

*An Advent Devotional*  
*for*  
*Saratoga Federated Church*  
*2020*

# Pondering Christmas

## Introduction

We invite you to join us on a reflective journey as we await the coming of the Christ child, Emmanuel, God made flesh; to consciously make space for the Child who is to come.

A popular Christmas song tells us, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year.” But is it? Can it truly be a wonderful time THIS year, with pandemic raging, with families unable to meet in person to enjoy their traditional Christmas gatherings? And why do we say it’s the most wonderful time of the year?

We hope that everyone who calls Saratoga Federated Church “home” will participate in this Advent devotional, designed to appeal to all ages and stages. Parents and grandparents, look for prompts to guide your children in preparing their hearts for the wonder of the greatest gift of all: Jesus. Life Groups, we’ve prepared questions for each week to help you engage more fully in Sean’s sermons. If you want to walk through this devotional on your own, you’ll find prompts geared towards individuals. This devotional is truly a joint effort: It’s based on Sean’s sermons, written by Sally, with Savoy and Matt providing age-specific prompts. For families, read through the weekly devotional together, or jump to the “Family Reflection” each week to guide your experience. We are so glad you can join us!

In preparing for this sermon series, Pastor Sean asked: *When you think about 2020, what will you ponder? To ponder well and honestly is to think deeply about all the good, the bad, and even the ugly of the past. Pondering is critical because it helps us put things into perspective. When we think deeply, slowly, and carefully, we see more. And when we ponder well, we are able to tell the story well.*

This year, let's ponder Christmas. Perhaps this year, we need Christmas like we have never needed it before. And perhaps we need ALL of Christmas - all the truth and love and compassion and pain and darkness and light and joy...all of it! So, this year, let's join Pastor Sean in his invitation to slow down, be present, breathe deeply, and ponder Christmas.

Imagine...700 years before the first Christmas, a group of tribes, with a glorious past, had dwindled and become a shadow of what they once were. It was a bleak and difficult time. Then God gave the prophet Isaiah these words:

*The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness  
a light has dawned.  
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 (Is. 9:2;6).*

700 years after that prophecy was given, the people were still pondering. And then one day, the light dawned. The light came into the world and the ancient words were fulfilled. And, now, over 2,000 years later, *we* ponder. Because our world still walks in deep darkness. We invite you to think deeply this year because we still need the great light. We ponder because to us, at the end of a very long 2020, a child has been born and a son has been given. And he is our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

We invite you to a season of expectation as we ponder together. Traditionally, the Church around the world has called this season Advent. Advent is the “coming” or “arrival” of something or someone significant. During Christian Advent, we anticipate the arrival of Jesus, *God made flesh*, into the world. We look back at the incarnation; we look into the present by considering Christ in us; and we look forward to consider that glorious day when Christ will come again. This year, let us ponder Christmas; invite Jesus, once again, to be our great light.

Perhaps for you, like me, the Advent wreath wasn't part of your Christmas celebration – but now it is one of the most meaningful ways to prepare for the birth of Christ. Each week we will light one candle on the Advent wreath. Decide which day and time the candles will be lit during Advent. Choose a consistent time for each of the four weeks. On Christmas Eve, light the final candle in the middle of the wreath. The Advent wreath traditionally includes three purple candles, one pink candle, and one white candle. The first candle, which is purple, symbolizes hope. The second candle, also purple, represents faith. The third candle is pink and symbolizes joy. The fourth candle, which is purple, symbolizes peace. The final candle, the white candle, is placed in the middle of the wreath and lit on Christmas Eve. This is the Christ Candle, and symbolizes the arrival of the Christ child. You will find prompts to include your children or Life Group in doing this together. While we light one new candle each week, you can continue to light the previous candles every night.

May the Holy Spirit bless you and keep you this Advent!

With love and gratitude for each of you,

Sally

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Image from <https://themighty.com/2017/07/finding-support-healing-grief/>

## Week 1

### *Prepare the*

### *Way of the Lord*

The prophet Isaiah urges us to prepare the way of the Lord:

*In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.  
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken (Isa. 40:3-5).*

Let's begin with a journey, a pilgrimage, a path to help us prepare the way of the Lord.

Pilgrimage is a key theme running throughout the story of the birth of Christ; there was domestic travel (Mary and Joseph) and international travel (the magi); both left home to embark on a long journey. Like all who journey, they no doubt encountered dust, boredom, discomfort, as well as wonder, discovery, and a sense of excitement.

Much has been written lately about the difference between a traveler and a tourist. Usually the definition of a traveler is one who seeks to understand the culture of the place she is visiting; a tourist is one who checks off famous sights from his "top ten" list. A

pilgrim is one who sets off on a (usually) long journey to visit a place closely associated with one they revere. Many Christians visit Israel, wanting to “walk where Jesus walked.” Muslims complete the Haj, traveling to Mecca, where they seek to begin again in a fresh new way. A pilgrimage is a journey where a person goes in search of new meaning and deeper understanding of self and the Other, the divine presence. It’s a journey to a sacred place. While pilgrimage sites such as Jerusalem or Mecca are perhaps the most common destinations, some pilgrims travel to the places that are — or were — significant to their personal heroes. Every August 16th, Elvis Presley fans from around the country make a pilgrimage to Graceland, his former home, to commemorate the anniversary of his death; history lovers might visit the Lincoln Memorial; or football fans might journey to Canton, Ohio to see the Football Hall of Fame.

In this study, we are going to consider ourselves “pilgrims,” even though we may not leave our physical home; we hope we encounter with fresh wonder the miracle of Emmanuel, God-with-us, the birth of our greatest gift.

N.T. Wright, in his book, *The Way of the Lord*, says, “if we go humbly, get down underneath the surface noise, and wait on God in the silence of our hearts, there is no telling what we may hear, what we may discover, in what ways we may be changed.” Pilgrimage invites us to prayer, to take fresh steps along the path of discipleship. This Advent, we invite you to a slow pilgrimage where our souls can rest, our hearts can ponder the miracle of the Incarnation, and we can joyfully enter into the miracle of Christmas.

As we begin our Advent journey, let’s begin with a pilgrimage that Jesus probably took part in: Hanukkah. John 10:22-23 tells us, “At that time the Feast of Dedication took place in Jerusalem; it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple in the portico of

Solomon.” Hanukkah, which means “dedication” in Hebrew, usually falls in November or December. This eight-day celebration commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem during the second century B.C. The origins of Hanukkah stem from a particularly turbulent phase of Jewish history when Judea was under the control of Antiochus III, the Seleucid king. While this king allowed the Jews religious freedom, his son, Antiochus IV, viciously and violently persecuted the Jews. He deposed the high priest in Jerusalem, ending the long line of succession, beginning with Aaron and his sons through the many centuries of Jewish life, and sold the priesthood to those outside the priestly line. When the Jews organized a revolt, Antiochus overturned the city, regained his power, killing over 40,000 people. When he forced his way into the Holy of Holies, he destroyed the scrolls of the law and sacrificed a pig on the sacred altar, completely defiling and violating the sanctuary. It is impossible for us to grasp how horrifying this was to the Jews. Jesus will later refer to this act of defiling the temple as the “desolating sacrilege” (Matthew. 24:15).

Judas Maccabaeus, one of the priestly line who, with his father and four brothers, rose up in revolt against the Syrian king. Within two years the Jews had successfully driven the Syrians out of Jerusalem. Judah called on his followers to cleanse the Second Temple, rebuild its altar and light its menorah—the gold candelabrum whose seven branches represented knowledge and creation and was to be kept burning every night.

Hanukkah celebrates the miracle of the light. Although there was only enough oil for one day, the candles continued burning for eight nights, giving

them time to find more oil. This wondrous event inspired the Jewish sages to proclaim a yearly eight-day festival, one that Jesus would have known.

Lights seem almost synonymous with Christmas, and we can see how the miracle of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, points to the coming of Jesus, the Light of the world. The light came into the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it.

And yet we need darkness. We crave light, and yet darkness can be a gift. Without darkness, we would lack food, as many crops must go through a period of darkness before they burst forth with new life. Darkness is instrumental in giving us a good night's sleep. (Have you ever tried to sleep in a too brightly-lit room?)

Darkness is often necessary for our own spiritual growth. St. John of the Cross is perhaps most closely associated with the “dark night of the soul,” that season when our previous understandings of God no longer fit, and our hearts undergo a purification, coming to a new and larger understanding of God. Perhaps you have experienced this. Perhaps the darkness is inviting you, in the words of Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1, to “clear the way for the Lord.” These scriptures promise the coming Messiah, the Word made Flesh, Emmanuel, God-with-us. They assure us that we are safe, even in the darkness. We need not fear, for the Light of the world is with us.

As you ponder your pilgrimage, how is God inviting you to clear the way for the Lord?

### **Questions for Discussion or Journal Prompts**

If you are reading this devotional guide as a family, you may want to have a discussion with your family by selecting one or two questions to use as a guide. If you are reading this guide on your own, use these questions as journal prompts. And if you may want to jump right to

lighting the Advent candle, that's fine. There is no right or wrong way to walk through this guide.

1. What is the farthest you have ever travelled?
2. What is the strangest mode of transportation you have ever experienced? For me, some of the stranger methods have included a bus filled to overflowing with people and live chickens, a very small plane which landed on a grass landing strip, small boat to forge a river, a tuk tuk, camel, and elephant.
3. When have you felt most "foreign," like you didn't fit in?
4. Pretend you are packing to go on a long journey. Knowing you will have to carry your suitcase a long way, what will you include? What will you leave behind? Now imagine you are travelling through this Advent season. What do you need to accompany you on the journey? What weighs you down and should be left behind?
5. My mother was fond of saying "It's a long road that never turns." When I was in the midst of a wilderness, I didn't appreciate this statement, because sometimes the road ahead seemed like an endless slog through a dry and barren land. She was right, of course. (Kids, mothers are almost always right). What gives you hope when you are in wilderness? What gives you hope today as you anticipate Christmas, the gift of Emmanuel, God-with-us?
6. It's been said the darkness brings gifts. We need darkness for many crops to sprout new life. We need darkness to sleep soundly. Darkness offers an opportunity to consider the great light that has pierced the deep darkness of our world. What gifts can darkness bring? Have you experienced the gifts of darkness?

7. As you ponder Christmas, where does your world need light? Where do you need the joy, hope, comfort, and promise of Christmas? Where has your life grown dark? In your marriage? With your children? With your parents? Your friendships? Your mind and body? Your finances? Your career? Your hopes and dreams?
8. As you ponder Christmas, specifically Christmas 2020 where many of our cherished traditions are put on hold, are you aware of any gifts God is giving to you? If so, what are they?
9. What do you need to do in your life in order to prepare the way of the Lord?
10. Where do you long to experience the great light of Christmas?

**Family Reflection:** Decide which day time the candles will be lit during Advent. Choose a consistent time for each of the four weeks. If sitting down together for a meal is usual in your household, light the candle when you gather for a meal, or for family devotions.

Explain the Advent wreath to your children. If they are young, or if you are enjoying an Advent wreath for the first time, you can tell your children about Jesus, the Light of the World. If they are older, you may want to invite them to participate in lighting the candle and reading the scripture for the week. If sitting down together for a meal is usual in your household, light the candle each time you gather for a meal, or for family devotions.

Read: Isaiah 9:2 and 6

Ask: What is it like to walk around when it's dark? How is it different to walk around when it's light?

Say: God is with us in darkness *and* in light. We need both. For instance, seeds need darkness and light to grow. We need darkness to sleep and rest, but we also need the light of

day to live our lives. Light is the form of energy that allows a person to see. In the Hebrew scriptures, such as Isaiah, light symbolized life and blessing. When Christ was born, it was like a light turned on for the whole world – a light that can never be turned off. This light lives inside of you too.

If you are parenting teens, be prepared for the Holy Spirit and your child to take the conversation in a different direction. The Advent Wreath tradition will be comforting for many. Still, it may raise some angst among those trying to reconcile God's goodness with the darkness of 2020. When a teenager asks a question or expresses doubt, honor them by resisting the urge to provide an answer. Instead, explore the question/doubt of your child. Affirm your child for wrestling with their faith honestly and for asking big questions. Encourage the journey. Our follow-up questions show teens that we're listening, that we care about them and their thinking, and allow us to honor the messiness of faith. This "tangential" discussion becomes a holy invitation to understand and encourage our children.

**Lighting the Advent Wreath** The first Advent candle symbolizes hope. If you are using the traditional liturgical colors, this candle is purple. It is sometimes called the “Prophecy Candle” in remembrance of the prophets, especially Isaiah, who foretold the birth of Christ. It represents the expectation felt in anticipation of the coming Messiah.

Close your time together as a family, Life Group, or individual, knowing that the Holy Spirit is with you, by saying this Celtic Advent blessing:

*God of the watching ones, the waiting ones, the slow and suffering ones:*

*Give us Your benediction, Your good word for our souls,*

*That we might rest and rise in the kindness of Your company.*

*Prepare our hearts that the Child King might find room,*

*For behold, the Lord, the Ruler, is come!*

### **Additional Suggestion**

Walk a labyrinth. Consider it to be a brief pilgrimage. Unlike a maze, labyrinths always take you to the center; you can't get lost in a labyrinth as you can in a maze. A labyrinth is a meandering, nonlinear path, a walking meditation, an invitation to slow down and join the Holy Spirit in his invitation to walk together. I have found labyrinths essential in my spiritual life. Through walking a labyrinth, I have gained strength to "keep on keeping on," given the grace to release problems and stresses that had the power to hinder my life, and discovered the joy of journeying with Jesus. If you want to walk a labyrinth, here are several nearby:

- First Congregational Church, 1980 Hamilton Ave, San Jose (located in the back of the church)
- Church of the Ascension, 12033 Miller Ave, Saratoga (located in the back of the church, near the rose garden)
- Westhope Presbyterian Church, 12850 Saratoga Ave, Saratoga (located in the front of the church, very near Saratoga Ave. I find this labyrinth the most difficult to walk as I get distracted by traffic.)
- You can also build your own in your backyard or living room. Find a simple labyrinth outline online. As you build the labyrinth with your family discuss the tradition and invitation.

## **Week Two: The Long and Winding Road**



The Adoration of the Magi from the Priscilla Catacombs, Rome, 2<sup>nd</sup> century

Read Matthew 2:1-12

Last week we talked about a pilgrimage, a long journey undertaken to come closer to Jesus. Sometimes following Jesus seems like a long and winding road. Sometimes it seems like a hard slog through a dry and barren land. Sometimes it seems like a beautiful walk through a vibrant rain forest where the colors delight and amaze us, or a walk along a sandy beach where the waves break softly by our feet. Eugene Peterson called following Jesus a “long walk in the same direction.” We don’t always get it right. We sometimes misread a roadmap, miss an important street sign, or are just in the wrong place at the wrong time. This week we are looking at a group of outsiders who traveled a long and winding road to find God – the Magi.

Although liturgically we celebrate the three kings (the Magi) on January 6<sup>th</sup>, we are going to continue our Advent pilgrimage by imagining we are with them on their journey. Perhaps their journey gives us a way to avoid being caught up in everything that must be done: gifts to buy and wrap, trees to decorate, cards to write and send, favorite cookies to

make; temper tantrums to endure (both children and adults!) – and this year, we have to figure out how to have a meaningful socially distant Christmas. Are you weary yet?!?! What do the Magi have to teach us as we begin our Advent journey?

These wise men embark on what seems like a foolish journey. T.S. Eliot, in his poem *The Journey of the Magi*, writes,

A cold coming we had of it, Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey ...  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly...  
A hard time we had of it. At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches, With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

What drove them to continue on this long and dangerous journey? Why did they embark on a journey that probably seemed foolish to others around them? I'm reminded of Paul's words to the Corinthians: "Don't fool yourself. Don't think that you can be wise merely by being up-to-date with the times. Be God's fool—that's the path to true wisdom. What the world calls smart, God calls stupid" (1 Cor. 3:18-20 The MSG).

The Magi must have had strong motivation and conviction to make this dangerous journey. I recall a journey that changed my life. It was a short journey, not dangerous, but one I was determined I would not take. And yet God called me with such an irresistible force that I felt as if a power greater than I drove to the meeting that would begin the journey I'm on today.

The Magi were dream interpreters for the royal Persian family, believed to have extraordinary religious knowledge. The gospel of Matthew tells us, "Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We

saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:1-3).

We know why Herod was disturbed. The Magi have told him a new king has been born, a king who could threaten Herod’s grasp on power. But why was all Jerusalem disturbed as well? I imagine part of their anxiety came from worrying about what Herod might do to keep control of his throne. Herod was well-known to be ruthless in keeping power, even to the point of killing wives and sons. In fact, a contemporary historian said it was better to be a pig in Herod’s household than his son, so endangered was anyone who seemed to threaten his hold on his kingdom.

But I think there was another reason Jerusalem was so disturbed by this announcement. The Magi are the ultimate outsider. The faithful and religious people of God have been waiting for 400 years to hear a new prophecy to give new insight as to when their longed-for Messiah and redeemer would finally come to free them from the tyranny of Rome. And now these outsiders, these foreign, pagan astrologers from an “evil empire” (Persia or Babylon) come to the holy city of Jerusalem, practicing what was forbidden in Israel, bringing news of the Messiah, the king of the Jews. What is going on? What is God doing? This must have seemed wrong on so many different levels. Perhaps they were asking themselves, “Weren’t these the kind of “wise men” Daniel, a servant of God, had to battle while in exile?” These wise men are very unlikely candidates to be a part of the story of the coming King, the One who will bring us out of darkness and into the light. And yet, the wise men are heroes, and we are invited not only to sympathize with them but to be like them, especially when we see them in contrast to the elite and religious.

The “magic” of the Magi was that they saw. They were educated, star gazers who were widely read and would have been familiar with the prophecies of Israel. As they pondered, and waited, they saw the star announcing the coming of Christ, the light of the world. We do not know exactly how they knew a king was coming at that exact time. What we do know is that they were open to God and willing to follow his lead. God revealed Himself to “outsiders” who were looking while the insiders were blind.

Let’s ponder the Magi. Jesus often ended his teachings by saying, “The one who has ears had better listen”; the wise men offer us “eyes to see.” The New Testament references the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10). Things hidden from the beginning of the world would blossom in the signs of the new messianic age and would be proclaimed to the whole world. These wonders would be revealed in Christ...and perhaps the Holy Spirit gave the Magi eyes to see these wonders.

The Magi have captured our imagination from the start. The first known painting of the Magi worshipping the Christ child dates to the second century in the Priscilla Catacomb in Rome. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century they were called kings. By the 8<sup>th</sup> century, they were three kings (perhaps because there are three gifts mentioned in scripture) named Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar. Balthasar is often represented as a king of Arabia or Ethiopia, Melchior as a king of Persia, and Gaspar as a king of India. The gifts are symbolic of Christ the King (gold); Christ the High Priest (frankincense); and Christ the Risen Savior (myrrh).

As you ponder Christmas, set some time aside to journey with the Magi. What preparations would you need to make before beginning your journey? What roadblocks and detours might await you? What gifts would you bring to the new born King? How would

you respond to a child lying in a manger surrounded by animals? What is it about the Magi that so capture our imagination?

### **Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts**

1. Last week, we talked about a time when we felt out-of-place, foreign. This week, we look at a group of travelers who are the ones out of place. Have you ever befriended a stranger? Share that experience.
2. Has God ever called you to do something you thought was crazy? If so, share that experience.
3. Why do you think the Magi thought the birth of this new king of the Jews so important they would embark on this long journey?
4. The carol, *We Three Kings*, sings about a star that led the Magi on their journey. Do you ever wish for such a star, one that would lead you to God, to make clear what direction you should take? What are some ways that God does direct us?
5. Are you surprised that pagan outsiders are such a key feature in the Nativity story? What does it say about Christmas and about God that the Magi were invited to come and see? Who might be considered the modern day Magi in our culture?
6. What differences do you see between the outsiders (the Magi) and the insiders (those living in Jerusalem)?
7. What is the “best” gift you have ever received, or the most unexpected? For me, it was the *in-a-Gadda-Da-Vida* album by Iron Butterfly when I was in junior high. I wanted that record so badly, but my father thought rock music was trash. That Christmas, there was an unusually shaped present under the tree. It was to me from my father. This in itself was odd because gifts were always from both my parents. When I opened that

present, I found the album I wanted. It meant so much to me because I knew it was a gift given out of a desire to bridge the gap between father and daughter. What gift has meant the most to you?

8. What's one way from your past that God made himself known to you? God is a God who makes himself known. He appeared to Moses in a burning bush, and to Saul as a blinding light while on the road to Damascus. God wants to be known; he *yearns* for an intimate relationship with us. When we take time to ponder, we often see more and more clearly. Like Paul, like the Magi, "outsiders" are invited to become "insiders." How is God making himself known to you?
9. To see clearly often requires concentration and focus. If you wear glasses, it requires clean lenses. What can you do this week to see more clearly, to ponder Christmas in a new light, with fresh eyes? What are some steps you will take this week?

Perhaps this prayer by Thomas Merton, an American Trappist monk who lived at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, may help you:

Lord, be our alarm clock as we make our way through this Advent in expectation of your coming. Keep us from "sleeping at the switch" so that our life of faith has an opportunity to grow and mature in us, and so that our life in the world becomes one of light and honor and love. Above all, let us not sleep through your call. Give us the grace to use the Advent season as a time for our own growth and the growth of our spiritual community. Amen.

### **Family Reflection:**

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

Ask: Who is the smartest person you know? How do you think they became so wise? Have you ever felt like an outsider? How do you think God feels about outsiders?

Say: The Magi, were wise people who took a long dangerous journey to find Jesus. The “magic” of the Magi was that they saw. The Magi were people believed to have extraordinary religious knowledge. They were also outsiders, foreign, pagan, astrologers from an “evil empire” (Persia or Babylon) come to the holy city of Jerusalem, practicing what was forbidden in Israel, and bringing news of the Messiah, the Light of the World. God was revealed to “outsiders” who were looking, while the insiders were in the dark.

**Lighting the Advent Wreath:** Light the second candle, representing faith. It is called the “Bethlehem Candle” as a reminder of Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem, and is traditionally purple. The Magi had great faith to follow God’s leading on their journey to find Christ. You may want to listen to the carol, *We Three Kings of Orient Are*.

**Additional Suggestion:**

Considering a “gift” that you can bring to God in this season. The gift might be financial support of a charity, groceries to a food pantry, or your time serving for a non-profit. Your gift might be reaching out to someone who may be considered an “outsider,” offering them the love of Jesus through encouragement, invitation, and inclusion.

Close your time together as a family, Life Group, or individual, knowing that the Holy Spirit is with you, by saying this Celtic Advent blessing:

*God of the watching ones, the waiting ones, the slow and suffering ones:*

*Give us Your benediction, Your good word for our souls,*

*That we might rest and rise in the kindness of Your company.*

*Prepare our hearts that the Child King might find room,*

*For behold, the Lord, the Ruler, is come!*

## Week Three

### Mary: Let It Be



*Annunciation* by John Williams Waterhouse, 1914

Read Luke 1:26-38

Like many of you, I awaited with new season of *The Crown* with great anticipation, watching as Diana marries Prince Charles. It seemed like a fairy tale: beautiful young girl marries handsome prince. In the storybooks, the couple always lives happily ever after. But that just isn't real life. In our study this week, a young girl marries her betrothed and lives happily ever after... uh, not quite. Actually, a young girl marries a carpenter under scandalous circumstances. In fact, the bride is pregnant – and her fiancé isn't the father of the child.

We read in Luke 1 that an angel came to Mary: “And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.” It seems natural that Mary would be troubled by the appearance of a supernatural being. After all, while we read about angels appearing to people, we probably don't expect to actually encounter one. But Luke says Mary was “greatly troubled at the saying.” What part of the saying troubled her? It sounds

wonderful! She is favored. The Lord is with her. In fact, this is a greeting I would like to hear.

Perhaps Mary is troubled because of the history surrounding the angel's words: "The Lord is with you" are the words spoken to many of the great heroes of the Hebrew Scriptures. When God met Moses at the burning bush to call him to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt, God assured Moses that He would be with him (Exod. 3:12). When God called Joshua to lead the people into the promised land occupied by hostile peoples, God promised him, "I will be with you" (Joshua 1:5). When Gideon was called by the angel to free the people from their Midianite oppressors, the angel promised, "The Lord will be with you" (Judges 6:12).

Each person in these examples were tasked with seemingly impossible tasks. In their own strength, they were unequal to the task. And yet each is successful – because God is with them. Perhaps when Mary heard the angel's greeting to her, "The Lord is with you," she immediately thought of those who had heard similar words. The words are the first indication that Mary's life is about to change beyond all expectation. The words tell Mary that God is calling her into his redemptive plan. We can understand how this would have been troubling!

The Amplified Bible says, "But she was greatly perplexed at what he said, and kept carefully considering what kind of greeting this was." In Greek, the word "consider" is *dielozizeto*. The word "dialogue" is derived from it. It refers to an intense reflection, an inner conversation. *Strong's Greek Bible Concordance* says it is "the process of *giving and receiving* information with someone to *reach deeper understanding* – a "going back-and-forth" of thoughts and ideas so people can better know the Lord. Doing this is perhaps the

most telling characteristic of the growing Christian!” Although puzzled, confused, and fearful, Mary continued in dialogue with God. She is not afraid to question the angel, asking how it is possible that she will become pregnant since she is a virgin. This is an honest and intimate conversation.

The angel doesn’t shy away from this conversation. He not only answers Mary’s question *how*, but also tells her *what*. The Holy Spirit will overshadow her, and her child will be called the “Son of God.” Mary’s response to the angel is radical: “Let it be to me according to your word.” Mary’s obedience is such that she is willing to risk her reputation, her engagement and even her life. (The penalty for adultery was death, and many in Mary’s world must have believed her guilty of adultery. It is, after all, a “more logical” explanation of being pregnant before she marries Joseph.)

Luke’s gospel focuses more on women than any of the other synoptic gospels. In his gospel, we see Mary’s choice. As Trappist monk Thomas Merton reminds us, “God willed that the salvation of the world should depend on her consent” (*Mary, the Royal Way*). Her consent...God’s plan. Wow.

Mary is the first disciple listed in the New Testament, the first to experience the incarnation, to hold Jesus inside her. She did not allow fear to overwhelm her; rather she remained in dialogue with God, continuing to gain strength from his presence. Like Mary, may we experience the joy of the incarnation this week.

### **Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts**

1. Can you recall a scintillating conversation? Or perhaps a heated conversation? What was it like? Did it help you come to a new understanding?

2. What other people do you know (in the Bible or in your life) who have questioned God, wrestled with him, or wondered if this was really what God wanted them to do? What was the outcome of this questioning, wrestling, or wondering?
3. How did the angel's visit change Mary's life? How did the visit complicate her life? How did it enrich her life? Where did it bring sorrow and joy?
4. What's most complex about your life right now? How are you responding?
5. When have you noticed God at work in your life? Do you feel excited by his actions? Fearful? Resistant?
6. You may want to try the practice of examen this week. It might be helpful to follow these prompts (with thanks to Russ Ikeda of Emmaus Ministry for creating them):  
 Review your day: Look back on your day slowly and entertain these questions:  
*Where/when did you experience God's presence? Where/when did you miss his presence?*  
 (Pay attention to small things, like feeling satisfaction for doing a job well or an interaction you had with someone in the ordinary moments. Take notice of the prominent emotions you experience.)  
*What stands out?*  
*What can you declare as being "good" or even "very good?"*  
*What was "not good?" Why?*  
*What do your actions (or failure to act) tell you?*  
*What do your feelings reveal?*  
*Was there more of a willingness to listen to God or to ignore him?*  
*What patterns do you notice in reflecting on the past week? (When you 'connect the dots', what do you observe?)*

*Is there a metaphor that best captures your journey with the Lord this past week?*

*Did God have anything to say to you through this process?*

Take your observations to prayer, asking the Holy Spirit for insight and understanding.

**Family Reflection:**

Read: Luke. 4:16-30

Say: Mary was favored and chosen; she was blessed beyond all women! But, we forget that with such favor comes loneliness and suffering. Mary was chosen for a glorious calling that included a unique burden. As the burden was being revealed, she did not shy away from her path. She held everything close in her memory; both trials and blessings. She wrestled with her reality in all its complexity and ferocity. Her willingness to preserve and encounter, both the mystery and the suffering of her life, takes our breath away.

Ask: What feels heavy for you today? Close your eyes and imagine putting this in God's hands.

**Lighting the Advent Candle:** The third candle symbolizes joy. It is called the "Shepherd's Candle." It is pink (or rose) because rose is a liturgical color for joy and love. Traditionally Advent was a season of fasting in preparation for Christmas. This third Sunday marks the halfway point in Advent and points forward to the joy the world experienced at the birth of Jesus, as well as the joy that the faithful have reached the midpoint of Advent.

Close your time of study, knowing that the Holy Spirit is with you, by saying this Celtic Advent blessing:

*God of the watching ones, the waiting ones, the slow and suffering ones:*

*Give us Your benediction, Your good word for our souls,*

*That we might rest and rise in the kindness of Your company.*

*Prepare our hearts that the Child King might find room,*

*For behold, the Lord, the Ruler, is come!*

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**Additional Suggestion:**

“God Sightings” are a favorite element of our annual trip to Mexico to build houses with Amor Ministries. Each evening we ask our team members where they saw God at work throughout the day. This season, create a visual reminder of your God-sightings. You can cut out paper stripes and make a paper chain garland to put around your Christmas tree or on the mantel of your fireplace. Have each member of your family write down where they saw God that day; by Christmas morning your tree will be covered in reminders of God’s daily presence in your lives.

## Week 4

### Simeon and Anna:

### Those who Bless



Simeon with the Infant Christ in the Temple by Rembrandt,  
around 1669

### Read Luke 2:22-40

Have you noticed a recurring theme on our Advent pilgrimage? We've been looking at the "outsiders" in the story: the Magi, and now Simeon and Anna, a different kind of "outsider."

Why do I call Simeon and Anna "outsiders," when they are devout lovers of God who spend all their time in the temple? I think they are outsiders because they have removed themselves from everyday life. Anna lives in the temple, spending all day every day praying. Simeon has been set apart from others by his belief that he will not die until he sees the Messiah. They have ordered their days differently than most people.

Like the Magi, they received divine revelation. But rather than a dramatic unveiling by God, Simeon and Anna were given a personal promise and then asked to wait. And wait.

And wait. They had pondered Christmas (unknowingly) for a long, long time. No doubt this fostered within them a keen sensitivity to God's Spirit. When Mary and Joseph arrived in the temple with their baby, Simeon and Anna knew who they were and were ready to bless them.

They had rehearsed their words and actions of blessing. Wrinkled hands took the baby out of his mother's arms. Cracked lips spoke the words that would never leave the young couple, especially the mother. The family was blessed by the old man and woman but the blessing was not cliché or "nice." Rather, it was filled with meaning and mystery. It was God's precious truth for them at that unique moment in time.

Some wedding ceremonies include the Blessing of the Hands. It's a beautiful look forward into time, when the young hands of the bride and groom will become the wrinkled old hands of a woman and man who have weathered life's storms together, whose hands are no longer smooth but now spotted by age and gnarled by arthritis. The blessing ends with these words: "These are the hands that even when wrinkled and aged, will still be reaching for yours, still giving you the same unspoken tenderness with just a touch." While this blessing is spoken between a human bride and groom, it seems to hold true for us as the bride of Christ, who have been faithful on that "long walk in the same direction," as Eugene Peterson called it.

Simeon's name means "God receiver," and he has indeed received God. Even before he held the Messiah in his arms, Simeon had received God in the person of the Holy Spirit. During a long season of 400 years when the prophets are silent and the people wait in darkness, Simeon had been visited by the Holy Spirit, and told that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ.

Luke portrays Simeon as a devout and righteous man longing expectantly for Scripture's fulfillment, "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (Isa. 40:22). In his beautiful words (known as the *Nunc Dimittus*). Simeon recognizes the fulfillment of God's promised salvation as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (You may want to read Isaiah 9:1–2; 40:5; 40:30–32; 42:6; 49:6; 52:10 as a reminder of the scripture Simeon probably meditated upon as he waited for the Lord's Christ to be revealed).

Simeon sees a young couple dedicating their baby boy at the temple, offering two birds as atonement (indicating they probably were too poor to offer the lamb as required in Lev. 12:8). Simeon has no worldly power or riches to gain by interacting with this humble poor family. Simeon is not witnessing a political movement or military revolt to overthrow Rome, nor does he experience a revival of strict law-keeping led by the Jewish religious leaders of the day. This probably isn't the kind of fulfillment he has been expecting.

And yet, the Holy Spirit reveals to him that *this* child is the consolation of Israel. The Lord's Christ has come not as a mighty warrior, nor as a worldly king, but as a baby. All that Simeon has longed for is wrapped up in this baby he now holds in his arms. Simeon, like the Magi, sees. He isn't blinded by his expectations of what the Messiah will be like; he sees the Christ in the body of a tiny helpless baby.

Simeon blesses Mary and Joseph and says to Mary, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:34-35). Simeon is the first to explicitly prophesy the coming sorrow of Mary as she watches her son crucified and the sword that will pierce his side.

Simeon's blessing is unusual. It reminds me of the blessing author Brennan Manning often gave. He received it from his spiritual director as a gift for ordination:

May all your expectations be frustrated;  
May all your plans be thwarted,  
May all your desires wither into nothingness,  
That you may experience the powerlessness and poverty of a child,  
And can sing and dance in the love of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Simeon's blessing is unusual, and probably not the blessing Mary desired. And yet it speaks to a necessary reality: Jesus' atonement for our sin.

Perhaps like Simeon, we long for the day when the Lord's Christ will come again. We live in the "already-not-yet" kingdom of God. Christ has come, and Christ will come again. Like Simeon, we wait and long for the day when Christ will come again to set everything right, to restore justice, to redeem the lost, to heal the broken, to renew the relationship broken in the Garden of Eden. During 2020, this roller coaster of a year, I have said more frequently this year, "Lord Jesus come now!" than I have ever in all the previous years combined. Just like Brennan Manning's blessing, my expectations have been frustrated, my plans thwarted...perhaps so that I can sing and dance in the love of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let's look at the next character in this story. Luke describes Anna in only three verses:

*And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:36-38).*

In such a brief account, every word matters. So why did Luke include the name of her father, Phanuel, and that she was from the tribe of Asher? Her father's name means "Face of God." Perhaps his name refers to the place where Jacob saw God face to face (Genesis 32:30). Her name, which she shares with Hannah in the Hebrew scriptures, means "favor" or "grace." (You may want to read about Hannah, another amazing woman of God, in 1 Samuel 1.) And indeed Anna is favored to see the face of God!

The tribe of Asher was one of the northern tribes lost during the Assyria exile. In 930 BC, the northern tribes split from the house of David to form the Kingdom of Israel as part of the Northern Kingdom. After the Assyrian conquest in 723 BC, the tribe of Asher was one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. How interesting that someone from a "lost" tribe is one who finds the Messiah.

Anna is a prophetess, one of a small number of women in the Bible bearing the title "prophetess." The others are Miriam, the sister of Moses (Exodus 15:20); Deborah, the judge (Judges 4:4); Huldah, the wife of Shallum (2 Chronicles 34:22); Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3); and Philip's four unmarried daughters (Acts 21:9). The period between what we call today the Old Testament and the New Testament was marked by 400 years of silence from God. Although we have no prophecies recorded during this time, we know by Anna's presence as a prophet that God did not desert his people.

Malachi closes the Old Testament when the nation of Israel had returned from Babylonian captivity, back in the promised land, and yet still dominated by Persia, the great world power. The temple in Jerusalem had been restored, although it is a much smaller building than Solomon's temple. 400 years later, the New Testament opens with Matthew's account of the status of Israel: Israel, still a puppet state, is now controlled by Rome, the

superpower of its day. There is a king on the throne, but this king is the descendant of Esau instead of Jacob, and his name is Herod the Great.

Rome captured Jerusalem around 63 B.C., perhaps even in the lifetime of Simeon and Anna. Anna is old: “She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four” (Luke 2:36–37). Anna had been married only seven years when she became a widow, and she remained a widow for the rest of her life. Most translations indicate that Anna was eighty-four years old when she met Jesus. But it is also possible to translate the text to mean Anna had lived eighty-four years *after* her husband died. That would mean Anna was at least 104 years old—if she had married at the age of thirteen. Whether 104 or 84, she may have witnessed Rome’s takeover of Jerusalem.

Anna’s actual age may not be important; scripture may emphasize her age to indicate that she has been faithful and obedient to God, and he has blessed her with a long life. Perhaps it’s a reminder of the promise Moses gave to the tribe of Asher, Anna’s tribe: “your strength will equal your days” (Deuteronomy 33:25). Surely Anna’s life shows evidence of that. Or her old age may be one of the many miracles surrounding the birth of Jesus, along with the advanced age of Zechariah and Elizabeth when John was conceived (Luke 1:7, 13, 18, 57), and the Holy Spirit’s action of overshadowing Mary, who was able to conceive without intercourse (Luke 1:31-35). Like Mary and Elizabeth, Anna proclaims the coming of the Messiah in the gospels.

Anna’s lifestyle is unusual: “She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying” (Luke 2:37). It is possible that Anna was given living quarters at the temple because of her designation as prophetess, or she may have lived close by. Luke

indicates that her habits of worship, prayer and fasting represent a routine, probably one of decades. Luke does not mention any children; perhaps her marriage was barren. How does she live? What about her finances? Is she independently wealthy, or do others provide her food? How does she afford to worship night and day? So much of Anna's story is unknown to us. But we can see how God delights in her, revealing himself to her as God made flesh. Upon seeing the baby, Anna gave great thanks to God. She then shared with many others, who also hoped for redemption, knowledge of the babe—her words and actions giving remembrance to the message of the prophet Isaiah: *Break out together in song, O ruins of Jerusalem! For the LORD has comforted his people, has redeemed Jerusalem.* —Isaiah 52:9

The words of Anna and Simeon help us cross from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. Simeon speaks of the time when the Gentiles will become part of the kingdom of God; Anna speaks to those “looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.” She and Simeon join the others in Luke's gospel who recognize this child's great significance and wide import: the angel Gabriel (1:31-33), Elizabeth and John (in uterus) (1:42-45), Zechariah (1:76-79) and the Bethlehem shepherds (2:11-12, 20). This week, won't you join in the blessing of the Christ child?

### **Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts**

1. Have you ever responded with “God bless you” after hearing someone sneeze? Why do we do that? Is it really a form of blessing?
2. If you were planning a dinner party, would you want to invite Simeon or Anna? Why or why not?

3. Have you longed (or perhaps are now longing) for an event to occur? Israel longed for the Messiah to come; the prodigal father longed for his son to return home. How do we keep our hope alive in times of great longing?
4. This is the last week of Advent. Take a moment to think about anything you still have to get done before Christmas. Now offer it to God, asking him to give you peace in the midst of chaos and patience in the midst of hurry. How does that change the way you feel?
5. God gives us words to bless others. Has someone blessed you with words of meaning? Have you blessed others? As you are comfortable, share this experience with others.
6. Pondering gives us hope and patience. Sometimes we have to wait for a long time for God to show us...for us to see. What do you hope for this Christmas?
7. Trust is a long-term word. How has God shown himself to be trust-worthy in your life?

### **Family Reflections:**

Read Luke 2:22-40

Ask: Who is the oldest person you know? What are they like? What is the longest you've ever had to wait for something you wanted? What did you think about while you waited?

Say: Like the Magi and the Shepherds, Anna and Simeon received divine revelation – God was revealed to them. But rather than a dramatic unveiling by God, Anna and Simeon were given a personal promise and then asked to wait. And wait. And wait! When Mary and Joseph arrived in the temple with their baby, Simeon and Anna knew who they were and

were ready to bless them. A prayer is talking to God, while a blessing is speaking to a person. It is like a gift of words that you give someone. Wrinkled hands took the baby out of his parent's arms. Cracked lips spoke the words that would never leave the young couple. This blessing was filled with meaning and mystery. It was God's truth for them at a unique moment in time.

**Lighting the Advent Candle:** On the fourth week of Advent, we light the final purple candle as we wait for the birth of our Savior. Often called the "Angel's Candle," this candle symbolizes peace. It reminds us of the message of the angels: "Peace on Earth, Good Will toward Men."

Close your time together as a family, Life Group, or individual, knowing that the Holy Spirit is with you, by saying this Celtic Advent blessing:

*God of the watching ones, the waiting ones, the slow and suffering ones:*

*Give us Your benediction, Your good word for our souls,*

*That we might rest and rise in the kindness of Your company.*

*Prepare our hearts that the Child King might find room,*

*For behold, the Lord, the Ruler, is come!*

### **Additional Suggestion:**

Matt Hall writes: When I was in college, one of my classmates was an older woman who was returning to school to finish her degree after raising her children and step-children. She shared with me that when she got remarried, she and her husband started a tradition of writing each other letters for Christmas. They had limited funds and both wanted to provide a special Christmas for their children who were still reeling from their parents' divorces. All of the Christmas budget went to gifts for the kids. This woman, and her husband, decided to write each other a love letter to be opened on Christmas, and that has been their long-standing tradition. These annual love letters are affirmations, expressions of gratitude, prayers of blessing, and a celebration of what God had done in their marriage. Consider sending your own "blessing" letter this Christmas; to a spouse, family member, or friend.

# MERRY CHRISTMAS!

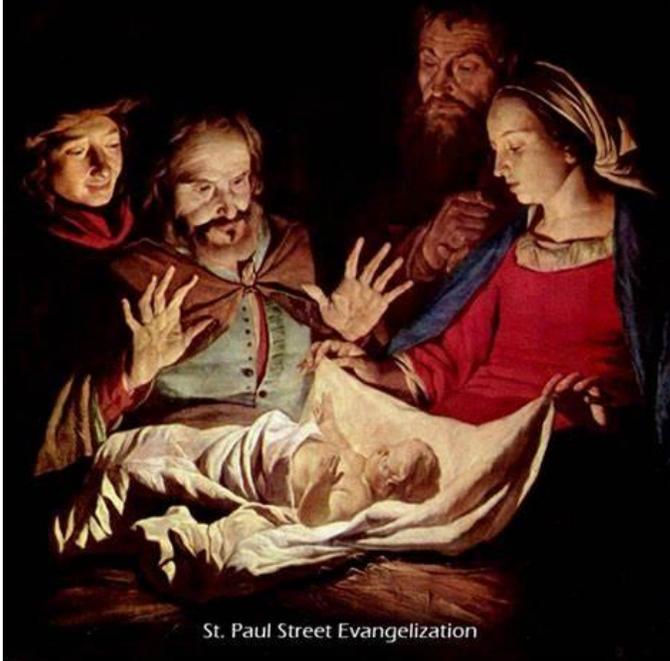


Image from St Paul Street Evangelization FB page, 2016. Original painting by Matthias Stomer, *Adoration of the Shepherds*

## **Read Luke 2:1-21**

Christmas often thrills with the multitude of lights, of Christmas spectacles, of colors and sounds. We've grown used to a "magical Christmas." This year Christmas is different. What would a Christmas look like without all the lights, tinsel, and glitter? This week, we get to imagine what the shepherds saw while they were keeping watch over their flocks at night.

The gospel of Luke tells us, "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified" (Luke 2:8-9).

**Christmas Eve**

**The Shepherds:**

**Outcasts or First**

**Responders**

Let's unpack this familiar story a bit. The shepherds are living in the fields. They are "living rough" – camping in the fields, sleeping in the open, perhaps with minimal food at hand. They are keeping watch over the flocks at night. This tells us there is danger at hand; the sheep are at risk and the shepherds must stay awake to keep them safe. I have been blessed to see the fields outside of Bethlehem where perhaps the shepherds were camping out with their sheep. It's a beautiful, open field, unfenced, putting the vulnerable sheep at risk from wild animals, poachers and thieves.

Although sheep were so important to the economy and the temple, shepherds were not well regarded. In fact, they were considered to be liars and thieves. They were not welcome in the local synagogue, and certainly not in the Temple in Jerusalem. Their testimony was considered worthless in court. In many ways, they are the opposite of the Magi: simple rather than sophisticated; ignorant rather than highly educated; and used to sleeping rough outside rather than dwelling in the rich abodes of the Persian royal family. It seems hard to get much farther apart. And yet, the Magi and the shepherds share a couple of things in common: Both are outsiders and both are chosen by God to witness (and to bear witness of) the miracle that forever changes our world.

Can you imagine? When God needed heralds to announce the first Advent, He chose them, these outsiders, these "thieves and liars" to come see the Christ child. Yet again, I imagine the religious elite were wondering just what on earth God was doing!

The largest gathering of angels ever seen from planet Earth sang for them. They sang of a peace which would now be available to all people, even the outcasts. These outcasts, the liars are chosen by God to become the star witnesses. Without instruction, they raced to see the baby and then told everyone who would listen what they had heard and what they had

seen. Who would believe a shepherd? Yet, “all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.”

Juliet Brenner’s book *Contemplative Vision: A Guide to Christian Art and Prayer* (I highly recommend this book!) notes: “the openness of the shepherds to having their vision changed led them to recognizing their Messiah.” The shepherds were open to change; to seeing with new eyes; and to having their actions changed because of what they saw. I wonder, how often we fail to recognize God in our midst, perhaps because we are so caught up in the daily grind of life. My mama was fond of saying, “the problem with life is that it’s so daily.” Do we fail to welcome Christ because God does not appear to us in ways we expect? Perhaps we don’t see God in our everyday life because he appears in ways contrary to our ideas of what God is like. When we hold fixed expectations of ideas of what God looks like, or how God acts, God will remain hidden from us and may seem silently absent from us. Or perhaps we don’t see God because we are so busy with the every-day-ness of life. The shepherds remind us it really is quite simple: Today a Savior has been born to you.

God desires to be known by us and yearns to be with each of us. We have only to be attentive, turn and draw near. God took the initiative through Jesus’ incarnation to reach out to us to draw us into a closer relationship with him. This prayer by Thomas Merton gives insight into how much Jesus longs to be in relationship with us:

Blessed Jesus, you who loved those outside the law, who sat down to eat with tax collectors, who kept company with sinners, who cured the alien Samaritan, help us go beyond the law into an intimate relationship with you. Transform us from literal-minded legalists into your grace-filled children. Take us by the hand and guide us home. Amen.

The people of John's day needed to have their vision changed in order to see their Messiah in different ways than they had expected. They expected a Messiah who would come in power and might to deliver them from their oppressors. Yet John told them this humble man in ordinary everyday clothes was their King and Deliverer (John 1:26). Where do we need to have our vision changed so that we see Emmanuel? Where do we need to be transformed from literal-minded legalists into God's grace-filled children?

### **Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts**

1. How have you announced good news in your life? Perhaps you were part of a new product launch, or were announcing some event in your life, such as graduation, a wedding, or a new baby. How did you share that news with others? How did their reactions either increase your joy or diminish it?
2. That wonderful Shaker song reminds us, "Tis a gift to be simple; tis a gift to be free." One spiritual discipline is simplicity. Where in your life have you experienced a "holy" simplicity?
3. Have you ever had the experience of sharing a story or event and found that you were not believed? As you are comfortable, share that experience with the group.
4. What does it say about Christmas and about God that the Shepherds were entrusted to go and tell? Who might be considered the modern day shepherd in our culture? Who are the "outcasts" in our world? Based on God's treatment of the Magi and shepherds, how should we treat the "outcasts" in our world today?
5. The shepherds left their important responsibilities to tell the good news. What about us? Would we have left our important responsibilities to follow the invitation as unhesitatingly as they did? Why or why not?

6. What fixed expectations or ideas do we hold about how God should be and where he should be?
7. Consider the stories of the Magi and the Shepherds. What “expectations” did God shatter in making them part of his story? What “expectations” of ours might God want to shatter so that we could live into a new intimacy with God?
8. The angels sang of peace on earth. What can we do this week to make our home, our community, and our world a more peaceful place?
9. What is one thing you will do this week to slow down so you can ponder the miracle of Christmas?

Perhaps we want to join in praying this prayer from Thomas Merton:

Lord Jesus, assuage our blindness and activate our hearts during this Advent, so that we find your presence hidden in ourselves. May we unveil the mystery of Christ-with-us and work toward the true restoration of the whole world in your image. Let your light shine in our hearts so that we may always know the truth of your love. Amen.

**Family Reflection:**

Read Luke 2:1-21

Ask: What do you think it was like to live like a shepherd? In many places in the world today, it's the kids who take care of the sheep. Have you ever cared for an animal? What was that like?

Say: In many ways the shepherds are the opposites of the Magi: simple rather than sophisticated; ignorant rather than highly educated; and used to living rough outside. Rather than dwelling in the city or in rich abodes of the royal family. It seems hard to get much

farther apart. And yet, the Magi and the shepherds share a couple of things in common. Both are outsiders and both are chosen by God to witness (and bear witness of) The Light of the World. Can you imagine? When God needed people to announce Christ's birth, God chose them, these outsiders.

### **Lighting the Advent Wreath**

We light the final candle on the wreath – the Christ candle. This candle is in the center of the wreath, reminding us that each of the other four candles point to Christ. It is through Christ that we have hope, peace, joy and love. Christ is the light of the world.

Thanks be to God!