



Advent

- 2014 -



What is Advent?

How easy is it for us to get over-busy during during this season? We get lost in the Christmas parties, present buying, and school schedule craziness only to look up and we are celebrating the New Year. What if this year was different though? What if you actually spent time with God everyday for a whole month? Let's fight against the December rush that is coming by celebrating Advent together.

Advent is an annual season in the month of December where the Church celebrates the coming of Jesus two millennia ago. The English word "*Advent*" is formed from the latin word *Adventus* (that would be an awesome superhero name...just saying), which means "coming." Through Advent we cheerfully reflect on Jesus' first coming and rest in our hopeful expectation of His promised second-coming. The Advent season is our time to prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate Jesus coming to us. For centuries Christians have celebrated Advent in many different ways - lighting candles, hanging wreaths, giving gifts, and singing songs. This year we want you to celebrate Advent with us by spending 10 minutes a day preparing your heart and mind to celebrate Jesus' coming.

Simply put, Advent is for adoring Jesus.

Our prayer is that these 10 minute devos everyday will help you break out of the December craziness and keep Jesus as your greatest treasure of your Advent season. Join with us as we seek to adore Jesus through reading His Word this Advent.

Advent Worship Schedule 2014

@ Wildwood Community Church

- **December 7:** Sunday morning worship 9:30 AM & 10:50 AM
 - ✦ **Message:** O Come Let Us Adore Him (part 1)
 - ✦ Christmas Music, Detailing Christmas Service Opportunities

- **December 14:** Sunday morning worship 9:30 AM & 10:50 AM
 - ✦ **Message:** O Come Let Us Adore Him (part 2)
 - ✦ Children Singing in worship service

- **December 21:** Sunday morning worship 9:30 AM & 10:50 AM
 - ✦ **Message:** O Come Let Us Adore Him (part 3)
 - ✦ Christmas Music, Annual “Carol of the Bells” Special Musical Presentation

- **December 24:** Christmas Eve Services: 5:00 PM & 7:00 PM
 - ✦ **Message:** O Come Let Us Adore Him (part 4)
 - ✦ Candlelight and Carols . . . a service for the entire family

- **December 28:** Sunday morning worship 9:30 AM & 10:50 AM
 - ✦ **Message:** O Come Let Us Adore Him (part 5)
 - ✦ Children/Students join their parents in worship service (No Sunday school today for any age. Only Nursery/Toddler Rooms open)

*All worship services are held at:
Wildwood Community Church
1501 24th Ave. NE
Norman, OK 73071*

Visit wildwoodchurch.org for more details.

Monday, November 30

The Genesis of Christmas *by Jonathan Holmes*

Read: Genesis 3:14-15

When we think of Christmas we usually don't anticipate turning to Genesis. Our minds most often go to the Gospels or the prophet Isaiah, but the first prophecy of Jesus' advent is found all the way back in Genesis. God already had a plan to save His people even before day one.

This is when you look back at the passage and go, "Uhhh, What!?! I see no mention of Jesus in this passage!" In v. 15 we find the first predictions foretelling Jesus' advent, "the seed of the woman." The phrase "you will strike his heel" refers to Satan's continued military campaign to sabotage God's plan. "He will crush your head" foreshadows sin and death's defeat on the cross and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The reason for the season is the fact that God fulfilled His prophecy found here in Genesis 3, and continues to be true to His Word today. The tragic story of sin and the serpent from the Old Testament might be seen as inappropriate for such a happy time of year. Some may say, "The season of Jesus' birth is no time to talk of sin and death. What do Adam and Eve have to do with Christmas?" But it has everything to do with Christmas! Now that we know the story of sin in the Old Testament, we can rejoice in the Good News of the New Testament. We cannot separate our joy at Christ's birth from our desperate need for Him. Unless we understand the tragedy of humanity's separation from God, then the birth of a baby in a stable will be nothing more to us than just a baby in a barn.

Jesus didn't come to aid, but to rescue.

Questions:

- What is sin? What are some of the impacts of sin in our lives?
- Does it give you hope that Jesus provides a way to "crush the head" of sin and its effects in your life?

Advent Prayers

- Thank God for fulfilling the promise of salvation.
- Ask God for greater faith in His timing and plan.

Monday, December 1

Jesus Lenses by Jonathan Holmes

Read: Luke 24:13-27

Two very distraught disciples were on their way to Emmaus as they discussed all of the things that happened with Jesus. This is post-crucifixion and they are distraught because they chose to leave everything behind and follow Jesus, who they believed was the Messiah that came to rescue them. All of that blew up in their faces when the Messiah died!

Why were the disciples so distraught about Jesus' death? They did not "believe all that the prophets have spoken (v. 25)!" They saw the coming Messiah as the Conquering King, but not the Suffering Servant. They focused on the glory (crown), but not the cross (suffering).

How does Jesus respond? Starting with Moses Jesus shows them how all of Scripture points to Him. Jesus gives a new way to read all of Scripture. We read the Old Testament through Jesus lenses - we read the Bible in light of Jesus' life. Our Jesus' lenses don't just stop there though. We don't simply put on our Jesus' lenses to read our Bibles and take them off to live our lives, rather we live all of life in light of Jesus, the coming Messiah.

Over the next few days, we will look at some of the Old Testament promise of Jesus' birth and read them with our Jesus' lenses on.

Questions

- How would your life look different if you lived with Jesus' lenses on?
- What would you see differently?
- What would you notice that went unnoticed before?

Advent Prayers

- Take time confessing to God areas of your life that haven't been radically affected by Jesus' life.
- Ask God to give you the strength and faith to walk in light of Jesus this week.

Tuesday, December 2

This is Our Guy!? *by Jonathan Holmes*

Read: Isaiah 53:1-12

Isaiah 53 is quite possibly the most well known Old Testament prophecy about Jesus Christ. Isaiah wrote this detailed description of the coming Messiah in his prophecy around 700 years before Jesus came. The first six verses talk about the kind of death Jesus would suffer.

How different do you think Isaiah's prophecy was than the expectations of the people?

Isaiah wrote of a suffering servant. You can imagine how this flew in the face of the kind of person the people expected to deliver them. Dreaming of a king, the people hear/read of Isaiah's prophecy of a Messiah that comes in humility to face a life of punishment and shame. "Wait...this is our guy!?"

This is HIM! We celebrate the reality of a suffering Savior today, but it missed the expectations of the people in Isaiah's time and even a lot of the Jews (Pharisees and Sadducees) during Jesus' time.

Question

- Can you think of a time in your life that your expectations didn't match up with the reality that God provided for you?

Advent Prayers

- Thank God that His plan is greater than any of your expectations.
- Pray that in missed expectations that you would see the beauty of God's plan above yours.

Wednesday, December 3

Son of God *by Jonathan Holmes*

Read: Psalm 2:7-9; Proverbs 30:4; Matthew 3:17; Mark 14:61-62; Luke 1:32; John 3:16

In the Gospels we find statements that claim that Jesus Christ was indeed the Son of God. The Gospels claim unanimously that Jesus is not only the Messiah or Savior, but also the Son of God. This lines up with the prophecy found in Psalm 2 and Proverbs 30. In the Old Testament we read claims that the Father has a Son, and with the New Testament we find that Jesus is the literal Son of God.

What does it mean that Jesus is the Son of God?

The major theological point brought out by Jesus being “Son of God” is His own divinity. Jesus is fully God. He is not simply a perfect sinless man, but He is both God and man. The title Son of God describes His distinct role in the Trinity as the Father, *Son*, and Spirit in which they are one in essence but separate in persons. How beautiful it is that the Father’s will was to send the Son to us, so that we might be saved by Him and through the Spirit.

As we continue to wait in hopeful expectation for the day that we celebrate the Son of God being born as a baby in the manger, may we remember that we are celebrating the arrival of God on earth. As we look to Jesus this season, let us come and adore Him for the Son has taken on flesh to be our suffering Savior. We have a reason to rejoice!

Question

- In what way does knowing that Jesus is God make His birth in Bethlehem more amazing?

Advent Prayer

- Rejoice that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, has come!

Thursday, December 4

Right on Time *by Mark Robinson*

Read: Galatians 4:4-5

Think about the last time you came to church. Did you arrive early? On time? Late? Now, think for a moment about the circumstances, decisions, and other factors that led to the time of your arrival. If you got there early/on time, then you probably woke up when the alarm rang, ate breakfast without any issues, had zero car problems on the way, etc. However, if you arrived late, there were probably a different set of factors that slowed your arrival. Maybe your alarm clock did not go off, breakfast was an adventure, or traffic slowed to a crawl. Whatever the story, a combination of planning and circumstances translated to your timeliness.

In Galatians 4:4-5, God tells us that Jesus' birth in Bethlehem happened right on time. Throughout all of history, God was planning and working together world events so that Jesus would be born at the exact right moment. He was not early and He was not late. He came right on time.

God's planning involved teaching us about His holy character, showing us our sinfulness, and reminding us our need for forgiveness. God did all of this through His Law that was given to us in 39 books that we call our Old Testament. After teaching humanity all these things over a period of about 1,500 years, it was finally time for Jesus to be born. Because Jesus was born at the right time, we can understand that the only way for sinful people like you and me to be forgiven by God is through what Jesus did for us by dying on the cross. Jesus was born just in time.

Questions

- What does it take to arrive "on time" to an event (like school, church, a party, etc.)?
- Why do you think God waited so many years before sending Jesus to be born? What does the Old Testament teach us about God that helps us understand what God has done for us through Jesus?

Advent Prayer

- Thank God for teaching us so much about who He is through the Old Testament.

Friday, December 5

God's Signature *by Mark Robinson*

Read: Isaiah 7:9-11

In life, many times we have to sign our name to different papers to verify that those papers belong to us. Kids, you write your name on your homework or a test to let your teacher know that it is your work. Adults, you sign your name on check or a contract to show your authorization for the commitment made therein.

In Isaiah 7:9-11, God "signs His name" to a promise that one day He will send His Son to live with His people. God's signature, was not just a few strokes of a pen, but something far greater. God would mark the promise to send His Son by promising to do something supernatural at His birth. Jesus's birth to His mother Mary was unique and special. Through these unique events God was guaranteeing that Jesus was definitely "from Him" and that His work was authorized to bring about forgiveness between us and God for the sins we have committed. I am so thankful that God did special things concerning the birth of Jesus so that you and I would know for sure that God was with Him. What's even more special is that Jesus nickname was Immanuel . . . which means that in Jesus, God is actually with us!

Questions

- What was special about Jesus life that lets us know that God was with Him?
- Do you ever feel alone? Is it encouraging for you to know that God is with us through Jesus?

Advent Prayers

- Take a moment and dwell on the reason for which we celebrate this day.
- Ask God to show you an opportunity to share the great news of Jesus today.

Saturday, December 6

The Bully Buster by Mark Robinson

Read: Isaiah 9:6-7

Do you know any bullies? People who take advantage of the weak and pick on the vulnerable? Most playgrounds have them. Some countries in the world are even ruled by one. People have always longed for a day when there would be no more bullies in the world. God promises in Isaiah 9:1-7 a time when the bullies will be defeated and peace will reign on the earth. According to the Bible, this peace will be accomplished by a most peculiar leader.

In Isaiah 9, we see that from the land of Galilee (a small rural province in northern Israel that often drew the first attack from invading armies because of its northern exposure) a leader would emerge that would bring glory and peace to God's people. This leader would be a bully-buster who would establish peace on the earth. Surprisingly, the leader who would quell the bullies would not be a bigger bully, but a child. What a contrast! This child, of course, was Jesus who would grow up and reveal Himself as Mighty God. 700 years after this prophecy was given (in Isaiah 9), Jesus would be born as a child, clothing Himself in humanity, to set in motion a plan to bring lasting peace to the earth.

What is amazing about reading this prophecy from Isaiah at Christmas time, though, is that the accomplishment of this prophecy has not yet fully taken place. The gifts of Isaiah 9 are still wrapped under the Christmas tree of Christ's second coming. When Jesus returns to the earth at a future time, He will put an end to war and He will rule the world in peace. One day war will cease, and the bullies will be stopped. The One who was born a Child will return in glorious triumph and shine His light throughout our world. That is one present I cannot wait to be unwrapped.

Questions:

- What is peace? When Isaiah 9 says that Jesus is the "Prince of Peace" what do you think it means?
- Have you ever thought about the fact that Jesus will come to the earth again one day? When He does, it will bring about everlasting peace for those who know Him!

Advent Prayers:

- Thank God for the promise of peace He has given for our future.
- Pray and ask God for this future peace to impact the way we live our lives and relate to one another today.

Sunday, December 7

Significance at Insignificant Places *by Jonathan Holmes*

Read: Micah 5:2–5 (prophecy) & Luke 2:1–6 (fulfillment)

Bethlehem in Judah hardly even carried the rank or status of a country town. It was located about five miles southwest of Jerusalem. It was so small that in both Joshua 15 and Nehemiah 11, it is overlooked in the listing of cities in Judah. The wording in Micah 5:2, “small among the clans of Judah,” gives the impression of a village with the least amount of worldly significance. To say the least, Bethlehem was an insignificant place, but some incredibly significant things happened in Bethlehem.

It was in Bethlehem that David was called by King Saul and eventually went on to fight the giant Goliath. Even though small, some significant historical events happened in Bethlehem. The most significant being the birthplace of our Savior Jesus Christ.

When God sent His Son as a helpless little infant, there was no giant throne waiting for Him or huge celebration that all of Judah would attend. Jesus came to earth silently and humbly. He came to earth like every other human being, as a tiny baby. He was entirely dependent on loving and caring parents. God took on flesh not to show us how God should act in this world, but to show us how a man can live in humble obedience to God. God often chooses insignificant people and events to bring about His great purposes. God loves to show His strength through human weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). It does not matter whether you are an artist, scholar, athlete or writer; He is going to use *you* if you are willing to be obedient to Him.

Even when you think you are so insignificant and could never be used by God, He will use you. God values you even when the world sees you as insignificant.

Question

- Why do you think God would choose a place of no significant value to allow Christ to be born in?

Advent Prayers

- Ask God to help use the talents and abilities that He has given you to have impact for His kingdom.
- Thank God for His faithfulness in your life to use you, and for sending Christ into the world.

Monday, December 8

Christmas Belonging *by Jonathan Holmes*

Read: Romans 6:16-23, 7:4, 14:7-8

Many people dream of total independence. They believe that they determine their own reality and belong entirely to themselves. The dreamers believe they are like birds flying in complete freedom because they aren't restricted by the path of others before them. With big eyes they spread their wings into the open air and dream of being totally independent from God and from man.

“But Jesus had a word for people who thought that way. He said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” But they responded, “We . . . have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” So Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:32-34).

The Bible gives no reality to fallen humans who are ultimately self-determining. There is no autonomy in the fallen world. We are governed by sin or governed by God. “You are slaves of the one whom you obey. . . . When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. . . . But now . . . you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God” (Romans 6:16, 20, 22).

Most of the time we are free to do what we want. But we are not free to want what we ought. For that we need a new power based on a divine purchase. The *power* is God's. Which is why the Bible says, “Thanks be to *God*, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart” (Romans 6:17). God is the one who may “grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:25-26)(Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die, John Piper 64-65).”

The divine purchase all began in the manger. It was in the manger that our freedom began. The God-man, Jesus Christ, came to purchase our freedom not to give us autonomy from God, but to give us a new life spent in relationship with our Creator and Savior.

Question

- In what way does sin seek to enslave us?
- In what way are we free in Christ?

Advent Prayer

- Thank God for giving you freedom in Him.

Tuesday, December 9

The Light of Jesus *by Jonathan Holmes*

Read: Philippians 2:5-11

Paul in his letter to the Philippians talks about the model of Jesus' attitude, humility and obedience. He speaks of how the incredible act of Jesus, the incarnation (His birth), is the greatest act ever seen in human history. Christ's humility will ultimately lead to His glory, higher than all others, and will be recognized by every person ever created. Jesus taking on human flesh is the beauty of the gospel and is the beauty of Christmas.

Every Christian is a new creation through Christ. We all have the ultimate goal of becoming more like Him in every part of who we are. That is why Christmas is such a celebration, because it commemorates the dawning of the world's light and a true understanding of how to live by following Jesus. It is in the Light of Jesus that we find our satisfaction and hope.

Questions

- In what way does Jesus "consider others more important than Himself?"
- What are some ways that you can follow Christ's example today?

Advent Prayers

- Pray that God will transform your perspective and attitude today.
- Pray for opportunities to be obedient and the clarity of mind to interpret when God is calling you to do something.

Wednesday, December 10

Batteries Not Included by Jonathan Holmes

Read: Ephesians 2:8-9

Picture yourself in a couple of weeks opening your presents and you come to your last one — and you realize that this is your favorite. This is the one you had asked for as you sat on Santa's lap a few weeks earlier.

After the tearing ceremony is over, you go to open the box and you realize that it says in the smallest unreadable writing, "Batteries not included." Your parents scramble to no avail and you are left with your favorite new dead toy.

Has this ever happened to you? Have you ever found yourself so excited for something, but then come to realize it's not complete? Like you opened a gift, but found out that not everything is included. I am afraid that you have had this same experience with the gift of salvation. That when you received salvation and you started to read Scripture, you came to the interpretation that the gift of salvation has written on the side, "Faith not included." That we are responsible for the means of our salvation that empowers salvation. Some believe that just like the toy needs batteries to enable it to be alive and moving, we too must supply the faith that enables salvation.

When reading this passage, you get to the end of v. 8 "this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God." and you have to ask, "What is the this referring to?" This is where a lot of people would emphatically say, "Grace!" but is that all? The word "this" is not referring to just grace, but rather it is referring to the concept of salvation, which is laid out in the preceding section (Ephesians 2:4-7). The basis of our salvation (grace) and the means of our salvation (faith) is all included in the gift of God.

If you see "Faith not included." on the side of the gift of salvation, then you believe in a works based salvation. "The gift of salvation is dead... it has no efficacy... it cannot do what it is intended to do, unless you add faith to it." How can you even consider this? Are you missing the second half of our passage Ephesians 2:9?

We must stop viewing the gift of salvation as not enough. We must stop seeing salvation as a free gift with an asterisk that says "faith not included." If faith is not given to us by God, then we are surely destined for failure. Sure for a while you might feel like you can buckle your bootstraps and muster up enough faith in Jesus Christ that you can be saved, but sooner or later you will see that you have tried to empower the gospel through your own false works (faith).

Just as the Disciples called Jesus teacher, but obviously did not understand the authority of His teaching (Mark 4:35-41); we too should not call Jesus Savior and not truly understand God's self-sufficiency in our salvation.

Check the side of the box. It can only say "Faith included!"

Question

- In what way is faith a gift from God as well?

Advent Prayers

- Thank God for providing everything for you.
- Praise the Father for being the gracious provider for your salvation in His Son.

Thursday, December 11

In the Beginning *by Mark Robinson*

Read: John 1:1-3

Look around you right now. Everything you see had a beginning. If you are in your living room at home, you might see a TV that was built in 2011, a newspaper that was printed last night, furniture that was constructed three decades ago . . . even the house you are sitting in was built in a certain year! Everything around you had a beginning - even you have a birthday!

In John 1, a very interesting time is described. John 1 describes the time known as “the beginning.” “The beginning” is the time before anything was created. If you could somehow journey back in time, to the beginning and look around, you would see . . . NOTHING. There were no trees, no houses, no people, and no animals in the beginning. They had not yet been created. Though there were no “things” in the beginning, there was Someone. John 1 tells us that in the beginning, the “Word” was there.

The “Word” in John 1 is describing Jesus. John calls Jesus the “Word” because Jesus brings to life for us who God is and what He is like. As words (like the ones on this page) help us understand the ideas created by their author, so Jesus helps us understand God. By looking at the way Jesus treated others, we can understand how God feels about us.

John 1 lets us know that Jesus existed long before His birth in Bethlehem! His birth did not begin His life (He was around at the beginning), but was simply His arrival in this world. He arrived at Bethlehem in order to help us understand God more fully. If Jesus had not been born, we would not know so many things about God. I am thankful that the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14)” so that we might know Him.

Question

- What are some things that you know about God by looking at the life of Jesus?

Advent Prayer

- Focus your eyes on the beauty of Jesus being born into the world so that we might know God!

Friday, December 12

Life and Light *by Mark Robinson*

Read: John 1:4-5

Have you ever noticed how often things break? You get a new toy for your birthday and it is your favorite - for a while. But after just a few weeks, an arm breaks off your action figure, a eye needs to be sewn back on the doll, or the batteries need replacing. Things in this world just don't last as long as we would like. This includes even people. All of us have experienced the sorrow of seeing a loved one die. In this world most everything is broken and dying.

But . . . at Christmas time, we celebrate life not death. At Christmas time, we celebrate light and not darkness. Why? Because of Jesus.

As we saw in John 1:4-5, Jesus came as a giver of life, not a dispenser of death. The Bible tells us that one day Jesus will return to the earth again and set up a kingdom that will never end, filled with people who are eternally alive, and inhabiting a world that is protected from decay. Why? Because "In Him was life." Additionally, Jesus was a light in this dark world that would never be "overcome." That means He would never break or be extinguished. We have a living and bright future because of Jesus.

So to all of us who are living in a dying and broken world, there is good news of great joy this (and every) Christmas season. Jesus birth brought Life and Light into the world, giving us something different than the rest of this world can offer. Faith in Christ is more than a decision to follow a new religion. . . it is a step out of your dying and broken destiny into an eternally living and luminous future.

Questions:

- How often does something break around your house?
- How does hearing that Jesus brings light and life encourage you?

Advent Prayer:

- Praise God for the life and light that Jesus has brought into the world!

Saturday, December 13

Rejection of the King *by Mark Robinson*

Read: John 1:11-13

Can you imagine a King being rejected by His own Kingdom? Believe it or not it happens . . . and it has happened to the best King that ever lived — the King of Kings, Jesus Christ. As you saw in John 1:11, when Jesus came into the world, He was not accepted by all of the people who lived in His country.

When Jesus was rejected by some, however, He did not pout or stop His mission. Instead, He made a very generous offer. He promised to be a loving and generous King to ANY who would receive Him! This meant that whether you lived in Africa, Asia, America, Australia, or Europe, if you received Jesus, He would give you eternal life and forgive your sins. Isn't that amazing?

All people on the earth have a choice. We can either reject Jesus (as some of His fellow countrymen did), or we can receive Him as Lord. How about you? What choice will you make?

Questions:

- What does it mean to reject something? What does it mean to receive it?
- Jesus came and offers a great gift to you - the gift of forgiveness and eternal life. We can either receive or reject these gifts. Have you received it? Are you rejecting Him?

Advent Prayer:

- If you are receiving the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ, express that faith to God in prayer right now.

Sunday, December 14

Can This House Hold Him? *by Mark Robinson*

Read: John 1:14, 18

The year was 959 BCE. The place was Jerusalem. 500 years had passed since God had called His people out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. King David had passed away and now the ultimate “wise guy,” King Solomon had ascended to the throne. By God’s design, Solomon completed a project his father David had planned for . . . the construction of a Temple for God in the capital city. Inside the Temple, the ark of the covenant would be placed and God’s presence would hover.

In the year 959, Solomon dedicated the Temple and the words he shared provide a powerful reminder for us at Christmas time. In 1 Kings 8:27, Solomon says of the Temple: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You; how much less this house that I have built!”

As Solomon looked at the impressive Temple the people of Israel had just constructed, one of the seven “wonders of the ancient world,” he marveled at the thought that God would inhabit such a common place.

Imagine that you were standing in front of the White House, the Taj Mahal, Buckingham Palace, or Notre Dame Cathedral. As you look at these impressive structures, despite all their grandeur, you probably would say something similar to Solomon. As beautiful as the best of our buildings are, it is impossible for mankind to create an adequate “home” for an eternal, omnipotent, omniscient God.

And yet at Christmas time, we celebrate God coming, not to a palace, but a stable! We celebrate God arriving not in a chariot but in the womb of a teenaged girl riding on a donkey.

We celebrate God not merely sending a telegram through the stars, but arriving in the flesh.

Listen to what John says in His Gospel, John 1:14, 18: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth . . . No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, He has made Him known.”

When we look at nativity sets around our houses this Christmas, we should wonder like Solomon did, “Did God indeed dwell upon the earth?” The answer to this question is an emphatic YES!

Jesus moved into our neighborhood. Jesus spoke in a way we could understand. Jesus demonstrated all Grace and Truth so that we might KNOW GOD. By living out a life in human flesh and having that life preserved for us in the Bible, we can understand what God’s character is like in three dimensions.

Do not let the wonder of the incarnation slip by you this year. God did indeed dwell on the earth, and we are blessed beyond measure as a result.

Questions:

- What is the most impressive building you have ever seen? Is the most impressive house you have ever seen an adequate home for God? Why or why not?
- Jesus chose to come and dwell in a stable (for His first few moments after His birth). Is this surprising to you? Why or why not?

Advent Prayer:

- Ask God to help you make this Christmas season about Him.

Monday, December 15

Santa and the Savior *by Mark Robinson*

Read: John 1:16

For my money, the most remarkable thing about Santa Claus is not his generosity, or his production capability, or his mode of transportation, or his appearance, or his schedule. What amazes me most about Santa is that he would actually come and visit me. He would take my requests, come to my house, slide down my chimney, eat my cookies, drink my milk, and give me presents. That is what is most amazing to me about Santa Claus. In my mind's eye, I can imagine someone so generous. I can imagine someone so inventive. But I cannot imagine THAT SOMEONE caring about me.

Now, switch from Santa to the Savior. For a moment, think about the historical account of Jesus, the Son of God coming into the world. What is it about this story that you find most amazing? For some of you, maybe you marvel at the humility it takes for God to take on the limitations of a human body. For others of you, maybe you are astounded that this same God would be born into a barn, instead of a castle. Still, for others, maybe you are awestruck by the fact that the Son of God would be born into a human family.

For my money, though, the most awesome thing about the birth of Jesus Christ is that He was born because He cared about me. He understood my separation from God because of my sin, so He came to my planet, lived my kind of life, endured my kind of temptation, felt my kind of pain, and died in my place, to give me the unbelievable yet believable gift of eternal life! That is what stops me in my tracks as I ponder the Christmas holiday.

In my mind's eye, I can imagine a God so generous. I can imagine a God so gracious. I can imagine a God so good. But I am awe struck that this God would apply those truths to specific sinful people . . . including me. Some have taken this truth, processed it through their "adult" minds of intellect and reason and concluded that such a Jesus cannot exist . . . however, the facts do not bear this out. Jesus is real. He is alive. He was born into this world, and He died to rescue us out of it! This Christmas as you ponder the awesome events of the baby in the manger, remind yourself of this fact . . . He came for you.

Questions:

- What part of the Christmas story do you find most amazing?
- Have you ever stopped to consider that Jesus was born to give YOU grace upon grace (John 1:16)?

Advent Prayer:

- Thank God that He is aware of your circumstance and situation. God sent Jesus so that He might have a relationship with you.

Tuesday, December 16

Opening Act *by Mark Robinson*

Read: Luke 1:5-25

All four Gospels begin the story of Jesus with the story of John the Baptist. Do you find that odd? Only one Gospel mentions the shepherds. One Gospel mentions the Magi. One Gospel tells Joseph's back story. One Gospel mentions Mary's story. No Gospels mention the Little Drummer Boy, yet EVERY Gospel mentions John the Baptist. This indicates to us that there is something important about John's life. But what is it?

The Gospel accounts all tell us the same story. John came in the "spirit of Elijah" as the "opening act" to Jesus of Nazareth. Before Jesus would take the stage and reconcile us to God, John came to help get us ready.

John was to showcase God's Truth in front of a large audience, while prepping the people for the Main Show. His message of repentance helped remind people of their need that Jesus would meet. The water baptism he offered, gave people a chance to pull out of their orbit around self-righteous religion, and seek new life in God. John talked about Messiah coming soon, recreating or reinforcing the true hope for the people of Israel. John did this job, and he did it very well. When Jesus finally "takes the stage" after His baptism in the Jordan River, God's people were more ready to respond based on the preparation they received from the opening act. As Luke 1:17 says, John was "to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

This Christmas, as you flip through the first few pages of each Gospel to get to the headlining event, don't just skip over the story of John the Baptist. God wanted every heart to prepare room for Messiah, so He sent John ahead to make those arrangements.

Questions

- If you are in a relationship with Christ today, no doubt you too had an opening act that God used in your life to prepare you for Jesus. God uses a variety of things/people/experiences to prepare us for Him. For the Israelites of the first century, John was the opening act . . . who did God use in your life to prepare the way for Jesus?
- Is there anyone in your life right now that God might want to use you as an "opening act" to help lead them to Christ?

Advent Prayer

- Pray for someone in your life that you would like to help lead to a relationship with Christ this Advent season.

Wednesday, December 17

Don't DVR Matthew *by Mark Robinson*

Read: Matthew 1:1-17

Watching TV on a DVR has conditioned me to bypass anything I see as “filler” to get to the main course. Sadly, too often I take this attitude with me when I read my Bible . . . a book that has NO FILLER. All of the Bible is inspired by God, therefore, I should not fast forward through any of it. Yet, too often I come to certain sections of God's word and want to double tap the right facing arrows, speeding up progress until the “main story” resumes. One such section of Scripture we are tempted to fast forward through is found in Matthew 1:1-17. I hope when you read this section earlier, you did not fast forward your way through this list. If you did, you would have missed some very interesting and spiritually important facts:

- Jesus is a direct descendant of Abraham. This means that Jesus would be the One through whom all the people of the earth would be blessed according to God's promise (Genesis 12:1-3)
- Jesus is a descendant of David, thus having a royal lineage. This also makes possible God's promise to David of his descendants sitting on Israel's throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16)
- 5 women's names appear in this genealogy (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheeba, and Mary). These women remind us of God's love of both men and women and His intention to use both extensively in His plans.

If you DVR your way through Matthew 1, you will miss some very important stuff. This Christmas, as you read the Christmas story, read all of it . . . and be blessed.

Questions

- Do you like to fast forward through commercials or parts of a show that you don't find personally interesting?
- What stands out to you most about the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1?

Advent Prayer

- Knowing that God makes good on His promises to His people, think of a promise that God has made to you (as His follower) and pray, thanking Him for His provision in your life.

Thursday, December 18

Christmas Recipe *by Mark Robinson*

Read: Luke 1:26-38

Today cooking shows are all the rage. An entire television station (the Food Network) shows programming all day to help us know how to make the perfect broccoli casserole. Cooking food is not nearly as interesting to me as eating it . . . but there are times it is important to understand what actually goes into making certain dishes. Let's just say (for instance) that someone has a peanut allergy. It would be imperative for that person to know if ANY peanuts were used in making the Pad Thai.

In Luke 1:26-38, God shows us what all went into making Jesus born on the earth. This is important because God is a holy God and the idea of a divine incarnation raises some serious questions.

- Was Jesus really God?
- Was Jesus really man?

In order to prepare the incarnation, Luke 1 tells us that several ingredients were necessary in certain order:

- **Mary.** Mary was an essential ingredient in this story. Some have tried to mythologize Mary into some sort of super hero, but that is not the biblical picture of Mary. The biblical picture of Mary highlights how normal she really was. She was so normal, she had sinned and disobeyed God in her life, and was in need of a Savior, just like the rest of the world. By being born of a woman (Mary), Jesus was clothing Himself in a fully human body.
- **The Holy Spirit.** The second necessary ingredient to the incarnation was the Spirit of God. The miraculous conception of Jesus happened because the Spirit of God was present and "overshadowed" Mary causing her to conceive. By this Jesus would not merely be human, but be the Son of God. This divine inspiration allowed Jesus to be human, but miss a sinful disposition. It allowed Jesus to be both Man AND God.
- **Mix in a dash of Joseph.** Joseph was Jesus' connection to the royal lineage of King David. This allowed legitimacy to Jesus' kingly reign, and foreshadowed His fulfillment as the King of Israel who would sit on David's throne forever (2 Samuel 7).

When you serve up all three of these ingredients, you have a God/Man who can save humanity from our sins and reconcile us to our Heavenly Father. Serving up the King of Kings is a delicate process theologically. That is why God broadcasts the details so we can enjoy its rich flavor.

All this points to the fact that Jesus is uniquely qualified from His birth to His death. These extraordinary events identify God's presence and invite us to "taste and see that the Lord is good."

Question:

- Who do you know who is 13 years old? Mary was about 14 when the angel came and announced to her that Jesus would be her son. How do you think you would have responded if this news came to you?

Advent Prayer:

- Thank God that His Word is true!

Friday, December 19

Leaping for Joy *by Jonathan Holmes*

Read: Isaiah 40:3 (prophecy) & Luke 1:39-45, 57-66 (fulfillment)

Elizabeth, a relative of Mary's, was past the natural pregnancy age and remained unable to have children. But six months earlier, Elizabeth found out she was pregnant as well. The baby in Elizabeth's womb was John the Baptist who was coming to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. As the women drew near to one another, the baby in Elizabeth's womb "leaped for joy" and she began to shower blessings upon Mary and the unborn Jesus. During his ministry years later, Jesus would say of Elizabeth's son that "among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist."

Although the conversation between these pregnant mothers was rather simple, and the actions of Elizabeth's unborn child were common to the behavior of any unborn child, the significance of this encounter was huge as the long-awaited birth of the coming Savior was already causing the world to stir with anticipation. John's sole purpose was to prepare the way for Christ. Although still an unborn child, his very first encounter with Jesus caused John to leap for joy.

As we prepare our hearts through the Advent Season, may we prepare them to leap for joy. In just a few weeks we celebrate the birth of our Savior and there is no greater reason to be filled with joy than a reminder of our Savior's first advent.

Question

- What is it about Jesus that brings joy to your heart?

Advent Prayers

- Spend some time praying for the Holy Spirit to move throughout our church.
- Pray that God will cause your heart to "leap for joy" as you await Jesus' return with restless anticipation.
- Ask God to lead you in preparing the way for His return and what that will look like.

Saturday, December 20

Mary Christmas Song *by Mark Robinson*

Read: Luke 1:46-55

What does it LOOK like for someone to worship God through song? Would they be singing loudly? Would they be quiet and reflective? Would their hands be in the air? Would they be kneeling on their knees?

The truth is, that even though we all have images in our head of what it looks like to “really worship,” outside appearances can be deceiving. It is totally possible to “look the part” on the outside, but actually be self-focused, not God focused on the inside. That is why God looks not at outward appearance alone, but at the heart. It is totally possible to be deep in worship in any one of the postures or volumes listed above. After all, it is what is going on inside us that best expresses our heart of worship.

In Luke 1:46-55, there is a passage that clearly depicts a person who is deeply engaged in worship. It is a song that was spoken by Mary to her cousin Elizabeth in response to all that God was doing in her life. This song includes within it a great example of worship:

- Mary begins by orienting her worship from the inside out. It is “her soul” that “magnifies the Lord.” Her body was probably in a posture of worship, and emotion filled her voice . . . but those were products of a heart that was intent on focusing on God and not herself. We begin worship when we lift God high, from the inside out.
- Mary also begins her worship by marveling at, and praising God for saving her life, and for involving her in His plans. She does not come to God with a haughty attitude, but stands back in awe at the notion that the God of the universe loves her that much. Early in a time of worship, we should reflect on this amazing fact as well . . . God has taken notice of us and uses us in His plans on the earth. May we never grow tired of hearing this wonderful truth!
- Mary continues by declaring that God has been at work to provide relief for His people, fulfilling promises from ages ago. Mary worshipped God who was making good on promises that were nearly 2,000 years old at the time she first sung . . . harkening all the way back to God’s promises to Abraham. When we worship, we can pray to God and trust Him to make good on all His ancient promises to His people as well that we still reap benefits from today. Promises to be with us no matter what. Promises to forgive us our sins based on what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross. Promises to one day come back to this earth and judge evil and re-establish paradise in a new heaven and new earth. We can worship God and praise Him based on the promises He has made to us through His Word.
- Mary’s song may appear spontaneous, but it is really populated with at least a dozen Old Testament references. Mary’s previous study of God’s Word provided the very vocabulary for her worship. We too study God’s Word to learn the language of God, and even more reasons for us to praise Him. Far more than an academic exercise, study of the Bible is a primer for worship.

Mary’s song is an often read passage at Christmas time for good reason. It is a wonderful, faithful response of worship from the heart of a person fully following God’s plan for her life.

May God's preservation of this song help each of us see an example of what it looks like to worship at Christmas time and throughout the year

Questions:

- What do you think it looks like to worship God?
- What can you learn from Mary's song about worshipping God?

Advent Prayer:

- Spend some time worshipping God in prayer based on the model of worship laid out by Mary in Luke 1:46-55.

Sunday, December 21

Best (Not Necessarily Easy) *by Mark Robinson*

Read: Matthew 1:18-25

Sometimes God's plan for our lives is not easy or comfortable. God wants us to tell the truth, even if telling the truth could get us in trouble. God wants us to talk to our friends and neighbors about Jesus, even if our friends and neighbors might make fun of us if we do. God wants us to obey our parents, even if doing so will mean that we will not get something that we want.

Though God's plan for our lives is not always EASY, it is always BEST. God knows what is best for us at all times and we can trust and obey Him, even when doing so seems hard. A great example of this is the story of Joseph in Matthew 1:18-25. It would have been easy for Joseph to walk away from Mary when he found out she was pregnant. His friends and family would have supported him if he had decided to leave Mary because of her scandalous pregnancy. Yet God persuaded Joseph through an angel to not leave Mary and to remain with her. Because Joseph obeyed, he ended up getting to be the earthly Father of Jesus Christ! What an amazing blessing. Though it was not easy, it was best.

Questions

- Is there any thing God wants you to do right now that is hard or uncomfortable?
- Is it difficult for you to remember that God's plans are always best for us? Why or why not?

Advent Prayer

- Pray and ask God for the strength and courage to trust Him even when it is hard to do so.

Monday, December 22

What Happens When the Answer is “Yes” *by Mark Robinson*

Read: Luke 1:57-66

Have you ever wanted something for a very long time, but never got it? Maybe you wanted a new toy, a new car, a new house, or a new job. Day after day you found your quiet moments spent thinking about the thing you did not have. Perhaps you spent a fair amount of time praying for God to give you this new thing or working hard to save the money to be able to buy it.

Did you ever get the thing you wanted? Sometimes we do, and sometimes we don't. Sometimes when we don't get the thing we wanted, we get angry with God. Many times, when we do get the thing we wanted, we simply enjoy the new thing (and forget about the God who gave it to us!)

In the Christmas story in the Bible, there are two people who wanted something for a very long time. Their names were Zechariah and Elisabeth. What they wanted, though, was not a thing . . . it was a person. Zechariah and Elisabeth had no children of their own, and for decades they had asked God to give them a child . . . but the answer was always “no.” Finally after years and years of waiting, God finally gave Zechariah and Elisabeth a baby . . . Jesus's cousin, John (who would grow up to be John the Baptist.)

Zechariah and Elisabeth finally had their baby in Luke 1:57-66. After the baby was born, Zechariah gave all of us an example to follow when God finally gives us what we have always wanted. Instead of forgetting about God when they finally got what they wanted, they praise God, making the birth of the child all about God and what He was doing instead of about them. This perspective is life changing for anyone who embraces it. Life is about giving God glory, not about what we have or what we can get.

Questions

- What is something that you have prayed for a long time?
- When something goes well for you, do you remember to thank God for His provision?

Advent Prayer

- Take a moment to praise God in prayer for what He has given you.

Tuesday, December 23

The “B Side” by Mark Robinson

Read: Luke 1:67-79

What is your favorite Christmas song? Christmas is truly a musical holiday. I love the “soundtrack” that plays in the background of December every year. Whether you are in church, driving in the car, or even shopping at the local mall, songs of our Savior fill the air from Thanksgiving to New Year’s.

We should not be surprised that we sing a lot at Christmas time. On the very first Christmas when Jesus was born, many songs were sung. Mary sang her “Magnificat” and the Angels serenaded the shepherds.

As you look at the albums first recorded around the birth of Christ, however, you will notice that both famous AND more obscure songs were recorded around the time of the manger. Right after Mary’s hit song, Zechariah records what some may see as the “B side” to her 45. You may have skipped this track in the past, but today, I want you to “press play” and read its beautiful lyrics found in Luke 1:67-79.

After waiting a lifetime for the joy of fatherhood, it is so striking that Zechariah spends most of the time at his son’s birth singing about Jesus, not John (his son). As we saw in yesterday’s post, this shows that Zechariah “got it” . . . he understood that the real joy in his AND John’s life would be their connection to Jesus.

At the end of the song, is one of the most poetic and beautiful statements about the work of Jesus in all of Scripture. “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.”

I am so thankful that in Christ we have a hope that one day all death will be replaced with life eternal, and all darkness will be illuminated with His light. This is the reason Zechariah sings . . . and the reason we sing as well.

Question

- What is your favorite Christmas song? Why is it your favorite?

Advent Prayer

- We have a great hope in Jesus. Thank God for the hope we have, even in the face of death and circumstantial uncertainty.

Wednesday, December 24

A Simple Painting *by Mark Robinson*

Read: Luke 2:1-7

Several years ago I was in Paris, the city of lights. I was blown away by the beauty of that city. In Paris there are many incredible art museums that contain priceless works of art, but truth be told, Paris itself is a work of art. From the towering steel of the Eiffel Tower to the elegant beauty of winding streets lined with sidewalk cafes and guarded by gargoyles, this is one amazing city. In this city that showcases the arts, there is one portrait that gets all the press. There is one painting that people always remember – one portrait people are lining up to see. Deep in the center of the most famous art museum in the world, sits the small portrait of a half-smiling, plain-looking woman. Above all the larger than life sculptures, all the Egyptian treasures and impressionist paintings, the Mona Lisa has captured the attention of all the world like no other work of art in a city of artists. What is it about this painting that makes it so interesting?

What I believe makes the Mona Lisa special is not its famous subject, or its bright colors, or its grandiose size. The brilliance of the Mona Lisa is in the small details. The slight smile. The inviting face. The relatability of painting an ordinary person in a day when only saints, gods, and martyrs were painted. These common elements are what make the Mona Lisa special. This painting is a beautiful portrait painted in plain strokes by a master artist.

You know what? When I think about the life we all live in relationship with God, I think of the Mona Lisa. Many of us would love to see God work in our lives the same way He did in New Testament times. We long to see the mighty work of God, point to it, and proclaim, “There He is! I know God is real because I see Him at work in the raising of the dead man. . . in restoring strength to the paralytic . . . in giving sight back to the blind.” We long to see God work in the grandiose, and somewhere along the way, we have convinced ourselves that it is only in such circumstances that God is actually at work. If that is your perspective, then you need to keep reading. God is not just at work in the grandiose. In fact, God has always been at work in the simple things of life. God even worked through the commonplace in the New Testament.

Take the book of Luke for instance. As you read the first two chapters of Luke which highlight the Christmas story, what do you see? As I read the first two chapters of Luke, I see God mightily at work . . . through the common strokes of life. I see God at work in the timing of Zechariah’s work schedule for entering the temple. I see God at work in the birth of two children and the selection of those parents. I see God at work in the declaring that a census be taken to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. I see God at work in the way a mother relates to her child. I see God at work in the very common things of life like jobs and family and political decrees. And in the process, God is painting a Mona Lisa style masterpiece of His grace for us to see.

Take a few minutes and reread the first two chapters of Luke, then ask yourself the question, “Where is God at work in my life?” We may be looking for the majestic and miss God at work in the mundane. Who do you think had you born to the parents that you have? Who do you think was at work to bring you to the college you attended? Who was it that had you grow up in the town you grew up in? Who is it that has you working at the job you are at right now? God did! And God does! He is at work in the details of our lives to sovereignly guide us to where He

wants us to be. Stop for a few moments and reflect on the fact that God has been, is currently, and always will be at work in our lives . . . not just in the “big things,” but through the details of our lives. And know this . . . what God has led you to, He will see you through. Begin to see your life as a beautiful portrait of His grace painted in plain strokes by the Master Artist.

Questions

- What are some of the things God did to make the first Christmas story happen?
- What is one instance your life (or in the life of someone you know) where you have seen God’s hand at work?

Advent Prayer

- If you have a personal relationship with Christ think of how God worked in the “small strokes” of the circumstances of your life to bring you into a relationship with Him. Spend time praising God for how He has worked in your life.
- If you have not yet placed your faith in Christ, you can do so right now by expressing faith in Jesus work on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins.

Thursday, December 25

Who Invited These Guys? *by Jonathan Holmes*

Read: Micah 5:2 (prophecy) & Luke 2:8-20 (fulfillment)

As the census had drawn Mary and Joseph to the town of Bethlehem, the time came for the birth of Jesus. Wouldn't you know that the angels showed up again, but this time, to some shepherds. They were told that something pretty special had just occurred and that they needed to go check it out; so they wasted no time and headed to see Jesus.

Out of all the people in the world, why on earth do you think the angels appeared to the shepherds? They were at the bottom of the social ladder. They spent all their time outside with a bunch of dirty sheep, and to be quite honest, it really makes no sense at all that these men would be invited to see the Savior of the world. Or does it? Jesus did not step onto this earth to cater only to the rich and prestigious, but also to the poor and neglected. In all actuality, the mere fact that they were just "filthy shepherds" is why their inclusion in the celebration of Jesus' birth makes *perfect* sense. For rich and poor alike, God put on flesh for those who needed Him most ... you, me, everyone.

When we begin to look past the outward appearance of others and into the hearts of people, we may finally stop overlooking those in need of Jesus.

Questions

- Who is someone you know who is far from Christ? How does the story of the shepherds remind us that Jesus came for ALL, even those who seem far from Him?
- What can you do this week to help introduce Christ to someone currently far from God?

Advent Prayers

- Ask God to reveal to you a specific person you have overlooked because he/she is different.
- When was the last time you deeply thanked the Lord for coming into this world for us? Take this time to just go before the Lord and show your gratitude for His sacrifice.
- Pray that this Christmas would be different in the fact that all the presents or family drama would not distract you. Keep your focus on Him this season!

Friday, December 26

Gifts by Mark Robinson

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

No doubt, many of you have gone shopping this Christmas season. As you shop, you are guided by a list of names of people you want to buy a gift for. On this list are friends and family that you genuinely want to bless this holiday season. The problem, however, is what kind of a gift do you give them? We would like to think that the gifts we give are guided by our love and/or a principle of reciprocity. However, there is a problem with each of these principles.

First of all, though we might like to think that our giving is guided by our love, our love is usually limited by our budget. After all, we typically have more love in our heart than money in our bank accounts. Therefore, even if we have a “million dollar” love for our family members, we will probably get them a \$30 shirt from TJ Maxx.

Second, there is an issue with reciprocity. By reciprocity, I mean that you try to give a gift back to someone of equal value to what they have given to you in the past. This principle, however, is also flawed. I can never pay back my parents (for instance) for all they have done for me. No sweater (I don't care which logo is on it) can ever equal sitting through little league games in 40 degree weather or caring for me when I was sick or providing love, food, and shelter for me throughout my growing up days. I simply will never be able to pay back what has been given to me — I have just received so much.

I was thinking about all this and it reminded me of a deep spiritual truth that impacts my understanding of God's love for me and my response to that love towards Him.

First of all, though our budget always constrains our ability to give, it never constrains God. God is the only One anywhere who has no budget. Even Bill Gates and Warren Buffett have their limits, but God does not. He has everything at His disposal, so He never tires at ways to demonstrate His love for us. The obvious “big gift” that God gives us each day (including Christmas) is the gift of salvation through His Son Jesus Christ. As Romans 5:8 says, “God demonstrates His own love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” The God who has everything gave His very life so that we might live and know that He loves us. Even beyond that big gift, however, God continues to give to us without a budget. The beauty of nature, the spiritual encouragement of the Body of Christ, tasty food to nourish our bodies, etc. are all evidences of God's gifts to us. He never tires or grows weary in giving to His children. He has all the resources to match the scope of His love for us.

Second, I cannot practice the principle of reciprocity with God. There is no “sacrifice” that I can make in this life that is of equal value to the gifts God has given to me. No “I'll go serve you in Africa” claim could ever be the same as all that God has given to me. We cannot pay back to God what He has given us — for we simply have been given too much.

Given these truths, what are we to do? Well, when it comes to understanding how much God loves us, we should stand in awe of the gifts He continues to send our way. What great demonstrations of His budget-less love! Stop right now and thank Him for His indescribable gifts. Second, stop trying to pay God back for His gifts to us, for you can never give enough.

This does not mean that we do not serve Him or worship Him or love Him or give back to Him. We absolutely do that. Just as I still bought presents for family and friends yesterday as reminders of my love for them, we still give to the Lord out of our love for Him . . . we just don't do it to settle a score. This frees us up and purifies our motives in responding to His gifts!

As you shop every Christmas season, may the gifts you purchase remind you of the gifts we have received from Him that we can never repay.

Matthew 2:1-12, tell us of the wise men visiting Jesus and giving Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These three gifts were symbols of Jesus's future as both king and martyr. These men responded to the announcement of Jesus's birth by worshipping Him and reorganizing their time (they took a trip), talent (they were expert star gazers) and treasure (the three gifts delivered). We give back to God from the same three categories, not to pay Him back, but (like the wise men) to simply worship the King.

Questions

- What gift would you give to your friends/family members if you did not have a budget?
- The wise men worshipped Jesus through giving of their time, talent, and treasure. What are some ways you can give something back to God this Christmas season?

Advent Prayers

- Spend time thanking God for the tremendous gift of eternal life given to us in Jesus Christ.
- Out of gratitude and love, pray and lay your life before God, asking what He wants you to do as you respond to His grace in your life.

Saturday, December 27

A Sentimental Journey *by Mark Robinson*

Read: Matthew 2:13-18

Are you sentimental about locations? Do you have a special restaurant you go to with your spouse or sweetheart to celebrate anniversaries or key events? Do you have a special location that embodies “family vacation” in your mind? Most people do.

One such location for the Robinson family is Branson, Missouri. Since I was a little boy my family has gone to the Ozarks for vacation. I have so many memories playing mini golf, riding water slides, watching country shows, etc. in this hillbilly holiday.

Because of those memories, I am excited that recently my family has resumed gathering in Branson for long weekends together. It has been great to introduce my son to Silver Dollar City and Branson shows while in the company of my extended family.

You probably have places of significance in your family as well. You know what? So does God. That’s right, God has some special places that are full of memories with His people. One such place is Egypt. It seems God’s people visit there on occasion.

Of course, the most famous visit to Egypt from God’s people began in the time of Joseph (Genesis Joseph, not Jesus’ adoptive father) during a great famine in Palestine. God protected His people from starvation in the shadow of the Sphinx, and allowed them to grow in great numbers in this foreign land. After a number of years, however, Egypt began dealing harshly with the people of Israel, and God would raise up His servant Moses to lead God’s people out of bondage and into the promised land.

Because of that memory, God wanted to go back to that prominent place with His people in the time just after the birth of Christ. While Jesus was just a young child, the wicked King Herod wanted to kill Jesus because he was afraid of what Jesus would do to his earthly influence. In order to protect His Child from being starved out of life in Palestine, God sent Jesus to Egypt with Joseph and Mary to wait until it was safe to return (the story you read earlier today in Matthew 2:13-18).

After it was safe to return, God called forth the Redeemer, Jesus, out of Egypt and back to Palestine. Like Moses before Him, Jesus would be God’s leader to usher His people to the promised land. By going back to Egypt, God tied Jesus in as a type of Moses. However, Jesus is much better than Moses.

- Moses would be used by God to lead the people through the Red Sea, but his disobedience prevented him from ushering God’s people all the way to the Promised Land. Jesus, however, lived a perfect life, and completed the task of saving His people!
- Moses was the vessel chosen by God to deliver His Law to His people, but the Law only condemned, it could not save. Jesus, however, was the Living Word providing a Living Way for God’s people to not just hear about holiness but experience it!
- Moses would die in the wilderness still awaiting the promises. Jesus rose from the dead, a full heir of heaven’s blessing.

By taking Jesus back to Egypt God was using a bit of historical sentiment to show us the amazing truth that Jesus is better than even Moses. More than a religious figure, Jesus was the Savior of the world.

Questions

- Do you have a place that is sentimental for your family?
- Do you see any special significance in God taking Jesus back to Egypt in Matthew 2?

Advent Prayer

- Pray and thank God for how Jesus is superior to ALL others, even other famous people from the Bible.

Sunday, December 28

Small Town *by Mark Robinson*

Read: Matthew 2:19-23

According to wikipedia, there are 359 towns in the state of Oklahoma that registered on the census of 2010. At the top of the list are Oklahoma City (nearly 1.6 million), Tulsa (nearly 400,000) and my hometown of Norman (over 110,000). Most anyone who is familiar with the state of Oklahoma would have at least HEARD of these three cities. However, as you move down the list of Oklahoma towns, you quickly digress into places almost no one (except maybe a storm chaser like Val Castor) has ever heard of.

Quick, tell me something about each of these towns: Ringwood, Achille, Tryon, Depew, or Stonewall. Anyone? Anything? I didn't think so. Each of these towns range in size between 497-470 people.

At this point, you have to be wondering if I simply have way too much time on my hands. In the midst of a busy holiday season, why am I searching through 2010 census data? The reason is this: Jesus grew up in the town of Nazareth . . . population – 480.

Can you imagine that? The Savior of the world grew up in a one dog town (and that dog was old and mean.) The One who would explain God in terms we could all understand, spent his adolescent years in an area so small that only a few families would make up the entire community.

Mary and Joseph were residents of the town of Nazareth before Jesus was ever born, but after His birth, they lived life apparently moving from place to place (Bethlehem to Egypt). However, by the time Jesus was a preschooler, God led them to move back to Israel, and through some sovereign direction, led them back to Nazareth in the region of Galilee. We read this story today in Matthew 2:19-23.

It would have been a weighty task to raise the Messiah. No doubt Joseph and Mary wanted the absolute best for their son, and might have assumed they needed to live nearer the capital city of Jerusalem for their child to assume His throne. However, God had other plans. God used the political climate of the day, and direction through a dream, to guide Joseph, Mary, and Jesus back to Nazareth.

Matthew mentions that Jesus' hometown being Nazareth was "spoken by the prophets," but this can be a confusing statement. There is no direct Old Testament prophecy that mentions the town of Nazareth. So how can Matthew see Jesus being called a "Nazarene" being a fulfillment of prophecy?

The answer is quite surprising. Though Jesus is never prophesied to be from Nazareth, many prophets indicated that Jesus would be despised and rejected. The reputation of the small town of Nazareth was so poor that being called a "Nazarene" was an insult of sorts, a demonstration of His humble nature. Instead of coming to the world with privilege, educated degrees, and earthly titles, Jesus came as a humble carpenter's son from a town of less than 500. Instead of being from the big city, He was from Ringwood, or Depew, or Stonewall.

The Son of God who sits sovereign over space and time could have been born anywhere at anytime in history. He could have been raised in any environment and still been human. In His wisdom, Jesus chose to be raised in a town of 480 people. It was not an accident, God made it happen. This fact simply further drives home the point that Jesus came for all men and women.

Questions

- What is the smallest town you have ever visited? Look up the population of that town on the internet.
- Does it surprise you that Jesus grew up in such a small town? What does this decision tell you about His life and ministry?

Advent Prayer

- Ask God for a renewed sense of humility this week

Monday, December 29

The Rest of the Story *by Mark Robinson*

Read: Luke 2:22-35

4 score, and several days ago, Daniel Day Lewis became Abraham Lincoln for Steven Spielberg's epic movie about the sixteenth President. Obviously I have never heard the real President Lincoln speak before, but watching DDL relate to Civil War life felt amazingly real and true to life.

Watching any movie about President Lincoln is an interesting experience for someone who knows how his life ended. You watch his successes, and you are sad his life is cut short, preventing even more triumphs. You watch his enemies, and you wonder if they will ultimately contribute to his demise.

Reading the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus has similar effect. Knowing Jesus is crucified near the end of the story, we take the opposition He faces early in His life VERY seriously.

As I read Luke 2:22-35, however, I am also reminded that my experience of knowing that the cross cast a shadow over Jesus' entire life was not unique to my 21st century perspective. The reality is that Joseph and Mary were familiar with Jesus' fate from very early in His life.

According to Jewish Law, the mother of a male child was considered unclean for about 40 days after the birth of the baby. At the end of this time, the family would present an offering to God for cleansing. A wealthy family would present a lamb and a poorer family would present two turtle doves (no mention of a partridge in a pear tree). Mary and Joseph's offering of birds indicates their meager financial means.

When they showed up at the Temple, a man named Simeon is there and is prompted by the Spirit of God that Jesus is the Messiah. Simeon picks up the infant Jesus and confirms His identity as the Christ. This would have merely been a CONFIRMATION to Mary and Joseph about their child. However, as Simeon continued to talk, the Holy Spirit speaks forth an important CLARIFICATION about the content of Jesus' life that would have shaken His earthly parents.

It is totally possible that Mary and Joseph assumed (as many in Israel did at that time) that the victory Messiah would win would be largely political. However, just 40 days into His earthly life, Simeon informs His parents that Jesus life would experience significant conflict, and that Mary, especially, would experience sorrow in her soul regarding how Jesus would be treated.

Simeon's prophecy would have given Mary and Joseph full knowledge of the difficult future Jesus would have. Knowing this, I wonder how they felt watching their child grow up. They had to wait with great anticipation wondering how Jesus could experience both such a triumph AND such sorrow.

History would reveal that the Messiah's mission would be layered. His first coming would win an epic SPIRITUAL victory, with His death on the cross (that no doubt was soul piercing for Mary to witness) securing forgiveness and eternal life for God's people. Jesus also promised a second coming when the full extent of His epic PHYSICAL/POLITICAL triumph would be revealed.

As we celebrate Christmas, we are blessed by the events that brought sorrow to Mary, but spiritual life to all who embrace Christ by faith. We cannot reflect on the life of Jesus without pondering His death on the cross and its significance to our lives — making payment for the penalty of all our sins.

At Christmas, we also can celebrate the promised future when Christ will return and complete His Messianic destiny . . . ruling the earth from David's throne in a Kingdom that knows no end, free from sin's destructive forces.

When Simeon saw Jesus in the Temple, He saw both the joy and the pain that Messiah would face. When we look at the manger, do we see the same thing?

Questions

- Have you ever thought about what it would have been like to be the parents to Jesus Christ?
- What about the first coming of Jesus (on Christmas) encourages you? What are you looking forward to about the future return of Jesus to the earth?

Advent Prayer

- Ask God to help you feel the joy of adoring Jesus (not only for Advent) but for the rest of your life.

Tuesday, December 30

The King Returns *by Jonathan Holmes*

Read: Acts 1:1-11; Revelation 22:7

We have spent the past 5 weeks focusing on and adoring Jesus as a part of the Advent Season. Primarily we focused on Jesus' first advent in which He was born of the Virgin Mary in the town of Bethlehem, but we sometimes forget that the Advent Season is about TWO advents. The one we tend to forget about is that upon Him ascending into heaven He promises to return to make all things new.

In Revelations 22:7 John's prophecy tells us that not only is Jesus coming, it says "I am coming soon." Are you living your life like Jesus is coming? Or are you living a life that believes Jesus is coming *soon*?

As Christians we are called to live in the light of Jesus' promised return. No matter if He returns today or in the next generation our lives are testimonies to the inevitable return of Jesus.

Question

- Are you living a life that believes Jesus is coming *soon*?

Advent Prayers

- Ask God to increase your faith in the promises that have not yet been fulfilled.
- Thank Him for allowing you to celebrate Jesus this Advent season.

Wednesday, December 31

Reflecting by Jonathan Holmes

This is the last day of the year! Where did it go? As we celebrate bringing in the new year, let's take a moment and reflect back on a busy year!

- What was the greatest thing that happened this year?
- What was the hardest thing that happened this year?
- Who is someone that made a big impact on you this year?

Take a moment and reflect back on the entire Advent season. Whether you read one or thirty-one, spend time reflecting on what you learned. If you wrote in a journal or took notes on your phone then read through some of those.

- What is one thing that you learned through celebrating the Advent season?
- What is one passage of Scripture that made an impact? Read that passage again.

As you reflect look at ways that God has provided for you in this past year. Thank God for providing in all of these ways. Reflection is important for us, because it allows us to understand and see clearly how God is working in and through us. Søren Kierkegaard said, *"Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards."* We understand life by reflecting on the past, but since we always live moving forward let's talk about the unique opportunity we have today to set some goals or resolutions for the start of the new year tomorrow.

Here are a few ideas to help you set a New Years' Resolution that stick:

- Keeping Life Simple - Instead of starting something new and fresh, try a resolution to quit or spend less time doing something.
- Make an Impact - Choose to do something that will make an impact for the Kingdom of God. Consider mentoring someone this next year. Consider reaching out to someone as a friend. Consider inviting someone new to church on a weekly basis.
- Let Others In - Make a resolution with someone. You wouldn't even believe how much easier it is for your resolution to stick around longer, if you let someone in to do it with you or simply to keep you accountable.

Today is a unique day as we both reflect on the past and dream of the future. Celebrate today what God has done and rejoice knowing that He is going to do even more in and through you this next year!

Advent Prayers

- Confess ALL of your sins to God. Seriously lay it ALL out there.
- Your sin doesn't define you, your relationship with God does.
- Now walk away knowing that because God has forgiven you of ALL of them you can live for Him.



Advent

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