



*What
Child
Is This?*



DEVOTIONS
Advent 2023

As an added feature, these devotions have reflection questions for each day's message. These can be used for self-study or as prompts for discussion when reflecting as a group.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, occupying the central portion of the page. It is intended for reflection questions related to the devotions.

*Advent Devotions were written by Dr. Kari Vo.
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WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. (Matthew 1:18a)

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

It's a good question. What child is this? Who is this baby we see on so many Christmas cards—on banners at church—in the manger scenes in our houses? Who is He, and why does He matter?

Both Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels to answer this question. Together with Mark and John, they show us Jesus, the Son of God in action—being born. Growing up. Getting baptized. Teaching, preaching, and healing. Caring for the least of His people. Dealing with the attacks of evil. Laying down His life on the cross to save us all. Rising from the dead, never to die again—so that all of us who trust in Him may live forever.

What child is this? This is Jesus who loves us. This is Jesus who loves you, who knows you by name, who came into this world to rescue you and to make you His own forever. You matter to Him. Over the next few weeks, let's look at what He did—for love of you.

Dear Lord Jesus, open my eyes to see Your love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you know when someone really loves you?
- Do you find it easy or hard to believe in Jesus' love for you?
- When have you seen His love reflected in another person?

WHO ARE YOU?

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ ... Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers ... and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. (Matthew 1:1a, 2, 15-16)

“Tell me about your family,” we ask when we’re trying to get to know someone. What can we learn about Jesus from His ancestors?

Start with Abraham—the “friend of God” who left his family to go wherever God would send him. He is a great man of faith, yes; but he abandoned his own son Ishmael in the desert, and allowed his wife Sarah to be taken into another man’s harem to save his own life.

Isaac? We honor him as the young man who was willing to lay down his life, if necessary, at God’s command. But he’s also the father who played favorites and set up his sons to be enemies for years.

Jacob? The man who tried to cheat his way through life, only to realize in the end that God was the one who would give him help and every good thing.

We don’t have time to run through all Jesus’ ancestors—David, the faithful king—and adulterer and murderer; Rahab, the prostitute who saved Israel’s spies; faithful King Hezekiah, who fathered Manasseh, who offered his child as a human sacrifice! Good and evil, faith and faithlessness, appear on every level of Jesus’ family tree.

And isn’t that the way it should be for someone who came to save us all? Jesus’ ancestors are like us. We too are mixtures of good and evil; and we cry out for a Savior to help us. By sending Jesus, God has heard our cry.

Come, Lord Jesus, to be Savior of us all. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Are you proud of your ancestors, if you know them? Ashamed?
- Why do you think God didn’t pick only good ancestors for Jesus?
- Jesus came for you personally. What does this mean to you?

CURSED—OR BLESSED?

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah ... And he had a wife ... Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. (Luke 1:5a, 6-7)

My husband and I were childless for many years. And how much it hurt, every time someone confidently told us they knew the reason why. God was punishing us for some sin—we were under a curse, and that's why we couldn't have children! Zechariah and Elizabeth must have heard that accusation many times.

But even more hurtful than human blame is the silence of God in a situation like that. We pray—and God does not answer. Or if He does, the answer is unclear. What can we do? Nothing but keep praying—and continue to follow Him faithfully, even through doubt and darkness.

You may be going through an experience like this right now. If you are, please remember that getting a “no” or “not yet” answer to your prayer doesn't mean God is punishing you, or that you sinned. Elizabeth and Zechariah were in the same boat, and the Bible calls them “blameless.”

As someone who trusts in Jesus, you too are blameless and righteous, chosen to be God's own family. And as you walk through the darkness, you cling to the One who lay down His life on the cross for you—and rose from the dead, to make you His forever.

Dear Savior, help me in my times of darkness and doubt. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you had to deal with God's “no” or “not yet” to your prayers?
- How did it make you feel?
- How did you keep trusting Jesus in that difficult time?

READY OR NOT

Now while he was serving as priest ... there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him ... But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord." (Luke 1:8a, 11a, 12a, 13-15a)

Poor Zechariah! After a long life of disappointment, suddenly an angel appears to tell him he will have a son in his old age. Surely we can forgive him if he wondered, "Do I really still want a baby at this point?"

But it doesn't matter, does it? God's joyful, glorious plan is already sweeping him away, and that child is going to be born no matter how many doubts Zechariah has about it. Why? Because God knows what is best—and this is part of His plan to send His own dear Son Jesus into the world to conquer evil and bring us all back to God's family.

We, too, have times when life changes suddenly, and we're not sure we can cope. That's human. But God still has hold of us, and He knows where He is going. And no matter what comes, we have Jesus—the One who loves us so much He lay down His life for us, to rescue us from all evil. Now that He has risen from the dead, we know He will be with us every step of the way.

When I'm scared, Lord, be close to me! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you ever want to yell "Stop!" when things are happening too fast?
- Tell the story of a time when you felt "swept away" by events.
- How did God uphold you during that time?

BLESSED IN SPITE OF HIMSELF

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." And the people ... were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them ... And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. (Luke 1:18-22)

Oh dear, arguing with an angel. That was a mistake. And doubting God's Word was an even bigger one. No wonder Zechariah got nine months of silence to think about the error of his ways!

But in spite of the embarrassment, it must have been a fruitful, blessed time as well. For Zechariah had time to think—to consider all the wonderful gifts God was showering on him and on all people through John's birth. Because John is Jesus' forerunner—the servant who comes immediately before the King to set everything in order. John's birth meant Jesus Himself was just around the corner!

Zechariah messed up—but God still blessed him and kept His promise. We too mess up and sin on a regular basis—but God blesses us with the Child of Promise, Jesus our Savior, who gave Himself for us so that we might belong to Him forever.

Thank You, Lord, for blessing me even when I mess up. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you think led Zechariah to argue with an angel?
- How do you think he spent those nine months?
- Where do you think he found out more about John's work in the future—and Jesus'?

WAITING FOR A MIRACLE

And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people." (Luke 1:23-25)

I wish I could have seen how Elizabeth took it when her husband let her know what had happened. Could she read? Did Zechariah write it down? Did he mime it? I don't know. But it wasn't long before she understood that God had answered their prayers, and she would have her longed-for baby.

And she kept herself in seclusion. What did that mean? Probably not complete isolation, given that her husband was mute and somebody had to deal with the shopping! But it sounds like she kept this mighty gift of God close to her heart—wrapped up in silence and wonder. Soon enough the rest of the world would find out. For now, it was a private joy—the faithfulness of God, who had heard their prayer and answered with love.

But Elizabeth wasn't the only one who was waiting for a miracle. So were all the people who held on to God's promises in faith—promises to send a Savior who would mend the broken world and make us beloved children of God. John's coming meant that Jesus was on His way—and He would give Himself for the life of the world—for you and for me.

What a wonderful thing to think about!

Dear Jesus, turn my attention and my love to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When you have wonderful news, do you shout it to the world or do you go quiet?
- Can you give an example from your own life?
- What do you think Elizabeth did with her time during those days?

“THE LORD IS WITH YOU”

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was 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. (Luke 1:26-29)

What was Mary doing, when the angel came to her? Sweeping the floor, feeding the chickens, carrying water? Probably something very ordinary. How strange, then, to have an angel call you “O favored one” and say that the Lord was with you!

Of course she was afraid. Angels come for a purpose. And Gabriel was there to tell her that the Lord would soon be with her in a way more intimate and close than she could possibly imagine—incarnate within her as a baby in her womb.

How could she comprehend such a thing, that God would come to her like that? How can we comprehend it, when Jesus comes to us, to live within us as our Savior and Redeemer? It takes some getting used to.

But Mary would have that time—nine months of it!—before she began raising the very Son of God as her own Son. And we, too, have time to get used to Jesus’ loving presence with us—from the day we first trust Him who died and rose for us, until the day we see Him face to face.

Dear Jesus, help me to get used to living with You day by day. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How strange would it be, to have the Lord as your child?
- In how many ways is the Lord with you? Name some of them.
- How does God remind you of His loving presence?

REMEMBERING

And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall call His Name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” (Luke 1:30-33)

I wonder how much of these promises Mary even noticed at the moment the angel was speaking to her. After all, her mind must have been taken up with the first incredible promise: “You will conceive and bear a Son.” All the details about His greatness and kingdom could wait!

And yet, she did hear them—for she remembered them and passed them on to Luke the Gospel writer years later. This Jesus would be the royal Son of David, the true King of Israel. He would be the Son of God. And He would reign forever.

I can only suppose the Holy Spirit helped her to remember all this, even in a moment of shock. After all, Jesus promised the same divine help to His disciples in John 13:26. The Spirit would bring to their remembrance everything Jesus had told them—even through the shock of His death on the cross for our salvation, even through the joy of His resurrection. And ultimately they would pass those words of life on to us, so that we, too, might believe (see John 20:31).

Mothers treasure the promises of their children’s greatness. And we treasure these words too, because they tell us about our beloved Savior Jesus—who loved us enough to give Himself for us.

Dear Savior, thank You for saving us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When has shock made it hard for you to pay attention?
- How did you remember things later? Did someone remind you?
- What specific words do you treasure about someone you love?

DETAILS

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the Child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ... For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:34-35, 37-38)

After that glorious announcement, Mary has a question. "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

Notice that Mary is not arguing with the angel like Zechariah; she simply wants to know the details. Will Joseph be the father? If so, she needs to move the wedding up. The angel is happy to explain to her: God is going to do a miracle like never before. This Child will be conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and He will be holy—not just a prophet, but the Son of God Himself. So Mary herself doesn't need to do a thing.

And so she left it in God's hands, confident that He would deal with everything. And He did—just as He does for us, broken people who need His salvation. God sent His Son Jesus into the world for Mary and for us, so that we who need Him so much might become the forgiven children of God through Him. No need for us to do anything; on the cross and at the empty tomb, God has done it all.

Thank You, Lord, for loving and saving us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you think Mary felt: Happy? Confused? Relieved?
- How does it make you feel, to know that God has done it all?
- Why do you think God chose to handle our salvation all by Himself?

A PLACE TO REST

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. (Luke 1:39-40)

After a stressful time in my life, I went to visit an aunt I loved dearly. I knew that she would welcome me and treat me gently when I needed it.

God gave Mary a similar retreat when she needed time to adjust to the change in her life. To become a mother—to deal with morning sickness and all the physical changes that go with pregnancy. To think and pray about the future: Would her parents believe her? Would Joseph? Most terrifying of all, getting used to the idea of raising the Messiah—the very Son of God. No wonder she needed a break!

And so God added this to the angel's message: "And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren" (Luke 1:36). Of all the people on earth, Elizabeth would be able to understand and care for Mary. She would believe her, pray with her, rejoice with her. And Mary wouldn't feel useless—Elizabeth could certainly use a younger woman's help during the last three months of her own pregnancy!

How kind of God to care for both of them in this way, before they even asked! But knowing Jesus, how should we be surprised? No one has ever loved us more—supplying all we needed at the cost of His own life. And He has become our rest.

Dear Lord, let me find rest in Your love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When you need rest, where do you usually find it?
- Tell about a time when God provided for you before you even asked.
- How does God give you rest?

JOY

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (Luke 1:41-45)

Elizabeth's joy delights me. She is so happy to see Mary and to know that Jesus Himself is present—a tiny embryo in Mary's body. At this moment Elizabeth isn't thinking of what lies ahead—family problems, Mary's reputation, childbirth itself. She is simply overjoyed.

It is good to take time for joy, because joy is the business of heaven (as C.S. Lewis noted). This world is filled with very real trouble and sadness, and if we choose, we can always remember something important to worry about—something that will crowd out joy from this moment.

But Elizabeth lays all that aside to recognize God's blessing here and now. "Blessed are you! Blessed is your baby! Blessed am I, to have you bring Jesus to me! Blessed are you, for believing God's promise."

We, too, are blessed, and for the same reasons. We are blessed because Jesus has come to us, God most high become a human baby. We are blessed because God has kept His promise to redeem us, even at the cost of His own suffering, death, and resurrection. And we are blessed because the Holy Spirit has given us faith in His good promises.

Dear Savior, thank You for coming to me! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What joys has God given you today?
- How do God's blessings sustain you in time of trouble?
- Give thanks for one joy God has given you.

GUARANTEED

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ... for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and Holy is His Name. And His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation. ... He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." (Luke 1:46-47, 49-50, 54-55)

Listen to what Mary says in her song! She describes what God has done, and she does it *in the past tense*. She says that God has scattered the proud and brought down the mighty (not that He *will* scatter the proud and bring down the mighty). She says that He has filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty; He has helped Israel, remembering His promises of mercy to Abraham and all believers.

Why put all this in the past tense? We can look around us every day and see that these things have not all happened yet.

Mary can use the past tense because she is describing a world where God has set everything right—where evil is destroyed, and God's kingdom has come in full blessing. And she knows that all of this is so certain and sure that we might as well put it in the past tense—it is guaranteed to happen. Why? Because Jesus has come into the world. That tiny baby is God Himself, keeping His promises; and nothing will stop Him from saving us and all creation from the power of evil. For this He became a human being, and for this He will suffer, die, and rise again. It's guaranteed.

Heavenly Father, thank You for the assurance of Your love for us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you emphasize that something is sure to happen?
- What good things do you look forward to in God's kingdom?
- Why is Jesus our guarantee of everything good and necessary?

COMMUNITIES

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." (Luke 1:57-63a)

It's good to have people who care for you, and who will rejoice with you when good things happen. It's not so good when those same people get into your personal business, questioning your decisions, and trying to go over your head to get you to change them—as Elizabeth found, when her neighbors weren't happy with John's name!

Still, God did say in the beginning, "It is not good that the man should be alone," at which point He made another human being. Which led to more human beings in the long run. We were made to live together.

Maybe that's why Jesus came to us, born into a family, raised in a village. Maybe that's why He spent three years training His disciples, so that after Jesus died and rose to rescue us from the powers of evil, they could become the baby Christian church—the body of Christ—a community of love. Jesus' love—showing itself through the sacrificial care of our fellow believers.

Lord, thank You that You have given me the rest of Your people, so I don't have to be alone. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What are some benefits of living in a community?
- What are some problems you've noticed?
- What is the most Christ-like community you have lived in, and why?

NOT FORGOTTEN

And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. (Luke 1:62-64)

Do you notice that Zechariah is still mute for the first week of John's life? I would have expected it to end when John was born, but God had other plans. So Zechariah counted John's fingers and toes in silence—watched quietly while his wife learned to nurse the baby—and learned to comfort a crying baby with touch alone. Did Zechariah wonder if God had forgotten him?

But then the day of John's circumcision came, and Zechariah had the chance to do as the angel had promised: he named his son John. And God gave him back his speech.

Why then, exactly? We may guess, but we don't know. To fulfill the words of the angel in every detail? Maybe. To give Zechariah a chance to write faithfully, after his faithless speech nine months before? Who knows?

But to Zechariah, I doubt it mattered. He had his wife and baby—he had his speech back—and he had the full assurance of God's forgiveness and love, which had truly never left him. No wonder he used his new speech to praise God!

We too may experience difficult, painful times, and we may wonder if God has forgotten us. He has not. Even then He is working in us for our good, and we too will know the fullness of God's love and forgiveness—given to us for all time in Jesus, who died and rose to make us God's own.

Be with me, Lord, when I sit in silence and darkness. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When has God felt far away to you?
- How did you get through that time?
- How do you trust in the Lord during suffering?

SUNRISE COMING

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people ... because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:67-68, 78-79)

It is a great joy to have a newborn baby. It is an even greater joy to know that your dear child will grow up to serve the Lord as the prophet who will get things ready for Jesus. This is Zechariah's joy as he looks at John.

But he has an even greater joy than that, and it's one we share with him. Zechariah knows Jesus is coming, born only six months after John—so close in time that their adult ministries will overlap. And Jesus is no mere prophet—He is "the Lord God of Israel" Himself, who has "visited and redeemed His people." God is not just reaching down from heaven to fix things in our world; He has come Himself.

And what is that coming like? It is like the sun coming down from the sky to shine in our dark and broken world. It is like joy after grief, like morning after nightmare. Jesus is coming, and He will destroy all the power of sin, death, and the devil. We who trust in Him will never walk in darkness again.

Jesus, let me see Your light when everything seems dark around me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why are people afraid of the dark?
- Can you remember a time in your life when you were so happy to see the morning come? Tell the story if you choose.
- Jesus calls Himself the Light of the world. Why is that a good name for Him?

PAIN

When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with Child from the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18b)

I wonder how much pain hides behind those simple words: “She was found to be with Child.” Listen to the wording. It doesn’t sound like Mary had a chance to choose her time, to sit her family down and tell them about the angel’s visit. No, “she was found to be with Child.” Somebody noticed.

And that somebody probably yelled, don’t you think? Mary was supposed to be a virgin. Her wedding was coming up. The family would be disgraced. I suspect there was a painful scene, and a lot of disbelief, and then Joseph was notified.

Maybe it’s a good thing that Jesus came into the world in such a thoroughly human, painful, and messy way. Shame, conflict, fighting—all these were a part of His life even before His birth. It makes Him a good Savior for us, doesn’t it? Because we carry the scars of shame and pain, too.

Jesus knows our shame, every bit of it—all the pain, all the grief. But He does not add to it. No, He does the impossible and takes it upon His own shoulders, and carries it all the way to the cross. With His own shameful death He takes it out of the world forever, and with His resurrection He gives to us a new life—clean, unstained, marked by peace and love. We don’t need to carry that pain any longer. Jesus takes it for us.

Dear Lord, take my shame and pain from me, and help me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Take a moment to identify a painful episode from your own past.
- Privately pray, asking the Lord to help you with that memory.
- Thank Him for knowing and loving you completely.

FAITHLESS TO FAITHFUL

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:19)

Joseph is the quiet hero of the Christmas story. Matthew introduces him to us as “a just man ... unwilling to put [Mary] to shame.” What does that mean?

Probably that Joseph followed the Lord faithfully, with all his heart. He knew the Law of Moses—that betrothed women who committed adultery could be put to death. But there was no revenge in Joseph’s heart—no wish to hurt Mary, or even put her to shame in the village. In spite of the pain he must have been feeling, he put her needs first.

What a wonderful choice God made when He picked Joseph for Jesus’ foster father! Because Jesus, too, put the needs of His beloved people first, even though we rebelled against God and went our own faithless way. He did not consider His own pain or think about taking revenge on us. Instead, He planned to bring us back—to restore us to Himself, no longer faithless but beloved, forgiven, and faithful people. How? Through the power of His own death and resurrection.

Joseph reflects God’s mercy in miniature. The best he could think of to help Mary was a quiet divorce, and no shame to him. It takes God Himself to do much better than that—to do the miracle of turning faithless people into the loving Bride of Christ, Christians who love their Lord so much they would rather die than be without Him. And why? Because He loved us first. After what Jesus did for us, who can resist Him?

Dear Jesus, set my heart on You always. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you seen love transform someone’s heart?
- Can you think of a time when Jesus’ love made a difference in your life?
- How can you show that same sacrificial love to someone you know who is in need of it?

WHY?

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 1:20)

Why does God wait so long to let Joseph in on the secret? He doesn't tell him when Mary finds out; He doesn't even spare him the painful scene when he learns that Mary is pregnant. Joseph goes through that meeting and hours of pain afterward, trying to think what to do now.

But when he finally falls asleep—and how long did *that* take?—*then* finally God tells him. "The baby is from the Holy Spirit. Mary hasn't been unfaithful to you. Go ahead and get married, everything is okay."

I'm sure Joseph was grateful. I wonder if he was a bit frustrated?

Maybe not. Joseph is doubtless a better person than I am! But I admit I've been frustrated when God seems to leave me in anxiety. "Oh, thank God, it's not cancer," I think. And then I'm cranky because the scare happened at all.

Still, it comforts me to see that God hasn't changed. If He does it to me, He did it to people in the Bible, too. I'm certain He loved them, and I believe He loves me—and so I can trust Him for what I don't understand.

Jesus Himself is the absolute proof that God loves us—because He came to suffer on our behalf, so that we might live with God forever. When it was a choice between our suffering or His, He said, "Let it be Me." A God who accepts the cross and empty tomb on my behalf is a God I can trust—and love.

Lord, I trust You. Help me to trust You more. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you ever get frustrated with God?
- If so, when?
- How do you trust God in the face of things you don't understand?

NAMES

“She will bear a Son, and you shall call His Name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall call His Name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:21-23)

When I was little, I used to wonder: Why did Joseph call His name Jesus when the prophecy said they would call Him Immanuel? Now I think that maybe one name isn't enough to capture how wonderful Jesus is.

Let's take that first, ancient name—Immanuel, “God with us.” It tells us just who Jesus is, doesn't it? He is God Most High, come down from heaven—and why? To be with us. To be one of us—a human being, suffering the same griefs and troubles we do, walking our road beside us. Jesus is the proof that God understands us—not just intellectually, but through experience. He has been there. There is nothing of our sorrow that He has not carried all the way to the cross.

But then there's the other Name—Jesus, “The Lord is salvation.” Jesus is God come to be our Savior—the One who rescues us from the power of sin, death, and the devil. There is no evil so strong that He cannot conquer it and set His people free. If it costs Him His life—and it did—Jesus will rescue us and make us beloved, forgiven, cleansed children of God.

Maybe it takes two names to carry all His wonderfulness!

Lord Jesus, our Immanuel—thank You for coming to us and saving us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you know what your own name means?
- If you have given names to someone or something (a child, a pet), why did you choose those names?
- Why do you think God chose “The Lord is salvation” to be Jesus' Name rather than something like “The Lord is great”?

CARETAKER

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a Son. And he called His Name Jesus. (Matthew 1:24-25)

The English Standard Version of the Bible gets a bit shy in this verse. It says that Joseph “knew her not” when he brought Mary home to be his wife. Of course, what it really means is that they did not have sex. Mary remained a virgin, so no one would have any reason to doubt Jesus’ miraculous conception.

But this is just one way that Joseph acted as caretaker for both Mary and Jesus. By going through with the wedding, Joseph gave them the protection of his name and his home. Joseph guarded them with love under God’s direction, and deserves all honor for it.

It makes me wonder if, humanly speaking, Jesus learned His caretaking love from Joseph. Here is a father who would encourage his Son to be gentle with people, especially those who are in trouble. Here is a father who lived faithfully, caring for others at his own expense and protecting them from danger.

Because, of course, that’s what we see Jesus doing—for us!—as an adult. He came to us, people scarred by sin and full of shame—and what did He do? He had mercy on us. He taught, fed, healed, corrected, forgave, and comforted us. And He put His own body between us and danger. On the cross, He broke the power of the devil and set us free. And when He rose from the dead, He shared that everlasting life with us.

Lord Jesus, thank You for taking care of us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Who has taken care of you in your life?
- What specific ways did they care for you?
- How can you reflect Jesus’ love and care to someone you know who needs it?

SHARING OUR LIFE

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ... And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with Child. (Luke 2:1, 3-5)

It wasn't a good time to travel. Mary was near her time to give birth, and Joseph—well, I suspect there's never a good time to leave a business. But they obeyed the government, and went up to Bethlehem—a distance of around 90 miles.

Did Mary have a donkey to ride? We don't know. Most people walked, and she may have done so, too. When you're not rich and you live in a conquered country, things like this happen. Mary would be far from her family when she gave birth.

This is the world that Jesus came to—a world where bureaucracy comes before babies, and money affects the way you're treated—even for the family of Jesus. God knew these things would happen, and still He chose this place, this time, this family—for Jesus, His beloved Son. Even before His birth Jesus would bear our griefs and carry our sorrows—all the way to the cross 33 years later (see Isaiah 53:4).

Jesus shared our life for love. Because of His death and resurrection, everyone who trusts in Him will share Jesus' own everlasting life—in the joy and peace of God's kingdom.

Lord Jesus, stay close to me, and keep me close to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Does it help to know that Jesus shared the hardships you suffer?
- Why or why not?
- As a believer, you will share His life and joy. What do you think of when you imagine that?

THE TIME CAME

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn Son. (Luke 2:6-7a)

Imagine the panic Mary and Joseph must have felt when her pains started. “Joseph?” she would have said. “I’m not feeling so good.” They had no place to stay yet, no proper place anyway—no guest room or place at an inn. But by that point Mary was past caring. She needed a safe, private place to lie down—somewhere warm—and a midwife, if one could be found. She was in labor. Her time had come.

This is the same kind of language Jesus Himself uses, years later—for Himself. “My time has not yet come,” He says at different times in His ministry—until the night before His death, when He says to God the Father, “Father, the hour has come” (John 17:1b). Jesus is referring to His own suffering, the pain that climaxed at the cross. And yet, like Mary, Jesus knew that there was a purpose to His labor; through His death and resurrection, He would give life to everyone who trusts in Him.

We celebrate Mary’s labor because she brought forth her first-born Son, our Savior, Jesus, the Son of God. Even more gladly we celebrate Jesus’ suffering for us—because He has given us life that lasts forever.

Dear Savior, thank You for giving us life. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever gone through labor—or sat with someone in labor?
- If so, how did you feel about the experience?
- How does it compare to Jesus’ experience saving us?

DOING THEIR BEST

And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

Can't you picture it? Mary and Joseph, figuring out how to care for their newborn baby in a setting made for animals, not people—because “there was no room for them in the inn.” The place was all wrong, but they did the best they could anyway.

Somebody (either Joseph or a midwife, if they were blessed with one) found water and helped clean up mother and Child. Mary had already prepared swaddling clothes for Jesus and packed them in their gear—it was probably Joseph who fetched those and watched while she wrapped Him up. And I wonder who thought of the manger? Much better to lay Jesus there in safety than to put Him on the cold floor where a cow or donkey might step on Him, or rats bite Him! They didn't have much, but they were doing their best—and God did not scorn it.

And God? He too was doing His best—giving us His beloved Son Jesus, to become a human being among human beings, one of us. God became part of our family—so that we could become part of His.

Thirty-three years later, that sleeping baby would be an adult man, hanging on a cross. He chose that suffering willingly, to break the power of evil and to set us all free from death. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus gave us the very best He had—forgiveness. Life. Salvation. A place in God's family. And best of all, Himself, to love us forever.

Lord Jesus, I love You. Keep me close to You forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What kinds of things do people do when they are preparing for a baby?
- What do you think God did when He was preparing to send Jesus into the world?
- Name one of the best things Jesus has done for you in your life.

GOOD SHEPHERD

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not ..." (Luke 2:8-10a)

The shepherds were guarding their sheep when the angel came. There's a good chance it was lambing time, as shepherds in Judea didn't usually stay out all night otherwise. If that was the case, then one of the things they'd be watching for was sheep in trouble—ewes that needed help delivering their lambs.

The shepherds were just ordinary people—not especially rich or powerful or holy. What they knew was sheep, and how to take care of them. Maybe that's why the Lord chose these people to be the first to hear the news of Jesus' birth—the baby who had come to earth to become our Good Shepherd. Jesus was in the same line of work, you could say.

Because He does take care of us, doesn't He? Jesus watches over us as carefully as any shepherd ever watched his sheep. When we are troubled or in pain, He knows it. When we get lost, He searches for us. And when we were threatened by the powers of evil, and in danger of spiritual death, Jesus came to save us—laying down His own life so that we might live. Now we who trust Him will live forever, because He shares His resurrection life with us. What a wonderful Shepherd!

Dear Lord, I'm glad You are my Shepherd. Thank You for taking care of me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever had full responsibility for a living creature, human or otherwise?
- If so, what was the hardest part of that work? The most rewarding part?
- Tell about a time when Jesus saw your need and took care of you.

UNTO YOU

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:10-12)

It's a lovely and surprising thing the angel says to the shepherds. "Unto you is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." We usually speak of a child being born to its parents, or more broadly, to its family. But the shepherds aren't Jesus' family! Or are they?

Jesus seems to think so. And not just the shepherds! He feels that way about all of us, great and small alike. After all, do you put yourself in danger for the sake of a stranger? Do you lay down your life for a mere acquaintance, a casual friend?

No. Jesus is God Himself come to join the human race—to become a blood relative of ours, the closest one we have. Through His suffering, death, and resurrection, He has rescued us from the power of evil and made us part of God's family. And now He has united us to Himself—every one of us who trusts in Him.

And so the angel's words to the shepherds are true for us, too—"Unto you is born a Savior." Jesus is ours, and we are His. What could be more wonderful?

*Dear Lord, I'm glad You are mine, and I am Yours. Let it be that way forever.
Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Who is a person you consider especially close to you—either by blood or by love?
- What specific reasons do you have to feel that way?
- What about Jesus—how has He drawn you close to Him? Tell about your experience.

SUDDENLY

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!” (Luke 2:13-14)

It may be way too childish a picture, but I can't help thinking of the multitude of angels that joined the first one and how they came so suddenly. Was there eager competition in heaven to be part of that group celebrating Jesus' birth? Were they waiting just behind the scenes, wanting the first angel to hurry up? Did other angels have to hold them back?

Yes, these are probably childish pictures—but what is not childish is the clear and overwhelming joy that we see in these servants of God. They are rejoicing with their whole hearts because God has done a wonderful thing for us—He has sent us His own Son Jesus to be our Savior. They can't help but sing and celebrate!

They celebrate because at long last, God has carried out His promise. Jesus has been born into the world to be our Savior, to set us free from the power of sin, death, and the devil. This is the beginning of God's great victory, and the dawn of our redemption. What could be more worth singing about?

Dear Father, thank You for Your servants the angels, and their joy for us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you been happiest on someone else's behalf?
- How did you show your joy?
- When you finally meet Jesus face to face, remembering His birth, death, and resurrection for you—what do you think it will be like?

BACK TO THE SHEEP

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds ... went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this Child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. (Luke 2:15a, 16b-20a)

The shepherds go see the baby, of course. And they tell everyone what they saw and heard. But after that ... they go home. Back to the sheep! Because glorious as the news is, the sheep still need minding, and that is the work God has given them to do.

This happens to us, too, doesn't it? We may have some wonderful spiritual experience, and for a moment, we see God's glory. But then it's back to the desk—back to the chores—back to the children. Because whatever it is, that is the work God has given us. And by doing it, we honor God and bless our neighbor.

Jesus, too, would shortly be doing the work God gave Him. At first it was the same work every child is given—to grow, to play, to learn how people behave with each other. But in the end it would be the special work nobody but the Son of God could do—to give Himself up, even to death, so that everyone who trusts in Him might live. Jesus' loving work for us is our salvation.

Come with me, Lord, into my everyday life. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is the most boring part of your day?
- Have you seen God at work in that area? If so, how?
- How can God use your daily life to bless other people?

REDEEMER

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice ...” (Luke 2:22-24a)

It seems odd to me—Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to the temple to fulfill the law about firstborn sons. Because in essence, what they were doing was presenting the Lord *to the Lord*, right? Even when I take into account the Trinity, this makes me dizzy.

And yet, it was good and right, what they did. Because the law about firstborn sons had its roots in the days of the Exodus, when God set His people free from slavery in Egypt. In those days the angel of death destroyed all the firstborn sons in the country who were not protected by the blood of a sacrificed lamb on the houses where they slept (see Exodus 12). And forever after, Israel’s firstborn sons would have to be presented to the Lord in early infancy, and redeemed with an offering.

Now the baby Jesus comes—not to be redeemed, but to be the Redeemer. God in the flesh takes His place, standing for humanity. And He comes not just to save the firstborn of a single country, but to save all of God’s children—everyone who will put their trust in Him. Jesus took our death upon Himself on that cross; and because of His resurrection, all of us who belong to Him are freed from death forever.

Thank You, Lord, for taking my place and saving me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Were you baptized as an infant, or not? Share your experiences.
- What did Jesus take from you when He took your place?
- What did He give you instead?

HEART'S DESIRE

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, ... And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ... and when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, ... he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation." (Luke 2:25a, 26, 27b, 28-30)

God made Simeon a strange and wonderful promise: that he would not die until he had seen the promised Messiah. He didn't know when it would happen, or who it would be, but he firmly believed God would make it happen at the right time.

And of course, God did. He sent Simeon to the temple just in time to see Mary and Joseph standing in the courtyard, holding their baby. Of course he took Jesus up in his arms! Who could resist? And he looked into Jesus' face—the face of his Lord and Redeemer. It was the high point of his life.

As Christian believers, we share in Simeon's blessing. Oh, not because we have seen Jesus face to face yet; we look forward to that. But we too have our hearts' desire, because Jesus has become our Savior, the One who loves us, closer to us than the breath in our bodies. Through His suffering He has rescued us, body and soul, from the power of evil; and death cannot hold on to us, because Jesus has risen from the dead, and gives life to us also.

What could be better?

Dear Jesus, set my heart upon You forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What would you ask of the Lord, if He offered you your heart's desire?
- What would you give to obtain it?
- What did Jesus give to obtain His heart's desire?

FEAR

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. (Matthew 2:1-4)

King Herod wasn't happy. He knew that whoever the wise men were looking for, it wasn't one of his own children or grandchildren; no, this was a future rival for his throne, possibly the Messiah Himself. And his first impulse was to get rid of Him.

No wonder Jerusalem was troubled! They knew Herod's temper. They knew he was paranoid and had a history of murder. A man who killed his own wife and children when he thought they were plotting against him—who could feel safe around him?

And there was the baby Jesus, just a few miles down the road.

God understands danger. He understands abuse and violence—and the fear that comes from living in the shadow of it, day after day. If this is your situation, God cares deeply for you. He loves you, and He came into this world, your world, to rescue you. Call out to Him for help. Cry to Him when you are afraid. He loves you enough to die for you—and He has all power, even over death itself. He can help.

Dear Lord, have mercy on us who are afraid. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you been touched by fear in your life?
- Does God ever agree with abuse?
- Where can people who are afraid find help? What resources do you know of?

LIES AND TRUTH

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the Child, and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him." After listening to the king, they went on their way. (Matthew 2:7-9a)

It's very likely the wise men came from the courts of other kings far away. They understood how politics worked. I think they knew exactly what Herod was up to.

But they couldn't show it, naturally. They had to listen respectfully as Herod suggested he might actually be up for worshipping this rival newborn King! And then they went their way.

It gets old, listening to lies. I wonder if the wise men found it refreshing when they reached the home of Jesus? There were no lies there—only a hard-working father, a careful, loving mother—and the baby Jesus. A toddler who was truly human as He played on the floor at His mother's feet—and yet truly God, come in all reality to save His people.

In a world of lies, God's promises are our comfort, because they are always true. When Jesus says, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me" (John 14:1), we can do that with full confidence, because we know that He is the Truth incarnate (see John 14:6). The Lord who died and rose for us will never lie to us.

Lord Jesus, thank You that You are trustworthy and true. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Tell about a time when someone lied to you.
- How did it make you feel?
- How does it feel to know that Jesus will never betray you or lie to you?

GIFTS

And behold, the star ... went before them until it came to rest over the place where the Child was. ... They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the Child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:9b, 10b-11)

It's a charming picture—Jesus reaching out His toddler hands to touch the gifts the wise men offered, the gold and spices. I wonder if Mary had to stop Him making a mess with the myrrh and frankincense? These were precious gifts, but not exactly calculated for a toddler's use.

And yet, they acknowledged the truth of who Jesus is on a deeper level. Gold is a gift fit for a king; myrrh and frankincense were precious spices used to make incense for God's temple, and so it makes sense to give them to a Child who is God incarnate. I don't know how much the wise men understood of all this, but it may be that the Holy Spirit guided the gift-giving just as He brought these Gentile wise men from far away to worship the King of the Jews.

For Jesus is God's Gift to the world—more precious than gold, more holy than the spices of the temple. Because He gave Himself up for us all, we have life, forgiveness, and peace with God. Because He has risen from the dead and will never die again, we too will live in happiness and joy with Him forever. What more could we want?

Thank You, Father, for Your good Gift! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is one of the best gifts you ever got?
- Why do you say so?
- Why do you think God's Gift of Jesus came to us in such humble wrappings?

THE LAST BABY OF BETHLEHEM

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the Child, to destroy Him." And he rose and took the Child and His mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. ... Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. (Matthew 2:13-15a, 16-17)

This story used to make me feel uneasy. "Why did God save His own Son but not the other babies?" I wondered. It seemed ... unfair, somehow. Unjust. Was God playing favorites?

Years later I realized that in fact, Jesus did not get away safely. The final baby of Bethlehem also died at the hand of a king named Herod—thirty-some years later, as an adult. And it wasn't a quick death by the sword but the long-drawn-out agony of crucifixion.

But even that's not the real point, is it? Because out of all those babies and toddlers, Jesus is the One who came into this world on purpose to die. He gave Himself into death on purpose, for all those babies and for us as well. And then He rose from the dead, just as He will raise those children—and us as well.

Lord, overcome the darkness with Your light. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Does this story make you feel uneasy about God? Why or why not?
- Some call those children the first martyrs for Christ. Would you agree?
- How does Jesus help you cope with the darkness of great evil?

THE WISDOM OF GOD

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the Child and His mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the Child's life are dead." And he rose and took the Child and His mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. (Matthew 2:19-22)

It fascinates me to see the way that God guides Joseph as he brings Jesus and Mary home from Egypt. God sends Joseph dreams, but God also relies on Joseph's common sense to protect Jesus from danger. Both are good, but God's wisdom is greater. Common sense can only take you so far!

When we trust in Jesus to rescue us from the power of sin and death, we are trusting God's heavenly wisdom—because the cross doesn't make sense in human terms. What power to save can there be in a dying man? Or in a newborn baby, lying in a manger?

But when we look with the help of the Holy Spirit, we see that Jesus truly is "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Through His death and resurrection He has made us God's own children. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Corinthians 1:24-25). Let's trust in Him.

Lord Holy Spirit, lead me when I don't know what to do. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When you have to make a decision, how do you seek God's will?
- What makes Christianity look silly to non-believers?
- Why do you trust in Jesus anyway?

YEARS OF QUIET

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon Him ... And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:39-40, 52)

These are the quiet years of Jesus' life—years when the most unusual thing that happened was the time His parents misplaced Him in Jerusalem for a couple of days and found Him again (see Luke 2). Other than that, what? A normal life for the Son of God. Learning basic life skills from His mother and carpentry skills from His father. Praying with His parents. Going to school with His classmates at the local synagogue. Learning to read and write. Learning to know the Bible by heart.

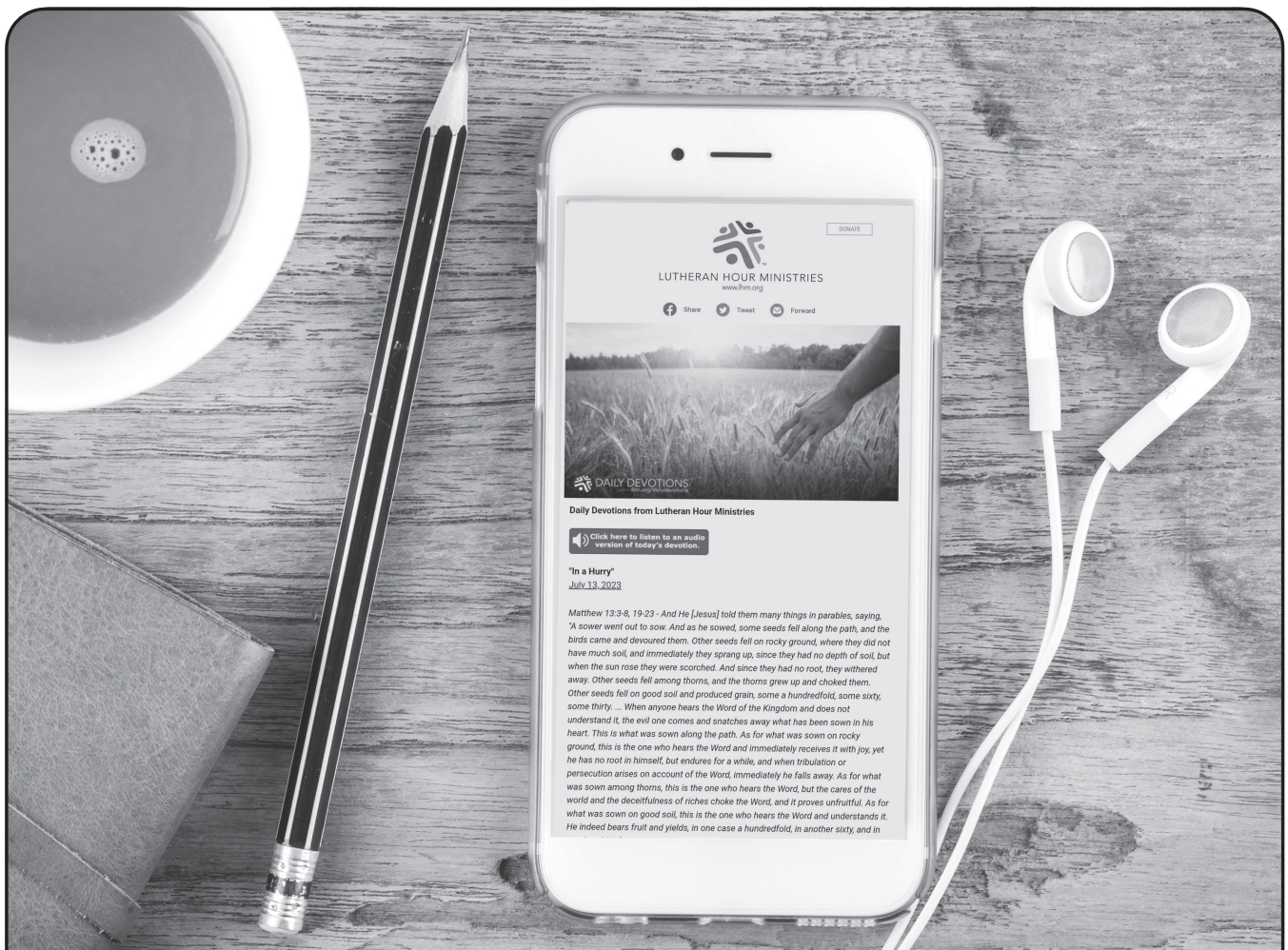
And throughout it all, there was the world around Him, from which He drew so many of His parables later. Harvest and planting. Shepherds with their sheep. Men out on fishing boats. Builders who did their job well—or poorly. Families and their arguments.

During these years, Jesus was getting ready for the heart of His mission—three years when He would teach, preach, heal, and finally save the people God loves through His own suffering and death on the cross. Three years until His death and resurrection—which opened everlasting life to all of us who love Him. Just look how He loves us!

Dear Jesus, come with me as we leave the days of Christmas behind and enter a new year of life. Keep me with You forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you, too, hope for a year of quiet?
- What do you hope for or fear in the new year?
- How will you rely on Jesus to get you through it all?



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