

ADVENT
DEVOTIONS
2016

Christmas Memories

Thinking back on Christmases past is a fun way to reflect on the good old days. The wonderful lights and decorations, festive holiday atmosphere, warm family get-togethers, unforgettable melodies, and jovial Christmas cheer all make for pleasant memories. But, of course, our hearts aren't merry for these things alone. Christmas is the believer's celebration of the arrival of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, "who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a Servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:6-7).

Hallelujah! It is this Gift of God—His own beloved Son—whom we joyously adore with our hearts this Advent season. Jesus, who took on human flesh so that we might partake of His divine redemption, is the One our Christmas memories turn to, worshipping and adoring Him for all He has done for us. Take time this holiday season to make Christmas memories that last—memories that lovingly honor the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.



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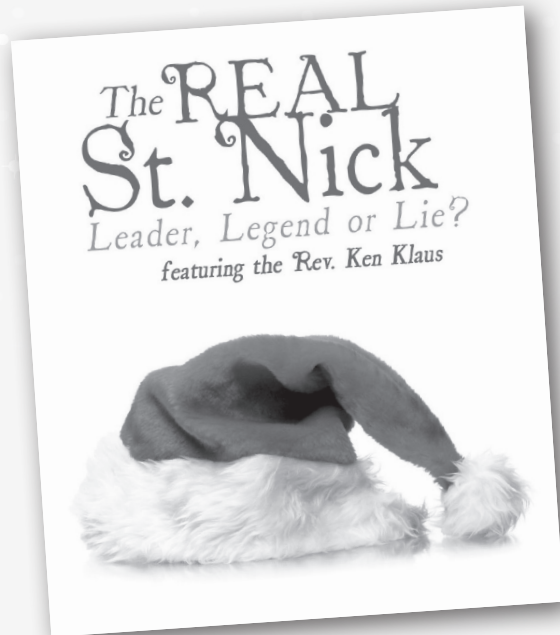
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This single-session Bible study, hosted by the Rev. Dr. Ken Klaus, Speaker Emeritus of **The Lutheran Hour**, examines a man who, next to Jesus Christ, is the most visible figure during the holidays—St. Nicholas or Santa Claus—as we know him in Western culture. Dating back to the third century, St. Nick is attributed with the doing of many benevolent and charitable acts of kindness and generosity.

(Includes subtitles in English & Spanish)

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CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

What is your favorite part of Christmas? Is it the Christmas tree and ornaments? What about the decorations, lights, cookies, parties and songs? Then again, let's not forget about the presents.

When I was growing up one of my favorite Christmas songs was *It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year*. Over the years one line has taken on a special meaning for me: "...there'll be ...tales of the glories of Christmases long, long ago ..."

One of my favorite parts of Christmas is sitting with my family, telling and retelling our Christmas memories, like ...

- searching for hidden gifts;
- Mom and Dad getting wise to us, and wrapping presents as soon as they bought them;
- learning how to use steam to open a present without tearing the paper;
- how Mom could wrap presents without putting name tags on them;
- following a trail of clues that led to our first color TV one year, and a ping-pong table another;
- Dad and our neighbor carrying over our pool table piece by piece, which they'd hidden in their garage all through December;
- Dad staying up all night on Christmas Eve to assemble presents.

Our children love hearing those stories and sharing our laughter.

Have you ever asked an elderly relative, friend or neighbor to share their childhood memories of Christmas? As they search their memory, notice the twinkle in their eyes. Note the delightful laughter mixed with a tear or two as they pull cherished treasures from the attic of their memory, which have been gathering dust.

In this year's Christmas devotions we will do the same thing. But this time we will look at the very first Christmas many years ago.

CHRISTMAS—CAN WE BE SURE?

The First Sunday in Advent
November 27, 2016

Read Luke 1:1-4.

TEXT: It seemed good to me ... to write an orderly account for you ... that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught (see Luke 1:3-4).

Are you dreaming of a white Christmas this year? I always did. I'd hope and pray, but most years I'd look out the window and only see the same old, brown grass and bare trees. Sometimes we feel that same disappointment in our Christmases. We get our hopes up; we make all our preparations, but then we feel disappointed when the day rolls around.

Maybe our problem is building our Christmas excitement on uncertain things—a white Christmas, the perfect presents, everyone getting along at Christmas time. Luke had something different in mind when he wrote about the first Christmas.

Luke wasn't your typical writer in the Bible though. Unlike Matthew he wasn't one of Jesus' 12 disciples; he never met Jesus face-to-face. He wasn't even Jewish; he was a Gentile physician from Antioch in Syria. He joined Paul in his later missionary journeys. In Acts 16 notice Luke's commentary changes from "they went" in verse six to "we went" in verse 11.

To write his Gospel and the earlier chapters of the book of Acts, Luke gathered his information from interviews he had with people who saw and heard Jesus, people who lived with Him, ate and drank with Him. Being an educated man, Luke didn't get swept away by the ramblings of dreamy-eyed followers of Jesus. He made sure to ask for historical details and evidence from his witnesses—including Jesus' mother Mary.

THE PRAYER: Almighty God, I want to learn more about that first Christmas. Thank You for leaving us a record in the words of Jesus' own mother Mary. Help me learn why Jesus was born and why that matters for my life now. I pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.

2016 *Christmas* READING LIST:



For the adults!



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BACK TO NORMAL

The Epiphany of Our Lord
Friday, January 6, 2017

Read Luke 2:39-40.

TEXT: And the Child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon Him (Luke 2:40).

Today we take down our Christmas tree, the lights, and all the decorations. Finally, our house is getting back to normal.

Luke's account of that first Christmas is drawing to a close. After completing all the tasks God's Law laid out for them to do, Joseph and Mary left Judea and returned to Nazareth, where they would raise Jesus. We know from Matthew's account the reason the couple first left Bethlehem was because Herod sent soldiers to murder the Christ Child, after the wise men had come to visit. After spending some time in Egypt, they returned to Nazareth.

Luke tells us that in Nazareth Jesus grew physically, experiencing the normal development of a human being. But he also accumulated the knowledge, wisdom and discretion He would show throughout His adult ministry. In our Lenten devotions in March, we will listen to Jesus' own wonderful message of forgiveness, peace, salvation and eternal life, and we will follow Him as He courageously faces bitter opposition and a cross to save us from our sins.

In a sense life was back to normal for Mary and Joseph. They were home now and Joseph could go back to his carpenter's shop. But then again, once the Christ Child was born their lives would never really be the same. This is true for us too. Even though the trappings of Christmas are gone for another year, the Christ Child has come into our homes, and our lives will never be the same either.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for coming into our world that first Christmas, and coming into our hearts this Christmas. Keep us strong in faith, filled with peace and joy until the day You return to earth. Amen.

SOMETHING MISSING

Monday, November 28, 2016

Read Luke 1:5-7.

TEXT: There was a priest named Zechariah ... and he had a wife ... Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God ... but they had no child (see Luke 1:5-7).

Christmas Eve holds a special place in my memory. I remember my family sitting together in the living room after the candlelight Christmas service, enjoying a crackling fire. The only other light comes from the Christmas tree and dozens of candles. We spent hours passing around funny Christmas memories, while steam rose from our coffee and hot chocolate.

Luke's account of the first Christmas begins with an introduction to Mary's relative Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah the priest. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both good, upright people. Not that they were good enough to earn heaven—none of us can do that. They were good in God's eyes because they believed His promise to save them through the coming Christ. They had both lived to a good old age but were childless. In that age it was considered a disgrace when a couple was without child. For many long years the couple had prayed and wondered why God had kept them from having a child. By this late age, they had given up hope completely.

Is there something missing in your life? Something you have prayed long and hard for but nothing changes? Does that make you question God or yourself? Stick around and see that God always has a good reason, when He holds something back from us.

THE PRAYER: Lord God, sometimes life doesn't seem to have any rhyme or reason. I want something desperately but, for whatever reason, You withhold it from me. Give me patience and faith to trust that You are good, loving and gracious, so I may wait patiently for Your time. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

A HIGH POINT IN LIFE

Tuesday, November 29, 2016

Read Luke 1:8-10.

TEXT: According to the custom of the priesthood, (Zechariah) was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense (Luke 1:9).

Luke's account provides us rich detail regarding Zechariah the priest and the part he played in the first Christmas. Herod the Great was king over Judea at the time. We learn that Zechariah belonged to the priestly division of Abijah, one of 24 divisions of priests. Each of these divisions worked two weeks out of the year at the Jerusalem temple. Each afternoon these priests cast lots to see who would enter the temple alone to burn incense.

Luke takes us to the day the lot fell to Zechariah. It may have looked like luck or chance to us, but Zechariah knew better: God was inviting him into His presence. As Zechariah smelled the clouds of sweet, fragrant incense rising to heaven, he knew God was pleased with the prayers His people were offering to Him. These were prayers that rose from hearts that believed His ancient promise to send their Savior:

At Christmas we are often invited to other people's houses. Sometimes we get the honor of a special invitation. But God extends a greater invitation to us. Like Zechariah we can enter His presence in His house. And not just once in a lifetime can we do this, but every week. At the same time He promises to make His home *in* us. What a great privilege and honor to sit in God's presence and learn about His saving love.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, what a tremendous honor You give when You invite us into Your house. Thank You for coming to us and making Your home with us. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

THE DARK SIDE OF CHRISTMAS

12th Day of Christmas
Thursday, January 5, 2017

Read Luke 2:34-35.

TEXT: And a sword will pierce through your own soul also (see Luke 2:35).

If you have lost a loved one in death, then you know the pain the following Christmas when you feel that person's absence so keenly. But what if you had known the year before that would be the last Christmas you would spend with them?

After blessing God, Simeon turns to Mary and says something strange. She will see the nation of Israel reject its Messiah and speak against the One God has sent to them. This is something Mary has never heard before, and probably never imagined would happen.

The angels only spoke of God's gift of salvation to all people, of His love for the whole world in sending His Son. But Simeon warns that when He is grown and begins His ministry, there will be Jews who reject the salvation He came to bring.

But Simeon tells her it will get worse. She will feel as if a great broadsword is piercing her own soul. This is the connection between our Advent devotions coming to a close and our Lenten devotions beginning March 1. Mary, the virgin mother who laid her Child in the manger, will watch that same Son get nailed to a cross.

In all the Christmas memories Mary stored in her heart, this may be the first cloud that appeared over her thoughts. She will not only remember the moment when Simeon prophesied it, but she will stand beneath the cross of her beloved Son Jesus Christ. But the cloud will quickly pass three days after His death, when her mighty Son rises to life again—victorious through all eternity.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, You loved us so much You sent Your Son to die in our place on the cross. Thank You for His glorious resurrection, which saves us through faith in Him. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

DEPARTING

11th Day of Christmas
Wednesday, January 4, 2017

Read Luke 2:28-33.

TEXT: He took Him up in his arms and blessed God (see Luke 2:28).

Most of us really anticipate Christmas homecomings and get-togethers, but few of us look forward to that moment we have to depart. Saying goodbye is rarely easy, but it's wonderful to leave on peaceful terms, returning to normal life with warm memories of Christmas.

Simeon thinks of something similar as he steps up to the young couple and takes the Child in his arms. He says, "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation." Many have taken Simeon's words to mean he was old or close to death, but not necessarily. He had spent years anxiously waiting to see the consolation of Israel, and now the suspense has finally ended. Looking down into the face of the Christ Child, he knows he can live out the rest of his life with this peaceful, joyous memory.

Simeon points out that God has prepared His salvation before the face of all peoples. He doesn't want us to look at a baby in a manger and get warm fuzzy feelings. Instead, we are to be confident that Jesus Christ came into this world to make us right before God. He came to save us from death and hell by His suffering, death and resurrection.

Joseph and Mary both marvel at the things Simeon says about Jesus. For the first time they learn He has come not only for the people of Israel, but for people of all nations. Through Luke's words we, like Simeon, have looked upon the Christ Child: our Lord and Savior. Because of His life, death and resurrection, we can pass the rest of our days in peace and faith.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank You that I can depart this Christmas season in peace, having seen Your salvation in the Child of Christmas, Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

A SURPRISE APPEARANCE

Wednesday, November 30, 2016

Read Luke 1:11-12.

TEXT: There appeared to him an angel ... Zechariah was troubled when he saw him (see Luke 1:11-12).

Did your family have a Nativity scene in the front yard, under your tree, or on a table? I remember staring at the angel wondering what it will be like to see one of these beautiful creatures face-to-face.

As Luke continues his account of the first Christmas, Zechariah the priest is in the temple. He's laying the incense on the altar. Suddenly, through the clouds of smoke, an angel of the Lord appears. But for Zechariah it isn't the wonderful, thrilling scene I imagined—not at all. The aged priest is struck with terror, shaken to the core.

As the Christmas story unfolds, we'll see angels appear to Mary and to the shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And both will have this same reaction: one of being instantly filled with terror. You and I would be too.

No matter how good a person you are, coming face-to-face with the holiness of an angel shows you your failings, and fills you with dread and fear. How much more terrifying will it be to look into God's face when He comes with His angels in great power and glory to judge us on the Last Day?

That's one of the truly wonderful things about Christmas. The promised Savior did not come as a fearsome, mighty warrior to strike fear and terror into each of us. Instead, He came as a tiny Baby lying in a manger. He didn't come to terrify us; He came to take away our sin and guilt and assure us of God's love and forgiveness.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son to live among us and save us by Your perfect life, Your innocent suffering and death, and Your glorious resurrection. Calm my heart when I'm gripped with fear, and fill me with peace and joy. Amen.

A LONG-FORGOTTEN PRAYER

Thursday, December 1, 2016

Read Luke 1:13.

TEXT: 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” (Luke 1:13).

When I was a teenager I desperately wanted to find the girl I would marry. Over the next 20 years I kept praying for a wife, but that prayer went unanswered. At times I was convinced I would be single all my life. Then I finished seminary and went to my first call. Within a month I was dating the woman who would become my wife.

For decades Zechariah had prayed for a child. But when no child came he eventually gave up—but not God. On the very first day Zechariah prayed God marked that prayer in His memory. Decades later God vividly remembers every detail of that prayer, including the urgency Zechariah felt month after month as he poured out his plea to God. Now as the clouds of incense are rising from the altar to symbolize God's acceptance of His people's prayers, the angel brings Zechariah the answer to his long forgotten prayer.

Have you been raising heartfelt prayers to God for years and years, only to find things get worse—finances, employment, health, family strains? Does it seem God is against you—that He just doesn't care? We learn the truth in this angel visit. The first moment we offer a prayer in faith to God, He in His great wisdom and care chooses the best way to answer that prayer as well as the best *time* to answer it. Sometimes, like Zechariah, we just have to wait until God's time is right, and He has made everything fall into place.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, fill me with confidence that You mark all my prayers, and will answer them when Your time is right, and always for my good. I pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.

EXPECTATIONS

10th Day of Christmas
Tuesday, January 3, 2017

Read Luke 2:25-27.

TEXT: 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 (Luke 2:26).

We are moving further away from Christmas Day. For most of us life is returning to normal. Back when I was a child I would be back in school by now, or I would know that it was only a few days away. Time passed for Jesus too. He didn't stay a baby. Like every other child He quickly grew. In our reading He is now more than a month old, and Mary and Joseph take Him to Jerusalem for His presentation.

At the same time they carry Him into the temple courts, an Israelite man enters. Luke describes Simeon in much the same way he had spoken of John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, when he first introduced him. Both men were righteous through their belief in God, firm in their faith, and waiting anxiously for Him to keep His promise and send the Savior. The Holy Spirit had given Simeon a remarkable promise: he would not die before he had seen the Christ. During his lifetime the Messiah would come, and Simeon would see Him with his own eyes.

Simeon was a rare Israelite in his day. By the Holy Spirit's guidance, he understood the Old Testament promises accurately. The Christ would comfort His people by saving them from their sins -- not by driving out their earthly enemies, as most Jews expected.

And this very day Simeon feels a powerful urging from the Holy Spirit to go to the temple. As he passes through the temple courts, he is drawn to a young Boy being carried by His mother and father.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, You revealed Your Son to Simeon. As I read the Bible, reveal Him to me that I may know His salvation and praise You forever in heaven. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

SET APART

9th Day of Christmas
Monday, January 2, 2017

Read Luke 2:22-24.

TEXT: They brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (see Luke 2:22).

I was really rough on toys when I was a kid. Few of the presents I opened on Christmas day actually lasted through the 12 days of Christmas. Sadly, I realize now that only two of all those great toys still survive to this day—a Tiny Tonka bulldozer and a gas-powered Cox mini-van. The van doesn't run, and the bulldozer has a few rust spots on it, but those two toys stand apart as special to me because of their physical connection to my long-gone childhood.

Today's devotion is about the day Jesus was set apart as someone special. After the eighth-day circumcision, the next big event for firstborn male children was their presentation at the temple in Jerusalem, when they were 40 days old.

The firstborn male child of each family was set apart as holy to the Lord. And among all the Jewish boys presented, this Son was unique. Through His miraculous conception, Jesus was the only male Child who truly stood apart from all His fellow Israelites, the only One who was actually holy to the Lord, in, and of Himself.

In His presentation Jesus was officially set apart and presented to the Lord for the unique work He would undertake, saving all people from sin, death and hell. Through faith in Him, God sets you and me apart from all people, so we may serve the Lord and share Jesus' story with those around us.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, through Your Son Jesus Christ, You have set me apart as holy. Equip me and all your children in Jesus to share His wonderful salvation with those around us. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH'S BOY

Friday, December 2, 2016

Read Luke 1:14-15.

TEXT: And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth (Luke 1:14).

Stringing up Christmas lights is hard work, especially when you are on that ladder on a cold, windy day in December. But it's all worth it when evening comes—when you stand far enough back to take it all in, and then ... you throw the switch. Those bright lights bring such joy: a joy many of your neighbors will share too.

Now Zechariah stands in the presence of the holy angel hearing amazing news. How wonderful it must be for Zechariah to hear that he and Elizabeth will finally have that child for whom they prayed so many decades ago. They will finally hold him in their arms, their long-awaited son. This child will be a source of great joy, ending their sorrow, disappointment and heartache.

God even handpicks his name: John. It means "The Lord has shown favor." That favor is even greater than the conception of this miraculous child Elizabeth will soon bear; it rests in another Child—God's own Son. That Son for whom Christmas is named will bring us true joy and peace as He removes our sin and guilt and reconciles us to God.

Zechariah and Elizabeth waited decades for the birth of their son, but God's people waited thousands of years for their Lord to keep His promise and send His own Son to save us. John will bring all these believers great joy because he will be the messenger who will show the world God's Son has come at last.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, fill us with the joy of this blessed Christmas season, and drive away all our guilt, fear and sorrow. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

GOD'S GREAT PLAN

Saturday, December 3, 2016

Read Luke 1:15-17.

TEXT: He will go before (the Lord) in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared (Luke 1:17).

The angel tells Zechariah his son “will be great before the Lord.” That’s high praise for any of our children—that God looks upon them as great. But John’s greatness is not because he is the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, but because he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. The Spirit will equip him to accomplish his great God-given mission.

Zechariah is instructed to keep his son from drinking wine or strong drink. John will live like a Nazarite of Old Testament days. Nazarites were Israelites who were set apart from the Israelites with their lives dedicated to serving God and His people. They demonstrated that separation by letting their hair grow long and refraining from eating grapes or drinking wine and other alcoholic drinks.

As the angel tells Zechariah, “He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah ... to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (see Luke 1:16-17).

John will expose our selfishness and show us why we need a Savior, so we will trust in the promised Son of God. It is He alone who will work out our salvation in His perfect life and innocent suffering and death. Clearly, it was worth waiting all those years to have such a son as John.

THE PRAYER: Lord God, thank You for sending Your Son into our world. Thank You for preparing people like Zechariah and Elizabeth to be the parents of Jesus’ forerunner John. Give me courage to walk with You in faith, even as You order my steps. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

EVERYTHING IS NEW

New Year’s Day
Sunday, January 1, 2017

Read Luke 2:21.

TEXT: And at the end of eight days ... He was circumcised (see Luke 2:21).

New Year’s Day was always an exciting new beginning. If the old year had brought us pain and misery, we could rejoice that it was over, gone, behind us. And in the dawning of a new day, there was the hope the New Year would be so much better.

This day was also a new beginning for the Baby Jesus. Jesus is eight days old, and it is now time to circumcise Him, according to the Law of the Lord. This ceremony made Jesus a member of God’s people Israel. It also bound Him under the Law, obligating Him to keep that Law perfectly. As our Substitute, Jesus perfectly obeyed God’s Law, so His perfection, holiness and righteousness might be ours, covering our failings, our flaws, and our sins.

But His circumcision carries with it the reminder that Jesus will not simply cover our sin, He will remove it from us—forever. On this eighth day of His young life, Jesus first sheds His blood for us, but it will certainly not be the last time He does this. On a dark day some 30 years into the future, Jesus will shed His blood and die on the cross to satisfy God’s wrath against our sins.

The symbolism of His circumcision and our Baptism both remind us of God’s work, cutting off our sinful nature or drowning it. In Baptism God makes us new creatures, so we can stand before Him spotless and pure through Jesus Christ.

What a way to start a New Year!

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, in Your circumcision Your blood was first shed as our Substitute. Cut the sin from our hearts, that we may enter this New Year in Your holiness and purity. Amen.

A COMMON NAME WITH A NEW MEANING

7th Day of Christmas,
New Year's Eve, Saturday, December 31, 2016

Read Luke 2:21.

TEXT: And at the end of eight days ... He was called Jesus (see Luke 2:21).

New Year's Eve was exciting when I was a kid. We say goodbye to the old and ring in the new. With each New Year came all kinds of exciting opportunities, hopes and dreams.

Jesus has now reached the age of eight days and something new is about to happen. Every Israelite boy who reached the age of eight days was required to be circumcised and receive his name. As we saw earlier in the naming of Zechariah and Elizabeth's son John, names were important to the people of Israel.

Mary and Joseph have already been told the Name that God has given for His Son. So in obedience they gave Mary's Child the Name of Jesus. It was a common name at the time. It means "The Lord is salvation" or "The Lord saves." In the Old Testament the names Joshua and Hosea are variants of the name Jesus. Every other Israelite boy carrying this name in effect reminded people to turn their attention to God, who is their salvation.

In the case of Mary's Son it was completely different, however: In His case the Name pointed to Himself as Lord—the One who is now present to save His people from their sins. Many years from now His enemies will hurl His Name back at Him in mockery, as He hangs on the cross: "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He trusts in God, let God deliver Him now, if He desires Him. For He said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Matthew 27:42-43).

But there on the cross Jesus was fulfilling His Name—the Lord saving His people from death and hell by suffering for their sins.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You truly are the Lord who saves His people. Receive our thanks for being the Savior Your Name said You would be. Amen.

THE IMPOSSIBLE GIFT

The Second Sunday in Advent
December 4, 2016

Read Luke 1:18.

TEXT: And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this?" (Luke 1:18).

The impossible gift: for some children it's a pony; for us it was a pool table. Every Christmas we asked for a pool table and ended up disappointed. Finally, one Christmas we sat around the tree after opening all our presents. Figuring there would be no pool table, we resigned ourselves to look more closely at the presents we had received. That's when mom and dad brought out one last present for each of us. One brother opened a triangle; another opened a box of pool balls. We were all running downstairs before the other three gifts were unwrapped.

That's what happened to Zechariah. But instead of running downstairs to see the pool table, he sat on the floor asking "How shall I know this?" Long ago he had given up the dream of having a child. So even though an angel stands before him delivering this tremendous good news, Zechariah finds it impossible to believe.

God's great promises often greet us when we are beaten down, discouraged and depressed. A cynicism often creeps in that keeps us from enjoying God's gifts as we should, but those gifts are still offered whether you believe it or not. The Baby is still in Bethlehem's manger for you. Will you pass Him by just because you've been discouraged by the events in your life?

Christmas is really all about God stepping into our world of disappointment, heartache and failure. He came to share our life of pain and sorrow; He came to give us His life of joy, peace and bliss.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, come to me in my disillusionment and pain. Reassure me of Your power to heal my pain, provide all my needs, and lead me to unending joy in Your presence. Amen.

STOLEN JOY

Monday, December 5, 2016

Read Luke 1:19.

TEXT: And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place (Luke 1:20).

It took a lot of behind-the-scenes work for us to get that pool table. Our neighbors let mom and dad stored it unassembled in their garage next door. Then late Christmas Eve our neighbor and my dad carried it piece by piece to our basement, where dad spent all the night putting it together. But you never saw a group of happier boys surrounding a pool table than that Christmas morning.

This also should be Zechariah's greatest day. Instead, his doubt and skepticism blinds him to the joy and wonder of all that God has promised. So the angel reveals his name: Gabriel. A priest like Zechariah should certainly recognize him as the angel God had sent several times to share His message with Daniel.

Beyond that, Gabriel reminds the foolish priest that he has come from the very presence of God Himself. He received these words directly from God and has come to bring this great message of good news.

God has made Christmas such a joyous season, but just like Zechariah we so often let the little things in life steal our joy, along with our voice of praise and thanksgiving to God. Agonizing over our problems and self-absorbed, we miss the peace and joy that God is carefully working everything out for us. We fail to see that if God has sent His Son to take care of our most important problems, i.e. saving us from death and His fiery wrath, He will certainly take care of our mundane needs as well.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, I have every reason to praise You and declare Your glorious Name to everyone I see. Please turn me from unbelief, fear, anger and bitterness, and fill me with Your Holy Spirit, so I may joyfully share Your Good News this Christmas and always. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

THE GREAT SEARCH

6th Day of Christmas
Friday, December 30, 2016

Read Luke 2:15-20.

TEXT: The shepherds said, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us" (see Luke 2:15).

This is about the time we started running dangerously low on Christmas cookies. I always hated getting to the bottom of the "animal cookies." I'm not sure why we called them that, since we used all kinds of different shapes: trees, bells, etc. But I would definitely leave all the others behind in my search for that one last animal cookie.

The shepherds had the same feeling about the Christ Child. After the angel army returns to heaven, the shepherds immediately talk it over and decide to leave their flocks behind in search of the Christ Child.

They go to Bethlehem and search until they find Him wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger—just as the angel had said. How incredible was it to look down into the face of the mighty Son of God? The shepherds share the angel's words with Mary and Joseph and every person they meet. All who hear their words are amazed, but Mary stores up their words and ponders them deep inside.

What the shepherds did in one night, we spend our lifetimes doing. We learn of our Savior in the Bible. We then spend the rest of our lives looking forward to the moment when we will gaze upon His glorious face—just like they did. Because of His life, death and resurrection, we will be able to remain in His wonderful presence forever.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, the shepherds left their flocks behind to find You. Give me that same excitement and dedication, so I may leave everything to walk with You through life, until I meet You face-to-face. Amen.

ANGEL ARMIES

5th Day of Christmas
Thursday, December 29, 2016

Read Luke 2:13-14.

TEXT: And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host (see Luke 2:13).

One of my favorite Christmas presents was my army men. Those little, green guys could go anywhere. One of the best places was in my younger brother's toy parking garage (remember that big box I claimed as mine?). The soldiers with flame throwers and bazookas were pretty easy to hit. But no matter how you threw the Lincoln Log bombs, you could never pick off the sniper hiding in the elevator. Having control of that army was amazing.

The shepherds saw an army that first Christmas too. After the angel made his magnificent announcement, a multitude of the heavenly host suddenly appeared. Luke described it as an angel army. The eternal Son of God, now lying as a Baby in Bethlehem's manger, had created each and every one of them. He was their Lord, commanding them like a brilliant general.

Throughout the Old Testament He sent this angel army to shield and protect His people from their enemies. Now they have come to sing the praises of their Holy Commander. They call on all the inhabitants of heaven to give glory to God for keeping His promises and revealing His grace by sending His Son as a Man.

Jesus' coming to earth fills heaven with glory and pours out peace upon the earth. That peace is offered to each and every man, woman and child. Jesus won that peace with God through His perfect life and His atoning sacrifice on the cross. Sadly, many will reject this greatest Christmas gift, and the peace and protection He came to bring.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for Your angel armies that protect us. More importantly, thank You for winning our peace through Your life, death and resurrection. Grant me faith to never take Your salvation for granted. Amen.

SPEECHLESS

Tuesday, December 6, 2016

Read Luke 1:20-22.

TEXT: And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place (Luke 1:20a).

I can think of few times during the year when I would hate to lose my voice more than Christmas time. There are so many beautiful carols to sing, so many thrilling songs. It did happen one year in my ministry. I had to save my voice to preach and, as a result, sat silently as our members sang all those beautiful Christmas carols without me. It was frustrating beyond all measure.

What must it have been like for Zechariah to be silenced—not for a day or two—but for more than nine months? This should have been the happiest time in his life. It should have started with him stepping out of the temple, praising God with a loud voice. Instead, he can only try to make signs to communicate with the waiting crowds outside. God has left him unable to speak because of his unbelief.

At first, the worshippers in the temple court wondered at his delay since usually burning incense was a quick thing. But when Zechariah came out unable to speak, they read his gestures and realized he had seen a vision in the temple. But unfortunately he was unable to tell them what had happened.

The same will be true when he returns home to Elizabeth. He will have to watch God's marvelous plan unfold, seeing the dream he had long shared with his wife come true and all the while finding himself unable to speak a single word about it.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, I confess my doubt and unbelief. Forgive me for Jesus' sake, and fill me with Your Spirit that I may trust Your Word and praise Your Name forever. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

FALSE ASSUMPTIONS

Wednesday, December 7, 2016

Read Luke 1:23-25.

TEXT: After these days his (Zechariah's) 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 1:24-25).

Many husbands and wives struggle with the heartbreak of infertility. But Zechariah and Elizabeth experience something even deeper. During that period when a couple was childless, their neighbors often made false and hurtful assumptions about them.

Judaism had lost its proper understanding of the Old Testament. Instead of focusing on God's undeserved grace for helpless sinners, the Jews focused on their own worthiness. They judged their neighbors' relationship with God by the blessings He showered on them. Their good health, financial status, overall prosperity, social status, and number of descendants—or lack of—were indicators of their connection with God. No matter how much they honored God and trusted His salvation, Jewish society looked upon Zechariah and Elizabeth's infertility as proof that things were not quite right between them and God.

Now, at last, God has visited them and removed Elizabeth's social disgrace. But interestingly, Elizabeth doesn't go right out and clear up her reputation by broadcasting her pregnancy. Instead, she keeps her pregnancy hidden. Perhaps it is because Elizabeth knows God is doing something even greater than granting her the gift of a child—as special as that child will be.

God is sending His Son into the world, and her son will be His forerunner, His messenger. How surprised she will be in the sixth month when the mother of God's Son comes to be a guest in her house.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, it is not easy to be judged and misunderstood by people, especially when I struggle through difficult situations. Grant me Your joy, peace and patience as You guide me through this life. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

WHO NEEDS A SAVIOR?

4th Day of Christmas
Wednesday, December 28, 2016

Read Luke 2:11-12.

TEXT: "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

I remember being devastated one year when mom and dad took down our Christmas tree early. They said it had gotten too dry, but I never saw any danger. Years later our youth group had a Christmas tree bonfire. In seconds the tree exploded into flames, lighting up the entire field. We all were forced to step back from the intense heat. In that moment I realized just what great a danger we had been in, and how mom and dad had saved us.

If the shepherds were anything like most people, they felt no danger sitting out in the fields that Christmas night. Then in an instant the angel appeared, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. In that horrifying moment they saw the darkness of their sinful lives in the holy light of God, and they were gripped with the terror of His wrath.

Each of us will experience that moment someday—either at our death or at Christ's return. We will be immersed in the bright light of God's glory, as we stand before Him for judgment. God will not weigh out your good deeds versus your bad deeds, or compare you to other people. Instead, He will look deep into your thoughts, desires and attitudes. If you committed one sin, one single wrongdoing at any time during your life, you will stand condemned.

But that is why Jesus came as our Savior. He took every sin to the cross; there He suffered God's fiery wrath in our place. When we trust Jesus as our Savior, all our sins are taken away, and when He returns we will be able to stand spotless before His judgment seat.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for taking my place and suffering for my sins. Guide me to show others why they need Your salvation too. Amen.

FEAR TURNED INTO JOY

3rd Day of Christmas
Tuesday, December 27, 2016

Read Luke 2:10.

TEXT: 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" (Luke 2:10).

The days before Christmas were anxious times of worry for me. What if I ended up with a stocking full of coal? And of course there was always the dreaded children's Christmas program! But the days after Christmas were simply glorious: playing with our Christmas toys, listening to Christmas music, eating Christmas cookies. Life was good!

When the shepherds first saw the brightness of the angel, and the surpassing brightness of God's own glory, they were gripped with fear. But as the angel announced the birth of God's Son, their great fear gave way to greater joy. Life was good!

Life was *really* good for our first parents Adam and Eve. God created them perfect and good. They knew God loved them, and they knew they could depend on Him to faithfully provide all their needs. Fear didn't enter the picture until they disobeyed His command and ate the forbidden fruit. At that moment, their perfect knowledge of God was replaced with fear and dread of His wrath and punishment.

We still live under that fear too. It's a fear that comes from not knowing God perfectly or trusting Him completely. When times are bad or when troubles come upon us, we find it difficult to fully lean on Him. But that's why Jesus came, to take our guilt upon Himself and pay the penalty for our sins in His suffering and death on the cross. With all sins removed and death completely conquered by Jesus' death and resurrection, there is nothing left to fear. Life is good indeed!

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, we rejoice that You sent Your Son to remove our fear by taking upon Himself the punishment we deserve. Let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts forever. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

THE LORD'S FAVOR

Thursday, December 8, 2016

Read Luke 1:26-28.

TEXT: "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28b).

One of the most coveted roles among the girls in our Sunday school Christmas program was the Virgin Mary. Her big moment was when she gently wrapped a baby doll in cloths and laid him in the manger. But another sought-after part was the angel Gabriel. Since that required memorizing a larger part, it usually was given to an older student.

The angel Gabriel had already brought some great messages to Daniel and Zechariah, but nothing could compare with the message God entrusts to him now. He goes out from the presence of God to a city in the northern region of Galilee called Nazareth. There he appears to a virgin who is betrothed to a man named Joseph. Her name is Mary. Gabriel greets her with reassuring words, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"

But what is so special about Mary? Why has God chosen her for this singular honor above all other virgins in Israel? Actually, there is nothing special about Mary. She is a sinner like you and me, and needs God's grace and favor just like we all do. The focus is upon God; He has chosen a simple person like her to be the mother of His Son.

Each of us who celebrate with joy our Savior's birth has been favored by our God the same way as Mary. Like her, we deserved nothing but God's wrath, but instead He showers His grace and forgiveness on us through the Christmas Child. And just as Mary was favored to bring the Christ Child into the world, we are favored to bring Christ Jesus to the nations.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, You showed us Your favor by calling us by name and making us Your own children through faith in Jesus Christ. Bless us now to share that favor with others as we share Jesus' story. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

CONFUSION

Friday, December 9, 2016

Read Luke 1:29-30.

TEXT: And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." (Luke 1:30).

Frustration is sitting on the floor with six or seven strings of Christmas lights all tangled together. After a short struggle I gave up and handed the whole mess to dad. And even though I'd left the tangled ball of wire and lights even more tightly tangled than before, in dad's skilled Navy hands they were untangled and ready for the tree in a jiffy.

When Mary heard the greeting of the angel Gabriel, she was frustrated, confused, perplexed and greatly troubled—like I felt trying to untangle the lights. A debate began raging back and forth in her mind as she considered what the greeting meant. Why had the angel come? What message would he bring?

There is so much confusion in life. Just like Mary we try to pick through the tangled pieces of our lives and see if we can make sense out of them. Our minds go back and forth from one point of view to another, from faith to doubt, from confidence to uncertainty, from comfort to fear.

Thankfully, nothing is a mystery for God. He arranges everything according to His loving plan. He assures us, "I know the plans I have for you ... plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (see Jeremiah 29:11). The most important part of that plan was starting to fall into place right now. God's own Son is becoming human, so He can live a perfect life and suffer on the cross in our place to win eternal life for all of us.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, life can be very confusing. In such times remind me to cast my cares into Your hands so that I may live in peace and quietness. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

SHEER TERROR

2nd Day of Christmas
Monday, December 26, 2016

Read Luke 2:9.

TEXT: And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear (Luke 2:9).

One Christmas memory always makes me shudder. I'm sitting in a classroom dressed in costume and drenched in sweat. It's not that the costume is too heavy or the room too hot, I'm sweating because the children's Christmas program starts in five minutes, and I'm so nervous I can't remember a single word of my part!

Sheer terror! It's amazing how many times Luke mentions that terror as he describes the first Christmas. First, there was Zechariah in the temple, then Mary; now it's the shepherds' turn. They are sitting quietly watching their sheep on a dark night, when bright light suddenly surrounds them. An angel stands before them shining in glorious splendor. But that's not the source of the brightest light. God's own glory is shining all around them. Their reaction isn't unusual for a sinner in the presence of a holy spirit creature, let alone the brightness of God's own glory. Luke wrote in the original Greek, "they feared with great fear."

Actually, that was the same light the Son of God had been radiating in heaven, before this world was created. But He concealed that glory when He became human and came to our dark world to save us from death and hell by His life, death and resurrection. Because of Jesus' ultimate sacrifice we will be able to stand before Him without fear, when He returns to judge the world. Then throughout eternity we will bask in the glorious light of God's presence forever.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank You for Your gracious presence among us. Cleanse us from our sins through Jesus our Savior so that we may live in Your glorious presence forever, when Your Son comes again. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS CARD

Christmas Day
Sunday, December 25, 2016

Read Luke 2:8.

TEXT: And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night (Luke 2:8).

Writing Christmas cards is not always the most fun thing to do, especially when you have stacks and stacks of them. But it sure is fun to open the mailbox and find it stuffed with Christmas cards, announcing Jesus' great birth. We cover our front door with the cards mailed to us.

A Christmas greeting and announcement was one of the most memorable things about the first Christmas too.

Now that His Son is born, it is time for God to send out announcements to let the world know. What better messengers than angels? Interestingly, God didn't choose rich, prominent, important people to be the first to hear the glad tidings of the Christmas angel. Instead, He chose poor, lowly shepherds and sent His angel to give them the very first Christmas announcement.

Shepherds didn't have the best reputation at the time, especially in their local synagogues or churches. But theirs was still an important and ancient profession. Adam and Eve's second son Abel was a shepherd, before he was murdered by his jealous brother Cain. Jesus' own human ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had all been shepherds, as had been another famous ancestor, King David.

In time Jesus would show the greatest honor to shepherds, taking that title as His own and calling Himself the "Good Shepherd." Like these shepherds, Jesus was willing to lay down His life to protect His sheep. Unlike them, He could lay it down on the cross and take it up again on the third day. This He did so He would always stand guard over His flock, and gather us together as His own.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, our Good Shepherd, thank You for laying down Your life and taking it up again for us. Guard and keep us in this faith until the day of Your returning. Amen.

NO ORDINARY BABY

Saturday, December 10, 2016

Read Luke 1:31-33.

TEXT: And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall call His Name Jesus (Luke 1:31).

I love studying the ornaments on our Christmas tree. Each has a history and a meaning all its own; each triggers a memory. But when I was a kid I never really cared that much about the ornaments. For me the best thing was the tree itself—all lit up and shining in glory.

As Mary looks at the angel shining in all his glory, she is confused and gripped with fear. Gabriel cancels that fear by revealing God has chosen her to be the mother of a very special Son. In simple words he spells out the whole story of Christmas. She will conceive and give birth to a Son, a special Son; His Name will be Jesus.

Sadly, that is all most people see when they pass by a manger scene: a baby lying there in the hay. But we need to pause and step closer, so we can study each detail the angel reveals about Him, just like the ornaments on a tree. First, He says this Child will be great—the greatest human to ever live. Next, he calls Him the Son of the Most High, the mighty Son of God.

Now he reveals this Child is born to be King, but He will not be like any other earthly king. Other kings and leaders depend upon the might of their military or the assent of their people to rule. But Jesus' Kingship rests on His strength alone. He does not need an army of angels to keep Him on His throne; nor does He need our consent. In His greatest hour (and ours), He will go to the cross alone. There He will defeat sin, death, hell and the devil for us.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, Your Son is our mighty King. Receive our thanks for His great salvation and help us spread His reign of grace. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

SPOTLESS CONCEPTION

Third Sunday in Advent
December 11, 2016

Read Luke 1:34-35.

TEXT: And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34).

Mom and dad made most of the Christmas cookies in our house. Sure, they let us use cookie cutters and sprinkles, but for some reason that's all. I always thought five little boys would have been a really big help measuring out ingredients and mixing them together. Did it really hurt if you put in two cups of salt instead of two cups of sugar? (I couldn't understand why mom threw out that whole batch of dough and sent us out to the living room.)

When it came to Jesus' conception, the angel told Mary the Holy Spirit would do all the work. He will come upon her and use His miraculous power to bring about Jesus' conception.

Just as a cookie recipe requires the correct amount of sugar and salt, God's recipe for our salvation required His Son to be conceived and born of a virgin. Every human born of a human father and mother inherits the stain of sin our human race has carried since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Had Jesus been conceived of Joseph and Mary He would have been contaminated with our same sinful nature and could never have been our Savior.

To save us, God's Son had to share our human nature and flesh, without sharing our sin and guilt. Being conceived by the Holy Spirit and born free of our guilt, Jesus was able to be our perfect Substitute, living the perfect life you and I cannot live. He completed our salvation by suffering and dying in our place on the cross.

THE PRAYER: Almighty God, thank You for Your perfect plan to save us through Your spotless Lamb, Jesus Christ. Give us faith to always trust Him as our one and only Savior. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

IN THE ELEMENTS

Christmas Eve
Saturday, December 24, 2016

Read Luke 2:6-7.

TEXT: 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).

On Christmas Eve my thoughts goes back to a "live" nativity when I was a teenager. I was dressed as a wise man, and it was freezing cold. Each of us stood shivering and shaking, waiting for our shift to end, so we could thaw out our aching toes and wrap our frozen fingers around a steaming mug of hot chocolate.

We don't know what time of year Jesus was born. But whatever time of year it was, Joseph and Mary had to lay their Child where no one would ever want to put a newborn—out in the elements, with only a crude shelter for His protection.

Do you have a manger scene in your front yard? If so, spend a few minutes there tonight. Jesus willingly left His glorious throne in heaven to share the chill of nighttime and the grinding heat of the summer sun. He experienced our hunger and thirst, sleepless nights, and long difficult days.

But more than any of us, He experienced a crown of thorns, a brutal whip across His back, and nails driven into His hands and feet. He took our sins on Himself and felt the full weight of God's wrath, so one day we will live forever in God's presence where, "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat" (Revelation 7:16).

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You left the comfort of heaven to share the difficulties of our life. Through Your suffering and death in our place, You opened heaven to us. Fill our hearts with joy this Christmas and every day, until we stand with You in paradise. Amen.

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE!

Friday, December 23, 2016

Read Luke 2:1-5.

TEXT: In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered (Luke 2:1).

Every year I take my family across three states to spend Christmas with my brothers and their families in Ohio. It's a long trip, but we thoroughly enjoy it, reaching our destination the same day. My father once told me of a Christmas he spent travelling by train from California to Ohio on leave from the Navy.

As we remember the birth of God's Son, we recall another long and difficult Christmas journey. That journey was set in motion by a command from the Roman emperor. But standing behind the mightiest man in the world—Caesar Augustus—stood God, the ultimate Ruler, moving His Son's chosen mother to the exact place were long ago He had announced His Son would be born. In Micah 5:2 we read, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for Me One who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."

In another 30 years a Roman military governor will pass a judgment of his own, commanding this same Jesus to carry His cross on a journey to Mt. Calvary to be crucified. God stood behind that decision too, laying our guilt and sins on His own Son, who made that most difficult of journeys so that we could be forgiven and live with Him forever.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for taking up Your cross and making that long journey to Mt. Calvary, where You set me free from sin, guilt, death and hell. Fill me with joy and patience no matter where I may travel this Christmastime. Amen.

LIFE'S CRAZY PATH

Monday, December 12, 2016

Read Luke 1:36-38.

TEXT: And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (see Luke 1:38).

Did you ever open a Christmas present only to find an empty box with a clue in it? Following that clue led you out to the swing set, where another clue sent you to the hall closet. From there you went out to the garage, then up to the bedroom and, finally, down to the basement, where your real present was waiting for you.

The angel concludes his visit assuring Mary nothing is impossible for God, pointing to Mary's own relative Elizabeth as an example. Mary humbly offers herself to God's wonderful plan. But she has no idea the crazy path she will follow, as His plan unfolds in her life. We will trace this path through this Christmas season into the Lenten devotions, coming later this winter.

But no matter what will happen, Mary trusts God, and she is content to follow His path, wherever it may lead. We can learn a lot from her attitude! Sometimes God's will takes us down paths we are not expecting, paths we sometimes do not even wish to go. But God promises to be with us along the road. And we look forward to a great present at the end: eternal life with Him in our glorious and resurrected body, living in a perfectly restored world.

Actually, Mary's Son Jesus did the same thing too. When His Father asked Him to take the path of the cross, Jesus said, "Not My will, but Yours be done" (see Luke 22:42). He went to the cross, took our guilt on Himself, and died in our place so that God could look on us with love, favor and forgiveness.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, sometimes Your perfect plan for our lives takes us down paths we would not choose on our own. Give us faith and confidence to trust You as Jesus did. In His Name. Amen.

CHRISTMAS TRIPS

Tuesday, December 13, 2016

Read Luke 1:39-45.

TEXT: 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).

Christmas trips were always so much fun. It was exciting to see the Christmas decorations as we walked up to the front door. I loved stepping inside and seeing the Christmas tree, along with all the toys my cousins or friends had gotten for Christmas. Then we'd pull out a few toys of our own that we had brought along.

A Christmas trip to her relative is the first step on Mary's new path. She sets out to see her cousin Elizabeth, who is miraculously pregnant in her old age. Mary quickly travels from the area of Galilee to Zechariah's home in Judea. Filled with excitement she walks up to Elizabeth's door. Beaming with joy she greets her aged cousin—and gets the surprise of her life.

In a loud and excited voice Elizabeth proclaims, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (Luke 1:42b). Mary is shocked and delighted. She hasn't even had the chance to say anything more than "hello," and immediately Elizabeth knows everything. The Holy Spirit has revealed to her that the Child just beginning to grow in Mary's womb is actually God's Son.

What a comfort for Mary! She won't face the awkward explanation of the circumstances concerning her pregnancy, or have to convince the priest's wife this was all God's doing. In an instant, before Mary can say anything, the Holy Spirit has done it all. God has led her to the one couple able to fully understand and appreciate the amazing things God has done for her.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank You for faithful people like Elizabeth who believe Your promises and share our faith. Bring us together this Christmas season, so we may rejoice and share our wonder at Your amazing love in Jesus Christ. Amen.

OUR FAMILY PHOTO ALBUM

Thursday, December 22, 2016

Read Luke 1:80.

TEXT: And the child grew and became strong in spirit (see Luke 1:80).

It's fun to look through our family photo albums. Christmas after Christmas each of us grows taller. Before too long girlfriends start showing up, and then wives, and children of our own. Now the father of a teenager myself, it's fun to sit down and watch videos of past Christmases and see my son growing into a young man—strong in body, mind and spirit.

Luke concludes the account of John's birth with an interesting footnote and a reminder: John "grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel." Since Zechariah and Elizabeth were both advanced in years before John was conceived, it is quite possible neither of them lived long enough to see him grow to adulthood. When John was grown he lived in the wilderness, awaiting the moment the Spirit of God would stir him to begin his work, preparing the people of Israel for their Savior.

John wasn't born to remain a little baby and neither was Jesus. As Christmas Day draws near we take a moment to look back into the photo album of our human family. When we do we see our Brother Jesus on the day of His birth. But Jesus didn't stay that little Baby in the manger; He grew to be a remarkable man whose story will unfold more clearly and completely in the accounts of His adult life. This we will see in the upcoming Lenten devotions, especially His death and resurrection that set us free.

In the meantime, as our Christmas devotions continue, we rejoin Mary and remember the birth of her special Baby Jesus.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son to save us. Open my mind to watch Jesus grow from that tiny Child to the Lord and Savior of all mankind. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

DEATH'S SHADOW

Wednesday, December 21, 2016

Read Luke 1:76-79.

TEXT: 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 (see Luke 1:78-79).

In Charles Dickens' book *The Christmas Carol*, Bob Cratchit looks at his eldest son, nearly grown and about to leave home, and tells his family, "But however and whenever we part from one another; I am sure we shall none of us forget poor Tiny Tim—shall we—or this first parting that there was among us."

The first parting among my family was my father's death. The next Christmas we tried hard to recapture the joy and laughter of former Christmases, but we all felt the empty place his parting had left behind.

In Zechariah's words of praise to God, he briefly turns to speak of his son John and the great work God would accomplish through him as Jesus' great prophet and forerunner. But now he turns back to Jesus' far greater work.

He describes Jesus as the sun that comes to us from heaven. Just as the morning sun rises to scatter the darkness of night, Jesus Christ will arise to shatter the darkness of sin, doubt and death. Jesus comes to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death. They are sitting because they have no power or hope; they have given up the fight. But through His life, death and resurrection, Jesus has scattered the shadow that death casts across us. Raising us to our feet by faith, He sets us moving toward heaven again. He guides our feet along the way of peace that leads to God the Father's presence in heaven—and a joyous eternal reunion with our loved ones—those who have died in faith.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, shine Your light on our darkness, comfort us in our grief, and set our feet once again on the path of peace, the road to heaven. Amen.

MAGNIFY THE LORD

Wednesday, December 14, 2016

Read Luke 1:46-50.

TEXT: And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47).

One year in early December our old black-and-white console television conked out on us. Mom covered it with a white cloth and set up the manger scene on top. On Christmas morning my parents lifted the white cloth from the front of the set and suddenly we had a brand new color television. Seeing all the programs in color for the first time was amazing.

Mary had an experience something like that. First, the angel's message, and now Elizabeth's greeting. In response, she bursts out in praise, "My soul magnifies the Lord!"

What a curious thing to say. She obviously doesn't mean her soul or spirit has made God greater than He already is. She means her mental image of God has grown significantly. Previously, she thought God would have sent His angel to the high priest's daughter in Jerusalem or to a girl from a powerful, influential and wealthy family. She surely didn't think God would send an angel to a girl like her with no fame, wealth or influence.

But God had noticed her—a young, unknown girl from an insignificant, little town that is never mentioned throughout the entire Old Testament. God chose her to be the mother of His Son.

When we recognize our unworthiness, our sin, our failings, then God is ready to magnify Himself in our eyes too. That's the secret of Christmas: the Christ Child came to our world to take away our sin and the punishment we deserve for it. Today He comes to your house to live with you, give meaning to your life, guard your ways, and even lead you through death to life everlasting.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, I am amazed You would concern Yourself with someone like me. Thank You for sending Your Son to save me and promising me eternal life for His sake. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

BRINGING DOWN AND RAISING UP

Thursday, December 15, 2016

Read Luke 1:51-55.

TEXT: “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (Luke 1:52).

I used to snoop around the house to find the presents from mom and dad. Their solution was to wrap up the presents a few weeks early, then put them under the tree—without any name tags on them. We examined those packages with magnifying glasses but found no clue as to which present belonged to which of us five boys. My solution was daring and brilliant: I found the biggest package under the tree and claimed it as my own. Whenever we posed for pictures I stood by my beautiful, huge present. Of course, on Christmas morning it always ended up belonging to one of my brothers.

A few days back we discussed the stigma the Jewish culture put upon childless couples like Zechariah and Elizabeth. That proud and arrogant attitude plagued the entire Jewish culture. It was commonly thought that God showed His favor to certain people by giving them wealth, power and prominence. And He showed His displeasure to others through poverty, disease and a low social standing.

Mary’s experience shattered that foolish presumption. God passed by all the virgin daughters of the rich, powerful, prominent families in Jerusalem, and instead He chose an unknown girl from an obscure city in the despised north. Jesus would say it best, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:12).

None of us can stand before our pure and holy God in our own righteousness. Our only hope is through the humble Christ Child, born in a lowly manger, nailed to a despised cross, raised to glory on the third day, and seated at the right hand of God the Father in heaven.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, You humble the proud and raise up the lowly. Turn me from my arrogant, sinful pride that I may cling to Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior, my pride and joy. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

HIDDEN IN THE WRAPPINGS

Tuesday, December 20, 2016

Read Luke 1:71-75.

TEXT: That we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us (Luke 1:71).

Scattered among my Christmas memories are some dark clouds. Several Christmases saw cancer and death stalking our family. One year it hovered over my wife’s father; several years later it was my mother. That terrible enemy cast a shadow over everything, attempting to swallow up our joy, peace and light.

Of course, it doesn’t take as formidable an enemy as death to suck the joy out of Christmas. The nagging problems of poor health, strained relationships, or financial struggles are more than enough. That’s why I love the third stanza of “It Came upon the Midnight Clear.”

“All you, beneath your heavy load, by care and guilt bent low
Who toil along a dreary way, with painful steps and slow:
Look up, for golden is the hour, come swiftly on the wing,
The Prince was born to bring you peace, of Him the angels sing.”

Zechariah carried that same thought as he praised God for sending His Son to visit and redeem His people, “that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.”

The truth is we do have great and powerful enemies who are out to get us. Satan tempted our first parents to sin. That sin led to God’s condemnation and resulted in death and hell. But God did not abandon us to their heartless hands. He sent His own all-powerful Son to rescue us.

Come back around for the Lenten devotions this coming spring. Then you will see Zechariah’s prophecy unfold, as Jesus shows His great strength, against all of these bitter enemies.

THE PRAYER: Gracious Father, we are surrounded by powerful enemies that would destroy us, but You sent Your Son to win our salvation, by His perfect life, innocent suffering and death, and powerful resurrection. Keep us safe in this faith, until His return. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

FIRST WORDS

Monday, December 19, 2016

Read Luke 1:67-70.

TEXT: Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people (Luke 1:68).

As a child I had no problem going to church Christmas Eve, because I knew the presents wouldn't come before midnight. My problem came Christmas morning, after opening our presents and playing with them, then to have to go to church again. Obviously, at that time presents were the biggest part of Christmas to me.

Did Zechariah have that same problem? After all, he had been silent nine months, and finally got his speech back. If it was you, what is the first thing you would talk about? Wouldn't it be your child—the one you had waited and prayed about for so long?

But Zechariah said nothing about his child; all he could talk about was that other Child, who stayed in his household the last three months—the Baby still growing in Mary's womb. Zechariah shared his wife's amazement at how God has come to visit His people, and this visit is not the way an angel appears and then leaves. Instead, God remains, becoming one of us, ready to spend a lifetime living with us.

But there's even more to the story. Not only has the Christ Child come to live with us, He has come to redeem or ransom us—to buy us back from our slavery to sin, death and hell. Zechariah spoke of the ransom payment that still lay more than 30 years in the future. It was then when Jesus would be nailed to a cross, on a hill outside of Jerusalem. It is there that He will give His life to free us from God's wrath and the eternal punishment of hell that we deserve.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, Christmas is far more than presents, decorations and parties. It is about Your Son coming into our world to buy us back with His own life, death and resurrection. Fill my mouth with praise to You. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

FAMILY GATHERINGS

Friday, December 16, 2016

Read Luke 1:56.

TEXT: And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home (Luke 1:56).

When we first gather with family at Christmas, it's a wonderful feeling. But after a few days together, we begin to notice those things that got on our nerves as kids and how they *still* get on our nerves today. We can manage a couple of days all right, but three months would be out of the question.

But three months was perfect for Mary, Elizabeth and Zechariah. They probably would have stayed together longer if they could. The women talked about God's plans for their sons, while Zechariah listened in. These were great days. It is a truly wonderful experience to spend time together with people who share your interests and your fascination with the great things God is doing.

Of course, just as our Christmas gatherings must eventually come to an end, the time finally came for Mary to return home as well.

Our Christmas gatherings can be powerful glimpses of the great joy those who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior will enjoy in heaven. We will get along perfectly, because God will remove the sin that turns us against each other. Until that day, we can enjoy more harmonious gatherings, because Jesus has already begun His work in us, taking away our sins and God's wrath and making us new creatures in His image.

That process will finally be completed when Jesus Christ returns to earth on Judgment Day. Then He will make us perfect. We will live together in joy and peace in God's presence forever, sharing even greater delights than Mary, Elizabeth and Zechariah enjoyed during those three wonderful months together.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank You for gathering us as Your family in Jesus Christ Your Son. Purify our hearts so we may enjoy our time together this Christmas, looking to the pleasure of being together in Your eternal presence. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

SOMETHING NEW

Saturday, December 17, 2016

Read Luke 1:57-63.

TEXT: And he (Zechariah) asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John" (see Luke 1:63).

When I was a child presents didn't show up under our tree until Christmas morning. When my wife was a child they were there Christmas Eve after church. We knew when our first child came along that one of us would be starting a new tradition.

Something new was about to happen in Zechariah's family. The time finally came and Elizabeth gave birth to a son. Eight days later it was time to circumcise and name him. Zechariah's neighbors and family wanted to name him after his father, but Elizabeth refused. Clinging to the words of the angel to Zechariah, she said his name was to be John.

This puzzled the friends and relatives. It was traditional to name sons after their father or another family member. But Elizabeth stood firm. Her child's name would transcend family relations. He was not just a gift to his family, but to the whole world.

When the neighbors turned to Zechariah, they began asking him what name he wanted to give the child. Zechariah immediately got his writing tablet and confidently wrote, "His name is John."

What a difference from nine months ago. Then he was filled with doubt, skepticism and hopelessness. The time John was growing in Elizabeth's womb, and those three months with Mary and her special Child were more than enough to renew Zechariah's flagging faith. Now with great confidence and boldness, Zechariah gives his son the name the angel had said.

Jesus makes that transformation in our lives too. By the salvation won by His life, death and resurrection, He drives away our doubts, fears and cynicism, and fills us with courage, joy and faith.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank You for bearing with our doubts and fears. For Jesus' sake, fill us with confidence, hope and faith so that we may trust You and serve one another. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

REGRETS

Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 18, 2016

Read Luke 1:64-66.

TEXT: And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God (Luke 1:64).

Squeezing together at Christmas time can put a strain on even the closest of families. Cutting words can splinter and scar a family for years. Perhaps this Christmas will see empty places around your table—and deep regret in your heart.

Zechariah knew that regret well. Nine long months went by since he spoke a word. Out of disappointment he last used his voice to blurt out his doubts about the angel's promise. Over the months his faith has been restored by the wonderful things he has seen and experienced, but his last words still echo in his mind.

But along with that echo are the words of the angel, "You will be silent and unable to speak *until* the day that these things take place" (Luke 1:20). One by one everything the angel predicted has occurred, and now the last piece has fallen into place: the child has been named John. In an instant God restores his speech. And the first words from Zechariah's mouth are words of blessing for the great things God has done.

Each of us carries regret over hasty words we have said. Perhaps you regret something you said to a loved one now gone. Just remember Jesus Christ came in the manger to win forgiveness for that sin. Because He died and rose again, we have new hope and new life. It's a hope that through Christ Jesus our fractured relationships will be repaired. We hope for this to take place in this life but even if it doesn't, for all who believe, it will in the never-ending life we will enjoy together when Jesus Christ returns.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, please heal the wounds I have caused by my hurting words. Restore the relationships I have damaged and fill me with peace and joy for Jesus' sake. I pray in His Name. Amen.