could still smell it on his clothes, and I imagined the cloud of fragrance rising from the altar during worship. As he hugged me close, I knew that something important had happened to him. “Tell me all about it,” I said, hoping he hadn’t set the Temple on fire and wondering why he was so quiet. What HAPPENED in that Temple? Of all times for him not to have any words! But when I looked in his eyes, I saw great joy. He began writing frantically about what happened in the Temple. Incredibly, Zechariah had been visited by angel who told him that we would soon have a baby — a son. A baby? Now? How could it be true? Yet, knowing God’s faithfulness, how could it not be true?

Sure enough, after a time I began to feel an unfamiliar stirring in my body. If I didn’t know better, I might think I was dying, but I know now that I carry a miracle within me. God remembered us after all. Zechariah still can’t speak. I find that I miss his voice so much. I’ve stayed close to home as the months passed, feeling joyful and content to be here, taking the utmost care of this gift from God. We are to name him John, which means *Jehovah is a gracious giver*. God has shown His great favor to me. He has taken away my shame. This child is to have a great calling for the kingdom of God, beyond anything I could have imagined.

My friends, what I hope you’ll learn from my experience is to trust God in the wait. Even when it feels like He has forgotten you, He has not. Look for His goodness in every day and you will see it. Know that He can use your impossible situation for something good. He is indeed a gracious giver. I must rest now . . . it feels as though it won’t be long . . .

JESUS BREAKS THROUGH THE IMPOSSIBLE

Have you ever encountered a circumstance so monumental that you thought, “This is impossible!” Perhaps it is an illness over which you think you haven’t enough strength to triumph, an addiction over which you cannot seem to be victorious, or a challenge too overwhelming to conquer. You might have reached this place as a consequence of your own choices or maybe those of another. Regardless, you feel ill equipped to succeed. In the quiet moments of contemplation about what is before you, what if you truly believe that nothing is impossible with God?

MONDAY: LUKE 1:26-29

In Elizabeth’s sixth month of pregnancy, God continues to unfold His plan to redeem all people. God sends Gabriel on another mission, this time to Mary. We have many misconceptions about who Mary was because of the romanticization of her place in history. Traditionally, she would have been between thirteen and nineteen years old; most likely around fourteen. She is uneducated and probably cannot read or write. She is not permitted to participate in synagogue worship because women of her day were forbidden to enter the Temple beyond the Court of Women. They could watch through a screen, but they were never included. What she learned about God she learned through home worship led by her father (perhaps at Passover). She lives in a small, obscure community within the region of Galilee called Nazareth.

At that time, Nazareth was a very small village settled by a few families. Its population was somewhere between 100-400 people. It was not on a major roadway, and it sat in a basin surrounded by hills making it inaccessible, so it remained small until modernity. Most people in the village were poor and lived in caves honed out of the soft rocks of the hills. In this quiet little hamlet, God’s angel appears to Mary with a curious greeting, “You who are highly favored. The Lord is with you.”

Mary was not highly favored because of the strength of her character or her faith, both of which she possessed, nor for her position

Week 2: Luke 1:26—38

or wealth. She is highly favored because God is choosing (favoring) her above all other women to further His plan for the salvation of the world. Incredible — truly lacking credibility — that God would choose to redeem all people using an insignificant girl from an insignificant place at a seemingly insignificant time. But were these insignificant coincidences? No, clearly these were part of His plan! Of this we can be certain, God makes that which seems impossible from a human standpoint possible for His purposes.

PROPHECY FULFILLED

Isaiah 7:14

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Isaiah 11:1

¹ A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. (In Hebrew, the word for *branch* is *netzer*, “NZR,” which are the letters of Nazareth.)

TUESDAY: LUKE 1:30-33

Once Gabriel reassures Mary that she need not be afraid, he gives her a prophetic word. She will give birth to a son, and she will name him Jesus. That’s not earth-shattering news worthy of an angelic visit since Mary is pledged (engaged or promised) to Joseph. From childhood, Mary certainly prayed to be blessed with many sons, as did most Jewish girls. Gabriel instructed her to name this son Jesus — *Yeshua* — which means *Jehovah saves* (also Matthew 1:21).



SON OF THE MOST HIGH

Gabriel’s announcement that Mary’s child would be Son of the Most

High affirmed His deity. Most High, in Hebrew *El Elyon*, was an Old Testament title for God indicating that no one and nothing is higher than He is. See Genesis 14:18; Psalm 47:2, 91:1; Daniel 7:18. (Definition of “God Most High” is adapted from *God’s Gift of Christmas* written by John MacArthur.)

The next part of Gabriel’s message is startling and reveals the real purpose of his visitation. This child will be great (extraordinary, powerful, and magnificent are all related to the Greek word for *great*). He will be called the Son of the Most High. He will be the Messiah, who comes into the world to save it! Though not an astute student of the Scriptures, Mary possessed enough knowledge that she would have known about the promised Messiah, and what the angel was saying was impossible — she would be His mother. Mary probably held the same pre-conceived notions of the Messiah as many during her time. He would be a warrior king, who would break His people free from the oppressive rule of the Romans and re-establish God’s kingdom and rule. The angel’s message didn’t fit those notions. Who was she that God would choose her to play such an important role in His plan?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Think about those who are seemingly insignificant or marginalized in our world today (perhaps you would include yourself among them). Imagine if God broke through their humble state to use them to do a great and mighty work. How do you imagine this work would be received?

What evidence do you see that God is still actively involved in the lives of His people today, intervening on their behalf and breaking through their fears, doubts, and limitations to bring a saving message of hope?

WEDNESDAY: LUKE 1:34-38

God is at work, and He has a task for Mary, but how will it happen? Gabriel explains that the Most High God, through His Holy Spirit, would come upon her and overshadow her. He would plant His Son in Mary's womb. This Son would be God, the Holy One. The word "overshadow" describes the falling of the Holy Spirit upon Mary, His complete surrounding like the Shekinah glory of the Lord that the Israelites experienced as they wandered through the wilderness. This act would ensure the child was "God from God, Light from Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father" (The Nicene Creed). He alone is both divine and human, but not conceived of a man. We often hear the term virgin birth, but the miracle is a virgin conception. Jesus' birth was probably like any other baby's birth. His conception, however, was extraordinary and miraculous.

In reaction to Mary's wonder and awe, Gabriel reveals to Mary that her relative Elizabeth is also having a child, something Mary certainly did not already know. Elizabeth is the evidence that God is the Promisor, and His promises are true. Nothing is impossible with God: barren women and virgins can conceive and give birth when God is at work. Mary's response? I am the Lord's servant. May it be as you have said. What?! Think about that to which she just agreed. She, an unmarried woman, agreed to carry a baby that is not her husband's. She would be the talk of her small town. She would be ridiculed and rejected by her townspeople or, worse, Joseph could have her stoned. For the rest of her life, she would be shamed. Mary's unwavering surrender to God's plan belies an inner strength and peace in the power and provision of a mighty God, which proves that He had chosen the mother of His Son well.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Think of a time you had to make a difficult choice that might cause negative consequences for yourself or those you love. Would the decision be easier to make if you knew good would come of it? Is there someone you know who could use this reassurance today?

As modern people, we are anchored to our understanding of the world and the boundaries of science and culture and preconceived notions. What would it take for God to do a mighty work in our world today?

THURSDAY: LUKE 1:39-41

Mary immediately left to visit her relative Elizabeth (the KJV translates *syngenēs* as “cousin” while most other translations use “relative”), who lived in the hill country of Judea near Jerusalem, some 80-100 miles away from Nazareth, about a week’s travel on foot. Did she speak to Joseph or her family first? What explanation did she give for needing to leave immediately? Was Mary already pregnant? Who traveled with her? Some have said that the visitation of the Holy Spirit happens while Mary is under the care and chaperone of Elizabeth and Zechariah and away from Joseph so that there would be no doubt that Joseph is not the father of the child that she carries.¹ Others believe that she conceived while on the journey to Elizabeth’s home because she left in such haste. Luke does not provide the answers in the text. Presumably, however, the angel’s word that Elizabeth was with child gave Mary the idea to go to her. In Mary’s mind, she knew that if anyone would understand, Elizabeth would.

When Mary arrives at Elizabeth’s home, John is not yet born, and Zechariah is still mute. When Mary enters Zechariah’s home and greets Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaps, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth believes the promise of God about her own child. Her faithfulness is rewarded with a revelation about Mary’s baby. What is the significance of Elizabeth’s baby leaping for joy? Even in the womb, God has already spoken to and is using John as a forerunner of the Messiah, bringing revelation and pointing to the One who is to come. Elizabeth embraces Mary and welcomes her into her home when many would have shunned her. These months are a blessing for both Mary and Elizabeth. God brings together the two women who are integral to His plan. They are the confirmation for each other that God is at work, that the angel’s messages are truth, and that they have both been invited into God’s eternal plan for the salvation of the world. Surely their time together would give each the confident assurance to face whatever the future might hold and help them to raise these extraordinary children in obedience to their callings.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

God does not call us to a difficult task and then leave us without confirmation. When have you felt led by God, and later He sent confirmation? How did that confirmation affect you?

What reassurances do you need from God right now to help you face an uncertain future or to help you take a step of faith about which you are apprehensive?

FRIDAY: LUKE 1:42-45

Because of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth knows in an instant the continuing story of God's plan. Zechariah has told her their son will be the forerunner who prepares the way for the Messiah, but now she knows the rest of the story! Her relative, Mary, is the blessed vessel chosen to bring the Messiah into the world. Elizabeth apparently did not have foreknowledge of Mary's visit because she asked why she was so favored. Instead of condemning or shaming Mary because she is or will be with child and not married, Elizabeth blesses Mary and her baby because she has spiritual vision to see beyond the obvious. There is much joy in this passage — joy in their relationship, in their favor from God, in the lives they both carry, and in being used by God for His great purposes! Elizabeth gives Mary one of her greatest blessings: "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" Spoken from one woman to another in admiration of her confident faith and trust in a God who makes all things possible. In a world where women had little worth other than their ability to bear children, these two women share a special place in spiritual history. As Mary faces an unknown future, she could be certain of one truth: God will bring His promise to fulfillment.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Clearly the Holy Spirit is working in the lives of Mary and Elizabeth. When have you experienced the Spirit's work in and through you? How does His presence help you see Him at work around you?

Are you in period of doubt or questioning the future and God's plan for your life? If so, will you write a prayer for vision and guidance below? We are never too old or too young for God to have a plan and purpose for our lives.

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

Luke 1:39-45

Mary Visits Elizabeth

Luke 1:46-56

Mary's Song

JOURNALING AND PRAYERS

As you contemplate all you've learned this week, journal your thoughts and prayers to God.

THE MESSAGE IN SONG

Canticle of Mary: The Magnificat — Hymn 199

To a Maid Engaged to Joseph — Hymn 215

Angels from the Realms of Glory — Hymn 220

Angels We Have Heard on High — Hymn 238

Mary Did You Know — Pentatonix version

Breath of Heaven — Amy Grant

Labor of Love — The Isaacs

Mary's Boy Child

Ave Maria

What Sweeter Music Can We Bring? —

Robert Herrick & Jean Berger

THROUGH ELIZABETH'S EYES

These last months in seclusion have been so wonderful in anticipation of the birth of our baby. At the same time, they have been difficult because Zechariah still cannot speak after expressing his doubts to the angel. It has been so quiet here and the flow of our days has been altered. I still miss his voice and cannot wait to hear it again when our son is born. I am still overcome with joy over the gift that God has given us in our old age — to become parents after all this time. I don't always understand why God does what He does, but I know He has appointed this child at this time for a very special reason. I cannot wait to hold him in my arms. I pray that I will live long enough to see him grow in the Lord and turn hearts to make way for the Messiah who is to come.

I can't tell you how thrilled I was to hear Mary's voice as she stepped through my door. The moment she spoke, this baby in my womb literally leapt for joy! There is no other way to describe it — it was unmistakable! It was not some random kick or movement — it was an exclamation of praise from within me, and I just KNEW. It was as if my unborn child was giving his very first prophecy, breaking the silence of 400 years. I knew right away that Mary, still a child herself, will soon be the mother of our long awaited Messiah. I felt the Spirit of God come over me in a way I have never known. What fullness of joy! There were no words to describe it. I could only bless her. Blessed is she who has believed. Blessed are YOU who now believe.

This beautiful young woman who stands before me with such boldness and bravery makes my spirit soar. She has been highly favored by God but she has responded to that favor by being a faithful servant of God. She has shown a trust in Him that is rare for someone so young. She accepts the blessing she carries but also willingly accepts the challenges that will come with it. The road ahead for her will be both glorious and painful. I pray that these months ahead will encourage and empower her to live into her calling and that she will continue to declare the word of the Lord all of her days. She does not yet understand the mark she will leave on this world.

Dear ones, when we can see one another with spiritual eyes — when we truly look to see God at work inside another person and speak hope to that, we are surely growing the kingdom of God. When we bless another, that blessing ripples and indeed pours back over us.

I can hear Mary singing out in the garden. Her voice is so beautiful, but her words, reminiscent of those of Hannah so many years ago, will surely ring throughout the heavens and down through the ages: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of the Almighty's servant." This world is a broken and weary place, torn apart by things beyond our control. But take heart, my friends. Our long awaited Redeemer is coming and He will set all things right. What will your soul magnify as we await the coming of our Lord?

THROUGH MARY'S EYES

What a joyous visit this has been with my cousin Elizabeth! I have no words to describe the emotions I've felt since the angel Gabriel appeared to me with such wonderful and overwhelming news. Why would God choose an ordinary young girl from such a humble family? Though I am still a virgin and betrothed to be married to Joseph, I find myself pregnant by this miracle of God. It is all so much to contemplate. Soon the news will be out, and people will ask hard questions. They will judge me harshly and my reputation will be in ruins. And what about this child? How will He be received? Will He be scorned because of the circumstances of His birth? Will I be able to protect Him? Am I worthy of this calling?

I will give birth to the son of God and He is to be called Jesus. When I am afraid, I just say His name, and I feel a sense of peace from within me. It sustains me through all the circumstances that are swirling around me.

I'm still overwhelmed by the magnitude of Gabriel's message. Even as I whispered the words, "May it be done to me according to your word," I realized that my world, and that of those I love, had just been torn at the seams. I don't know if Joseph will ever believe me and now the life I imagined for myself is suddenly so uncertain. Why would I say yes? Because I know my God. I know Him to be merciful and just. I have seen His faithfulness in the lives of my ancestors. I trust Him to use me as He sees fit.

After hearing the incredible news from the angel that Elizabeth is also expecting a baby, I couldn't wait to see her. I wasn't sure how she would receive me, but I thought she might be the one person who would understand. This was not the route to motherhood that either of us had planned.

It wasn't an easy trip from Nazareth up into the hill country where Elizabeth and Zechariah live — it took almost four days. I just knew I had to see Elizabeth. There were so many ways my dear cousin could have reacted to my visit. So many questions she could have asked. But there was none of that. She welcomed me with love and acceptance. The very first words out of her mouth were words of blessing. She said that her baby leapt in her womb as soon as I greeted her, which thrills me. She called me the mother of her Lord and blessed me for trusting in the promises of the Lord. What precious affirmation!

I know I can't stay here forever, but I'll stay as long as I can. I want to help Elizabeth as her time approaches. This place, which felt so safe when I arrived, now feels sacred. She allowed herself to see the Holy Spirit in me and she responded with great joy. She has bolstered my faith and affirmed my calling. She has encouraged my soul. May we all do that for those who come to us for refuge. Let the first words from our mouths be words of blessing. Beloved, believe in the promises of our Lord. You too are highly favored — this child that I carry will soon deliver us all. Glory to God!

JESUS BREAKS THROUGH DOUBT

Who are the most interesting people in your family tree? How far back have you been able to trace your ancestors? While some families have traced their roots to England via the Mayflower crossing, others may trace their ancestry to Native American, European, Middle or Far Eastern, or Central or Southern American cultures. Companies like Ancestry.com have made it possible for people to discover their heritage through genealogical records. Other companies such as 23andMe have even made it possible for people who were adopted to discover their biological family members by administering DNA testing and matching their results with others whose test results are also on file.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Why do you think people find it important to trace their family tree?

What purposes might this connection with previous generations serve?

MONDAY: MATTHEW 1:1-6A

When God created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, He declared His work “very good.” God walked with them in the Garden at the end of each day, spending time with the people He had created. That personal relationship was severed when Eve and Adam ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the sin nature was passed to their children — and all humanity. As God pronounced the penalty for their sin and cast them out of the Garden, He alluded to the eventual appearance of a Savior. When cursing the serpent for deceiving the woman, God said, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). Even while passing judgment, God promised hope. He foretold of a Savior, born of a woman, who would suffer a wound from Satan before utterly defeating him in return.

Week 3: Matthew 1:1-25

God had not been surprised by Adam and Eve’s disobedience. In fact, before the foundation of the world, God planned to reconcile people to Himself through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ (see Ephesians 1:3-6). Gabriel had announced the next steps in God’s plan to Zechariah and Mary. God then sent Gabriel to explain to Joseph how he fits into this plan.

Matthew was a Jewish citizen writing primarily to Jewish readers who were fully aware the Scriptures said the Messiah would be a descendant of Abraham, the nation’s founding father, and David, the nation’s greatest king. To prove Jesus fulfilled this requirement, Matthew began his account with Jesus’ family tree, giving His lineage from Abraham to David.

Read the names listed in vs. 2-6. Which ones are familiar to you? Think about the roles they played in Israel’s development as a nation.

These fourteen generations spanned approximately 900 years. Many significant events for the Jewish people occurred during this period. God called Abraham to leave the land of his birth and travel to a land chosen for him, and He promised him a son through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. Though Abraham and Sarah were well beyond child-bearing years, God promised them a son, Isaac, through whom He would establish His covenant. Isaac was the father of Jacob, and Jacob’s twelve children were the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. The families of these brothers were taken into Egyptian captivity for 400 years, then God called Moses to lead their descendants out of Egypt. Except for Joshua and Caleb, the generation that escaped Egypt died in the wilderness, leaving their children to conquer and inhabit the Promised Land. When the nation eventually demanded to be ruled by a king like all the other nations, Saul became their first king. Under his successor, King David, these twelve tribes were formally united into one Kingdom. During these years, this fledgling nation was firmly established and rose to its most prominent position and power.

PROPHECY FULFILLED

Read each Scripture listed below and record the prophecy that Jesus fulfilled:

Genesis 12:3

Genesis 17:19

Genesis 21:12

Genesis 22:18

Genesis 49:10

Isaiah 11:1-3

TUESDAY: MATTHEW 1:6B-11

God elevated David from the station of youngest son and shepherd boy to King of Israel and first in line of a series of kings. Though David was not without sin, he was a man after God's own heart. When he strayed from God, he eventually repented, confessed his sins, and followed after God once again. Upon David's death, the kingdom passed to his son. Solomon's reign began promisingly when he asked God to give him the wisdom needed to rule this great kingdom, but he married numerous foreign wives and established centers of worship for their foreign gods. As a result of Solomon's unfaithfulness, God divided the nation of Israel into two kingdoms — the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The Northern Kingdom was ruled by a series of kings who were unfaithful to God and led the nation to worship idols, so God allowed Israel to be conquered by Assyria in 722 BC.

But God kept His promise to David by ensuring the kings of Judah were direct descendants of David. Over the ensuing 325 years, most of these kings strayed from God and led Judah into disobedience. Only four of the kings were men of faith who studied Scripture, prayed for the nation, and called the people to repent and return to God. Because the nation failed to remain whole-heartedly faithful to God, during the reign of Jeconiah, God allowed the Babylonians to attack Judah, invade Jerusalem, bring down the city walls, destroy the Temple, and carry its citizens into Babylonian captivity.

PROPHECY FULFILLED

2 Samuel 7:11, 16

¹¹ “The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you . . .

¹⁶ Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”

WEDNESDAY: MATTHEW 1:12-17

The Jews who were exiled in Babylon were not without hope. They were familiar with Jeremiah's prophecies of the exile — and his prophecies of their eventual return to Jerusalem (Jeremiah 32:26-44). Once the Babylonian empire fell to the Medes and Persians, King Cyrus allowed the exiles to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the Temple, just as God had promised in Isaiah 44:28 and 45:13.¹ Zerubbabel became their first governor who, alongside the priests, led the people in their efforts to rebuild the nation. The men listed as his descendants lived during the four hundred years between the Old Testament and New Testament periods — the time when God was silent. Though God wasn't speaking through the prophets, He continually worked behind the scenes to fulfill His promise to send a Messiah who would be born from David's descendants. This genealogical listing served a purpose: the Jews could see that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies that the Messiah would be the Son of David.²

PROPHECY FULFILLED

Isaiah 44:24b, 28; 45:13

^{44:24b} “I am the LORD, the Maker of all things . . . ²⁸ who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, “Let it be rebuilt,” and of the temple, “Let its foundations be laid.””

^{45:13} “I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty.”

Haggai 2:22-23

²² I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother.

²³ ““On that day,’ declares the Lord Almighty, ‘I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,’ declares the Lord Almighty.”

THURSDAY: MATTHEW 1:18-21

Matthew now turned to the birth of the Messiah. Mary was betrothed to Joseph. In the Jewish culture at this time, a betrothal was arranged by the parents of the couple, with the bride’s father receiving the agreed upon price from the groom’s family. Though not married, the betrothal between Joseph and Mary was legally binding and could only be dissolved through divorce. For one year, the bride and groom continued to live with their own families so the bride’s purity could be confirmed. However, if the bride became pregnant during this year, the marriage would be annulled. When Mary was “found to be pregnant,” Joseph had the right to a divorce. According to Mosaic Law, he could have had Mary stoned for this transgression (Deuteronomy 22:23-24). Failure to do either of these things would be considered Joseph’s admission of responsibility for her condition.

Joseph must have struggled greatly with the decision he had to make. Even if Mary had explained the details of her condition to Joseph, he would have doubted her word and struggled to decide the course of action he should take. Since Joseph knew the child Mary carried was not his, because of his love and compassion for her, he chose to divorce her quietly instead of further disgracing her. Once again, the angel brought a message from God. Mary had not been unfaithful to Joseph. She had conceived this child through the Holy Spirit. She, and now Joseph, were part of God’s divine plan to bring the Messiah into the world.

FOR DISCUSSION

Why do you think God allowed Joseph to struggle with his doubts and reach a decision before sending the angel to convey God’s instructions to him? What does Joseph’s decision tell you about his character?

FRIDAY: MATTHEW 1:22-25

Matthew summarized this account by emphasizing that all these things happened to fulfill every detail the prophets had revealed about the Messiah. The virgin would bear a child who would be called Immanuel. Since Jesus would be God in the flesh, he would literally be “God with us.” Think about it! God had not walked among His people since He removed Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. When Moses asked to see God’s glory, God only allowed Moses to see His back, stating, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Exodus 33:20). Now Jesus — Immanuel — would live among the people, share meals with the people, teach the people, heal the people, and even forgive their sins. He would face Satan’s temptations, but unlike Adam and Eve, He would resist the devil and remain completely sinless. He would ultimately experience the agony of human death and total separation from God when He submitted to the cross.

PROPHECY FULFILLED

Isaiah 7:14

¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Isaiah’s prophecy was fulfilled in this child conceived by the Holy Spirit and born unto Mary and Joseph. Matthew emphasized these truths because they form the foundation of our faith: ²²*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:* ²³*“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).* Jesus would be fully human, but He would also be fully divine. Remember, Adam’s sin had separated people from God and brought spiritual and physical death to all people. Only Jesus’ perfect life and sacrificial death could pay the penalty for sin and fully reconcile people to God. When we trust in Jesus, our sins are forgiven and we are declared righteous in God’s eyes and worthy of eternity spent with Him. This is His most gracious gift to us!!

Jesus’ divine nature is affirmed in the virgin birth, through God’s acceptance of His sacrifice for sin by His suffering on the cross, through His resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven, and will be celebrated when He returns again. This is the message of Advent. We celebrate Jesus’ birth, which set in motion God’s plan to reconcile us to Him, and eagerly anticipate His return, when we will live forever in His presence once again.

In response to Gabriel’s message, surely Joseph could do nothing less than set aside all his doubts and submit to God’s extraordinary plan. He took Mary as his wife but refrained from consummating their marriage. When Mary’s son was born, Joseph called him Jesus, just as the angel instructed.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

What doubts have you had about God’s plan for salvation and Jesus’ role in that plan?

How has God set those doubts to rest? How can you share His plan with others?

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

Luke 1:46-56

Philippians 2:5-11

Romans 5:12-20

Hebrews 2:5-18

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Mary’s Song

The Humble Attitude of Christ

Death through Adam, Life through Christ

Jesus Made Fully Human

By This Gospel We Are Saved

JOURNALING AND PRAYERS

As you contemplate all you’ve learned this week, journal your thoughts and prayers to God.

THE MESSAGE IN SONG

To a Maid Engaged to Joseph — Hymn 215

Joseph’s Carol — John Rutter

It Wasn’t His Child — Trisha Yearwood

Born on that Day — Matt Maher

THROUGH JOSEPH'S EYES

I am just a craftsman, not a religious leader, a prophet, or a teacher. Not much of an educated man. I build and shape. My father, Jacob, named me for the son of our original father, Jacob. He gave me the name *Joseph*, meaning *he will add*. An appropriate name for a builder, a craftsman. Born of the tribe of Judah through the line of David, I have always been aware of my heritage.

I have been singled out for some reason. Dare I say, *chosen*? I was betrothed to Mary, a young woman of Nazareth, but I learned that she was already pregnant, expecting a child that could not be mine as we'd had no relations. The right thing to do was to put her away quietly and be done with it. I would not submit her to the torment of stoning or humiliation.

But I was visited by an angel. An ANGEL of the Lord! He assured me that the child that Mary was to bear was of the Holy Spirit, and I was to give Him the name Yeshua — Jesus — and that He would save His people from their sins. *Save the people from their sins*! This was no ordinary child. The child, foretold, I think by the prophet Isaiah, would be Immanuel — *God with us*.

How can a lowly man like me deal with such things? My wife and I are assumed to have had relations prior to our marriage, and on the way to Bethlehem for the census, we were without much hope. There was no room in the inn, and she was about to give birth, so the inn keeper gave us room in his stable. This child, this Immanuel, was laid in a manger — a manger — and shepherds came to see the child, saying they were told by angels of the event.

Some time later, after I had found a house for us, we were visited by Magi from the east who came to honor the king of the Jews whose star foretold the birth. I did not know that such things happened.

Again, an angel of the Lord appeared to me, and I was told to get up and leave Bethlehem because Herod would try to kill the child. So, again, I obeyed. I did not hesitate to take Mary and the child and flee to Egypt to keep the child from harm. We only just escaped the massacre of the innocents, and I cannot begin to know the horror of that event. Only later were we told to return home to Galilee and live a normal life, if life with the son of God can be normal.

I do not claim to understand all that I know. My faith in God is such that I continue to follow the Lord, but these things are too great for a man like me to comprehend. But this I know: the Lord has broken through to do the impossible.

Week 4: Luke 2:1-20

JESUS BREAKS THROUGH TIME

Have you ever experienced waiting for the “fullness of time”? The best example I can think of is waiting for the birth of a child. As Christians, we are awaiting a future event, the fullness of God’s time, when all will be made right. We are surrounded by a broken and hurting world where it feels that evil rules. The beauty of Advent is that we celebrate not only that our King was born as a babe to bring salvation to the world over 2000 years ago, but also that He will come again as King victorious to ransom the whole world from the ravages of sin and death to establish His kingdom in heaven for all eternity. A kingdom where there is no death or decay, no sickness or shame. A time when we will be free to worship and glorify Him forever and ever. In a world full of bad, where can we find good news? The God of the universe is still on the throne. This is still His story. If God intervened on behalf of His people 2000 years ago, surely He will intervene today, if we humble ourselves and pray (2 Chronicles 7:14).

PROPHECY FULFILLED

Galatians 4:4-5

⁴ But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.

MONDAY: LUKE 2:1-5

Luke is the only gospel writer who gives two historical markers for the timing of Jesus’s birth. His point is clear: this is not a myth or a legend. These events were not happenstance; they took place at just the right moment, precisely as God planned and prearranged it, and as Gabriel proclaimed to Daniel, Zechariah, and Mary. Augustus (*Augustus* means “majestic one, highly honored one”) is Caesar (*kaiser*, a title like king), divine emperor of Rome. His birthname was Gaius Octavius Thurinus. He was the grandnephew of Julius Caesar, who adopted him and declared him heir to the throne. Octavian ruled as emperor from 31 B.C. to 14 A.D.

Once he established his imperial kingdom over the entire Mediterranean world, it entered a period known as the *Pax Romana*. Now that that he had finished warring, Augustus probably wanted to have a census of his empire to determine how many military men he had and to collect taxes. Luke further mentions that Quirinius was governor of Syria. Quirinius was governor for two terms, both of which were associated with a census: 6-4 BC and AD 6-9. We can narrow down Jesus’ birth to one of these two spans. God used this Roman emperor and his worldly motivations to fulfill His prophecies. Because Joseph and Mary are from the lineage of David, they must travel from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem, the City of David, a trip of some eighty miles around Samaria that would require about a week of travel on foot. According to Luke, Joseph and Mary are still pledged to be married because they have not yet fulfilled the requirements of marriage; Mary would remain a virgin until after Jesus’ birth.



PAX ROMANA

A 200-year span of Roman history (27 BC to 180 AD) considered a golden age for the Roman Empire. During this time there was relative peace and order and economic prosperity throughout Rome, which spanned from England in the North to Morocco in the south and Iraq in the East. There were many advances and accomplishments, especially in engineering and the arts. The Romans built an extensive road system, which made the movement of people and communication easier, which also made it a perfect time for the gospel to spread throughout the known world.

FOR DISCUSSION

What do these Scriptures reveal about the Messiah?

Daniel 9:21-27 _____

Micah 5:2 _____

Galatians 4:4-5 _____

TUESDAY: LUKE 2:6-7

Bethlehem, a town of approximately 800 residents, is crowded because of the census. There are not enough accommodations for the many visitors. Even though this is a significant village in biblical history, it was still only a small hamlet in Palestine. It’s importance in Jesus’ time was because it was where the Temple animals were raised because of its proximity to Jerusalem. While Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem, the time comes for Mary to give birth to her son. Mary wraps the baby in cloths and lays Him in a manger “because there was no room for them in the inn.” This is not what we would imagine in modern times. The inn could have been an auxiliary room in a family’s home kept for travelers or a room where travelers could



BETHLEHEM
 (“house of bread”) was David’s hometown, and where the prophet Samuel anointed him king over Israel

(1 Samuel 16:1-3). David was a shepherd boy in the hills surrounding this small town some six miles southwest of Jerusalem. First called Ephrathah (“fruitful”), Bethlehem has biblical significance as the burial site for Rachel and the location Naomi and Ruth settled.

house their animals while they rested. Contrary to Hallmark reproductions of this blessed event, Jesus was not born in a stable and laid in a wooden manger with clean hay. Instead, the Savior of the world was born in a smelly, smoke-stained stone cave and laid in a feeding trough carved from the soft limestone wall – we hope, with fresh hay. What a lonely time for Mary! There is no mention of anyone attending her at the birth. The verses indicate ***she*** bound Jesus in the swaddling cloths, a job for an attending female family member, and ***she*** laid her first-born son in a manger. The specificity of this description portends the fact that Mary will one day bear more children, specifically sons, as detailed later in the New Testament. It seems the holy family is all alone when their son comes into this world, but it is not so – the God of the universe, on whom they

depend, is their attendant. He is certainly there to witness and oversee the unfolding of His plan set into motion at the beginning of all creation. Two simple verses describe an event that changes the world!

PROPHECY FULFILLED

Micah 5:2

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

PERSONAL REFLECTION

We often find ourselves in overcrowded places and rushed circumstances, especially this time of year. While you are making your many to-do lists for this season, why not list below that which is truly important — that which you need most from the Lord. What would provide you with perfect peace and joy?

Although this is the “most wonderful time of the year,” it is a difficult one for the lonely. Write a prayer of comfort below for those who feel alone at this time of year.

WEDNESDAY: LUKE 2:8-11

At the same time, there were shepherds watching their sheep in a nearby field. An unnamed angel breaks through the darkness of night, the glory of the Lord shining all around, and brings this humble assembly a message for **all** people: a Savior has been born to you (Isaiah 9:6). This is important! From the beginning it is clear, the Savior is not just for the Jews but for **all** people. Who are these shepherds that they would receive this holy proclamation? Going back to the very beginning, God's people have a long history of being shepherds: Abel was a shepherd, and his offering found favor with God. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and most of his sons were shepherds. Moses spent time as a shepherd of both sheep and people. David, the man after God's own heart and notably Israel's greatest human king, began as a shepherd boy.

Because they were in the fields surrounding Bethlehem, these shepherds were probably Temple shepherds guarding the sheep raised for sacrifices. They took painstaking efforts to ensure their flocks were safe and free from blemish. We could surmise that their work was important work; however, they were among the lowliest of Jews. Shepherds tended to be aged men or young boys, those who could not find other suitable work. In Jesus' time, shepherds had a bad reputation and were considered unreliable; therefore, they were not allowed to give testimony in court. They were smelly and dirty from their work with the sheep out in the wilderness. And these shepherds were the lowest of the low because they had the night shift. They were among the few people who were awake and at work in the dead of night watching and waiting for predators when the angels appeared. Despite their rather humble circumstances, they would have known the Scriptures and understood the message. These servants were God's chosen recipients of the GOOD NEWS: the long-awaited Messiah — Christ the Lord — has come! How fitting that one of our favorite images is of Jesus our shepherd.



SWADDLING CLOTHS

A square piece of cloth with a long bandage-like strip coming diagonally from one corner (abidinginchrist.com).

Jewish mothers of the day would prepare these cloths for the birth because they believed the wrappings would protect the babies' limbs, strengthen their backs, and provide proper bone growth. Of additional note, shepherds who guarded the Temple lambs bound the newborn sacrificial lambs in discarded Temple cloths to protect them from blemish.

PROPHECY FULFILLED

Isaiah 9:6-7

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

FOR DISCUSSION

Read the following verses and record what each tells us about Jesus, the shepherd.

Genesis 49:24 _____

Psalms 23:1-4 _____

Isaiah 40:11 _____

Ezekiel 34:23 _____

Micah 5:4 _____

John 10:10-16, 26-29 _____

Hebrews 13:20-21 _____

1 Peter 5:4 _____

THURSDAY: LUKE 2:12-16

The angel then tells the shepherds how to find the babe: He will be wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. The angel's appearance didn't end there. Suddenly, a heavenly host appears with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests." Wow! Can we even imagine the scene? This was God's shining moment, the fruition of His plan for the salvation of the world that began at creation. God, in all His glory and in His perfect timing, had been waiting for this precise moment in His story. All of creation had been groaning, longing, and waiting for God to break through time. The Jewish people were crying out for God to hear their pleas and to send relief from the oppression and persecution of the Roman authorities. For too long, He has been silent because of Israel's greatest (and oft repeated) sin: idolatry. He had been listening; He had wanted to act since He expelled Adam and Eve from the garden, but He had to wait until the people figured out for themselves that there was nothing that they could do to heal their



HEAVENLY HOST

A large group or army of angels with heavenly power to assist God's people. The main purpose of heavenly hosts is to strengthen and comfort believers (www.christianity.com).

relationship with God, or to remove their sin, or to bridge the chasm between them. God breaks through the utter darkness — literal and spiritual — of the world 2000 years ago with the good news of a Savior. The unspoken expectation of those first recipients of the Good News: Go! Seek! Find! Tell! The shepherds decide to go to see "this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." The first visitors to the Savior of the world were these lowly men and boys who had very little to offer the

King of the Universe except their devotion, adoration, and obedience, which is what He really wants from all of us.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Place yourself at the nativity. What gifts would you give the newborn Savior of the world?

FRIDAY: LUKE 2:17-20

This passage contrasts two reactions to the night’s events. Once the shepherds visit the holy family to prove the truth of the message, they “spread the word concerning what had been told them about the child.” According to Pastor David Lose, “Good news isn’t really and fully as good as it was meant to be until it’s shared.” These shepherds were the first evangelists to spread the good news, and their excitement must have been palpable. Out of gratitude for being included in the greatest event in history, they glorified and praised God. Certainly, this was such a momentous event that the shepherds continued to tell the good news throughout their lives. They must have been convincing because the people were amazed at what the shepherds said to them, but the good news seemed to have little long-term effect on the people of Bethlehem. The shepherds go back to taking care of sheep, the people of Bethlehem go back to their daily living, and life goes on. Nothing really changed, and yet everything changed. The shepherds are not the same people they were before this night.

In contrast, Mary’s reaction was to “treasure up all these things and ponder them in her heart.” I love this beautiful image of the contemplative Mary. The events of the day had to be overwhelming, but she was not to be rushed past this moment in time. She was gathering up the sights and sounds of her first child’s birth and His first visitors (who were further confirmation that everything was working according to God’s plan, and that His promises are true), cherishing each moment so she would not forget. How thankful we are that she shared her most private experiences with Luke, who recorded them for us.



**WILLIAM
BARCLAY**

“It is a lovely thought that the shepherds who looked after the Temple lambs were the first to see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

PERSONAL REFLECTION

When God brings good news to our lives, we have a choice to respond in either of these two ways. Under what circumstances would you respond like the shepherds?

Under what circumstances would you respond like Mary?

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

Luke 2:21-40 Jesus' Dedication
Luke 2:41-52 The Boy Jesus at the Temple

JOURNALING AND PRAYERS

As you contemplate all you've learned this week, journal your thoughts and prayers to God.

THE MESSAGE IN SONG

Away in a Manger — Hymn 217	Joy, Joy — David Phelps
It Came Upon a Midnight Clear — Hymn 218	You're Here — Francesca Battistelli
What Child is This? — Hymn 219	For the First Time — Jason Bare
He is Born — Hymn 228	Peace on Earth — Austin French
Infant Holy, Infant Lowly — Hymn 229	God Made a Way — Brandon Heath
O Little Town of Bethlehem — Hymn 230	& Tasha Layton
The Birth of Jesus — Hymn 231	
Angels We Have Heard on High — Hymn 238	
Silent Night, Holy Night — Hymn 239	
Hark! The Herald Angels Sing — Hymn 240	
The First Noel — Hymn 245	
Jesu Bambino	
O Holy Night (Pavarotti version)	

THROUGH THE SHEPHERD'S EYES

Great stories, great revelations, great messages are reserved for great men. Right? I think of our father Abraham, Moses, the prophets — all great men of God. Like our Pharisees and teachers of the Law, great men to whom God has shown the way of His Law.

But I tell you, it is a terrifying thing to see the glory of the LORD.

Me, a shepherd. I tend sheep. *Sheep!* In the dark, at night, alone, while others sleep, I tend their sheep. But suddenly, an angel of God appeared to us. I swear, it was an angel of God. Nothing from earth could have looked like that, been like that. Surrounded with what I can only call the most glorious . . . *presence* that does not exist on this earth. Cannot exist.

I was afraid. We were all terrified.

“Do not be afraid,” the angel said. “I have good news for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Why would an angel come to us? Why would I be picked to receive this good news from God? I have a lot more questions than I have answers. A manger is where we put hay for animals, not babies and certainly not the Messiah. It’s no more kingly than a hillside full of shepherds.

But then, suddenly, there was a whole bunch of angels. They were singing and praising God, and then I knew — I *knew* — that this was real. People don’t even look at shepherds, much less pay any attention to us. We are mostly invisible to them unless we lose one of their lambs. But here we were being serenaded by angels.

We didn’t wait. We rushed to Bethlehem and found the little family just like the angel said. And we *knew*. And we couldn’t help telling the news to everyone and anyone who would listen. We were the first to know, the first to tell others about this good news. People were amazed; some probably didn’t believe any of it, but they were amazed nonetheless.

But we *knew*. We were certain. We had seen the glory of the LORD, and His angels singing. I do not understand all I know, but I am certain of this: we saw the LORD’s Messiah lying in a manger, and we were sure that this Messiah was born for us as well as everyone, “for all the people.” From now on, things would be different.

THROUGH MARY'S EYES

It is finally quiet. The stillness of the night surrounds me as I hold my sleeping child. The Son of God is here in my arms. I have anticipated this moment with so many emotions. My body is still weak and spent from delivery, but I have never felt more alive. Dear Joseph has been so attentive and has barely slept in days. He has not left us at all, even for a moment.

The shepherds just left. I will remember their visit for the rest of my days — their faces and the way they rushed in to find us, wide-eyed and breathless. The way they trembled with joy as they came close and fell to their knees to worship the long-awaited Messiah. It was so amazing to hear their story. The birth of Jesus was announced to the shepherds by a heavenly host of angels who told them where to come and bear witness to the newborn king. They came straight away. Their visit was so tender, but made it very real that we will indeed have to share this child with the world. It has already begun. Nothing will ever be the same again.

All these months, I have wondered the same things I suppose all first-time mothers wonder. Will I be a good mother? What will he look like? What will he be like? And then the things that no other mother has ever had to wonder: How on earth do I raise the Son of God? Will He need me? How can He be human and God at the same time? What will it be like to parent a teenager who really does know everything? All I know is that God has brought us this far, and He will not abandon us now.

The last several days travelling from Nazareth to Bethlehem were hard, especially as I thought about delivering my baby away from home and far from my family. I still don't know why we were chosen, or why this place was chosen. When we arrived, the only place available for us to stay was here in this stable where the animals are kept. Everyplace else was already full. It's dirty, it smells, and hardly seems the place for a king. But now, holding Him in my arms, it all makes perfect sense. A humble entrance, without fanfare, is the way it was intended to be. We have so much to learn from this child.

Joseph and I cannot stop looking at Him. We are weeping with joy, overwhelming love, and the weight of what has been asked of us. I try not to think about how and when He will leave us to take His rightful place as the king the world has waited for. Perhaps God has a different path for Him than we imagined. I feel a hint of something I can't quite comprehend, but it pierces my heart even now. I don't know what is ahead for Jesus, but I know it won't be easy. This child of promise is going to change the world. He has already changed me.

Rejoice, dear friends, for our Savior was born tonight in the city of David, and He IS Christ the Lord. I invite you to sit with me in this holy moment and worship the newborn King. Let us hold tight to the peace and hope that He has brought to our weary hearts. Are we willing to receive it? He has come so that we might have abundant life. My prayer is that you will know Him and follow Him all the days of your life.

JESUS BREAKS THROUGH DARKNESS

Darkness – the absence of light. Many of us grew up afraid of the dark. Our imaginations of the fearsome monsters hiding in the dark conjured terror in our minds. Even as adults, we shy away from dark alleys or corridors because we fear what might be lurking in the shadows into which we cannot see. Spiritually, darkness is a place where sin abounds. Darkness has a broader definition, though.

Many historians refer to the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages because it was devoid of the cultural and scientific advancements seen during the Grecian and Roman Empires (and that would come in the Renaissance). It was a period wrought with violent battles for power to fill the vacuum left after the fall of the Roman Empire. In this instance, darkness refers to a place where evil abounds; where imagination, creativity, and ingenuity are stifled by oppression, fear, or doubt; or a confusing place where what is right is deemed wrong and good is evil. It was just such a world into which Jesus came 2000 years ago, but that is not the end of the story. Advent gives us hope that one day, perhaps soon, He will return, breaking through the darkness of our world to establish His eternal rule and reign!



LOGOS

In the Greek, *logos* or “word” means not only the spoken word but also the word thought or still in the mind. In Jewish rabbinical tradition, they often referred to God in terms of His word, and they spoke of God as “the word of God.” Greek philosophers saw the *logos* as the power that puts sense into the world.¹

MONDAY: JOHN 1:1-3

John’s gospel was probably the last of the four written, and it is very different from the others. The purpose of John’s gospel is to show us who Jesus is so that we might believe (John 20:31). John’s message is clear: Jesus is God. There is no birth narrative. John begins his gospel by taking us all the way back to the very beginning of creation. Jesus’s story did not begin at His birth or even at His conception. He always has been, just as God always has been. Jesus is not a created being like the angels or man. He was there with God at the beginning of

Week 5: John 1:1-14

time. He was active and present at the creation of the world. Some scholars say He was the creative energy; others say He was the Word that God spoke in creation, calling all manner of things into being including the stars, the planets, water, living creatures, and humankind.

Although Jesus is God, He is distinct from God. John goes on to tell us that Jesus is “God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side” (1:18). John wants us to understand Jesus’ deity. This is important to us as believers. If we focus too much on Jesus the man, we miss the fact that He is God — eternal, immortal, and invincible! We can know God because we know Jesus. According to Exodus 33:20, no one could see God and live. However, we can see and know Jesus, who is the physical manifestation of the Father and the One who reveals God’s character to us.

FOR DISCUSSION

Read the following verses. Record how you see Jesus in them.

Genesis 1:1-4 _____

Genesis 1:26-27 _____

Psalm 33:6 _____

Colossians 1:15-17 _____

Revelation 19:13 _____

What difference does knowing Jesus this way make for believers?

TUESDAY: JOHN 1:4-5

In Him is life. This theme is repeated throughout John’s gospel. Over 36 times, John uses the word *life* in relation to Jesus. Life is God’s gift through Christ, true life — not that which the world offers, but the eternal kind, the freeing kind, the empowering kind, the joyful kind of life that makes this life worth living. Outside of a relationship with God through Christ, do we really have life?

In verse 4, John also presents another theme of his gospel: Jesus’ life is the “light of mankind.” He will later say that Jesus is the light of the world. He illuminates the darkness; He brings wisdom and understanding to our living. If we turn to the world, which is filled with darkness, the darkness will overcome us. However, if we turn to His light, He will overcome the darkness and light our way in the path of righteousness. Later in this passage, John refers to Jesus as “the true light that gives light to every man” (v. 9). All other light is an imitation of

the light that Jesus brings. He is the only true light. These verses harken back to Genesis 1. In the beginning, the world “was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep” (Genesis 1:2). God’s first act in creation was to say, “Let there be light.” And it was so — light was created, and God was pleased with it. He separated light and darkness. If we know this is true, why is it that humanity will continue to choose darkness over light?

PROPHECY FULFILLED

Isaiah 9:2
The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

FOR DISCUSSION

Read the following verses that refer to Jesus as Life and record what you learn:

John 14:6 _____

John 10:10 _____

Romans 5:18 _____

Colossians 3:4 _____

1 John 5:11-12 _____

What difference does it make that Jesus is our Life?

WEDNESDAY: JOHN 1:6-8

John, the gospel writer, then jumps from creation to John the Baptist, whom we have already met. Instead of retelling John the Baptizer’s story, He contrasts him with Jesus.

What new attributes of John the Baptist are revealed in these verses?

- v 6** _____
- v 7** _____
- v 8** _____
- v 15** _____
- v 23** _____

John the Baptizer’s whole purpose was to witness or testify about the Messiah who would come after him. In this passage, our gospel writer presents a third theme: witness. John

uses this term 14 times, more than any other gospel writer. John’s work was not to lead men to believe in himself, but to point men to Jesus in whom they should put their belief, faith, and trust. It seems that John was well-received as the forerunner of Jesus. His message was clear: “Repent, for the kingdom of God is near” (Matthew 3:2, Mark: 1:7-8). It was a message people could understand, and they responded by confessing their sins, being baptized, and by promising to bear the fruit of repentance. John never misunderstood his message or his mission. He knew he was to prepare people’s hearts to receive Jesus.


In a world where many question their purpose, as Christians, we find comfort in knowing that ours is the same as John’s: testify and witness to our Savior, Jesus Christ. We don’t have to be as bold and as dramatic as John; all we must do is share the difference Jesus has made and is making in our lives. Testify and witness (give evidence and proof) in a way that is uniquely ours. People may argue points of doctrine or theology, but they can never argue with our personal experience with the Savior of the world, who has redeemed us and who holds us together.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

If you were called to the witness stand to testify that Jesus is your Lord, what evidence would you give?

THURSDAY: JOHN 1:9-13

Our gospel turns from John, who was not the Light, to the ministry and life of Jesus, who is the True Light. In five simple verses, John encapsulates what we believe as lovers and followers of Jesus. Jesus came into this world as the physical representation of God, but humanity could not understand His true nature. He ministered unto His own, the Jewish



TRUE LIGHT
John uses the Greek word *alethinos*, which we interpret as *true*. This word does not mean “not false” (Greek, *alethes*); it means the original of which every other light is a copy (Wiersbe) or the essential/perfect nature of light (Westcott).

people, but they did not receive Him. Even so, everyone who believes in Him becomes a child of God. We are given new birth, born again, as God’s spiritual children because we believe. The Light came into the world to cast out the sin and despair that causes our spiritual darkness. Every Christmas Eve, when we dim the lights and sing “Silent Night,” I am reminded of these verses. The beauty of our sanctuary bathed in the candlelight, and the sweet sounds of my brothers and sisters softly singing is a moment that brings me complete joy and is the pinnacle of my Christmas season because in this one moment the noise is silent, only the light of Christ shines, and I know the babe born all those years ago is my Redeemer, the lover of my soul, my Savior.

Whatever else may come – joys, disappointments, highs, lows, and loss – He is mine, and I am His. His Light has dispelled the darkness of my fear, my doubts, and my sin. He has made me whole. In this “season of light,” when our world twinkles with the beauty of artificial Christmas lights (a symbolic reminder of Jesus), remember that their beauty is eclipsed by that of the one True Light who gave up His place in glory to take on human form, to reveal God to us, and to save us from the darkness of sin and despair that tells us God is not here, He does not care, He cannot save you.

PROPHECY FULFILLED

Isaiah 42:5-7

⁵ This is what God the LORD says—the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ⁶ “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, ⁷ to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

FOR DISCUSSION

Read the following verses which describe Jesus as Light. Record something you learn about Jesus in each.

Numbers 24:17 _____

Isaiah 49:6 _____

Luke 2:32 _____

John 8:12 _____

John 9:5 _____

John 12:46 _____

John 3:19 _____

John 12:35 _____

2 Corinthians 4:6 _____

What difference does it make that Jesus is the True Light?

FRIDAY: JOHN 1:14

Music is such an important blessing in our faith, especially at Christmas. One of the most beloved pieces of music is George Frederic Handel’s *Messiah*. Handel was raised in a home where his mother encouraged his musical interest, but his pragmatic father did not; he wanted his son to study civil law. By the age of nine, Handel was already a skilled musician. As Handel’s skill developed, he chose to pursue music full time and achieved much fame as a composer of operas.

Fortuitously, he met Charles Jennens who inspired him to create his masterpiece. Jennens sent Handel Scripture passages, mostly Old Testament prophecies, and challenged him to create an oratorio celebrating the Divinity of Christ. Around the same time, a group sent Handel a request for aid for men in debtor’s prison and for hospitals. Legend has it that Handel spent time studying Scripture and praying, and then he composed *Messiah* in twenty-four days. The day he finished “The Hallelujah Chorus,” Handel told an assistant that he had seen a vision. “I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself!” No wonder Handel repeats “hallelujah” over 47 times in the chorus! Handel later said that he wanted to create something lasting and that would lift the spirits of all who heard it.

Messiah was released at Easter, not Christmas, and it was met with varied responses. Over time, though, its popularity has given proof of its greatness. There is a rumor that when King George II first heard “The Hallelujah Chorus,” he rose to his feet to honor Jesus, which explains why, even today, we stand when it is sung. Handel’s grave in Westminster Abbey is marked with the words, “*I know that my Redeemer liveth.*” Like Handel and John and the “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) who came before us, we **must** testify because we have “seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father full of grace and truth!” And we reflect His light when we testify to our adoption as His children. How can we help but stand and proclaim, “Hallelujah!”

PERSONAL REFLECTION

What work is God doing in your life today for which will you stand and proclaim aloud, “Hallelujah!”?

Hebrews 12:1

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

FOR FURTHER STUDY:	
Matthew 3:1-17	John the Baptist Prepares the Way
Mark 1:1-8	John the Baptist Prepares the Way
John 1:15-23	John’s Role and Testimony
Matthew 11:1-15	Jesus Affirms John the Baptist
Matthew 14:1-12	John the Baptist Beheaded
Mark 6:14-29	John the Baptist Beheaded
Luke 7:18-28	Jesus and John the Baptist

JOURNALING AND PRAYERS

As you contemplate all you’ve learned this week, journal your thoughts and prayers to God.

THE MESSAGE IN SONG	
Canticle of Light and Darkness — Hymn 205	Light of the World — Lauren Daigle
Angels from the Realms of Glory — Hymn 220	A Christmas Alleluia — Chris Tomlin
In the Bleak Midwinter — Hymn 221	A Christmas Hallelujah — Cloverton
Good Christian Friends, Rejoice — Hymn 224	Emmanuel God With Us — Chris Tomlin
O Come, All Ye Faithful — Hymn 234	Light of the World (Sing Hallelujah) —
Joy to the World — Hymn 246	We the Kingdom
Go, Tell it on the Mountain — Hymn 251	

THROUGH JOHN'S EYES

You must listen: the LORD, El Shaddai, has chosen to do a great thing. The promised Messiah is coming to the world, in fact, is in the world, and all must repent and be baptized to prepare for His coming. Flee the world's evil and sin. Repent and be baptized.

I was born to be a Nazarite. Some thought I was the Christ, but they were wrong. I am not worthy to untie His sandals, and yet it has been my great privilege to prepare the way. From the time of my conception by aged parents, I was set apart and assigned a task by God: to prepare the way of the Lord, as prophesied in Isaiah.

The Pharisees call everyone to spend their days following rules and regulations, some of which had nothing to do with Moses, while forgetting to live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. My assignment is to call all men and women to repentance. Even in our attempts to follow the Law, we are still sinners, sinful from birth, thoroughly apart from God by nature, but God is fixing that.

I was sent ahead of His Anointed to ready a people for God's Kingdom when He would choose to unveil it. And unveil it He did. My cousin Mary's son, Jesus, was revealed as the One sent to save us. I knew He was the Son of God who takes away the sin of the world when He came to be baptized. I heard a voice from heaven proclaim it, I saw the Holy Spirit rest upon Him, and I knew that this was the beginning of the end of my task. I told my own disciples to follow Him.

My work has, at times, been lonely. Living in the wilderness, eating a limited diet, wearing rough clothing. But after nearly four hundred years of prophetic silence, God sent me to prophesy. And now, I am content to fade away. I have called out Herod's great sin, and he has arrested me. But he is afraid to do anything more than silence me. He is afraid of the people, if not afraid of God.

And so here I am, a prisoner. I have been faithful. I have completed my task. It is my time to lessen and go away as the Lamb of God grows in strength. The time of the Law and the Prophets is over; the Kingdom of God has arrived. The lame walk, the deaf hear, the blind see, and I am content for I am not alone. The worst Herod can do is kill me. Where do I go from here?

Into the Kingdom of God.

ENDNOTES

Week 1: Jesus Breaks Through Disappointment

1. Roger Beckwith, “Intertestamental Judaism, its literature and its significance,” available from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/intertestamental-judaism-its-literature-and-its-significance/>.
2. Tommy Waters, “Who was Herod?” available from <https://study.com/academy/lesson/king-herod-history-reign-death.html>.
3. Trent C. Butler, editor, entry for 'Barren, Barrenness,' *Holman Bible Dictionary*, available from <https://www.studydrive.org/dictionaries/eng/hbd/b/barren-barrenness.html>. 1991.
4. J. Vernon McGee, “Interior of Herod’s Temple at Jerusalem, “ *Thru the Bible Ministries*, available from https://ttb.org/docs/default-source/extra-materials/herod-39-s-temple-packet.pdf?sfvrsn=a0af1c16_0.

Week 2: Jesus Breaks Through the Impossible

1. Bob Deffinbaugh, “The Worship of Two Women,” available from <https://bible.org/seriespage/2-worship-two-women-luke-139-56>.
2. John MacArthur, *God’s Gift of Christmas*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006.

Week 3: Jesus Breaks Through Doubt

1. Shawn Aster, “Ezra and Nehemiah,” available from <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/ezra-nehemiah/>.
2. Bruce B. Barton, et. al. *Life Application Commentary: Matthew*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. (1996), p. 11-12.

Week 4: Jesus Breaks Through Time

1. David Guzik, “Luke 2 – Jesus’ Birth and Boyhood,” available from <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/luke-2/>

Week 5: Jesus Breaks Through the Darkness

1. David Guzik, “John 1 – The Word and the Witness,” available from <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/john-1/>.



Inspired by Georges de La Tour's painting *The New-born* (Der Neugeborene), Madison First UMC member Chris Cook painted a masterful rendition of his own.

"In doing this work, I felt a deeper connection with Mary, Elizabeth, and Jesus being 'real people living at a real time.' I was struck with the wonder of Jesus being 100% human and 100% God at the same time. The single source of light emphasizes the promise of Jesus being the Light of the World." — Chris Cook

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it!"

John 1:5

Madison First United Methodist Church
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Rev. H Grady Mosley, II, Senior Pastor