



God with us

DAILY DEVOTIONAL
CHRISTMAS 2022

by Mark Robinson



God with us

Preview

Imagine you were to get a phone call this afternoon from someone who is really famous (in a circle or industry you care about). Could be a politician, a famous sports star, an author, an actor, or a titan of industry. This is a hypothetical, so you get to decide which famous person is calling you. Upon answering the call, they inform you that they are coming to YOUR HOUSE to celebrate Christmas with YOU! Now that would be quite a phone call ... wouldn't it?

If you got that call, what would you do next?

Well if you are like me, you first would want to make sure that the phone call was ACTUALLY from the famous person and not from an impersonator. You might check the caller ID, request written documentation, evaluate whether their voice sounded like the person they said they were, etc. I'd be looking for signs to determine if this person really was who they said they were.

After seeking signs of verification as to their identity, I would next begin to wonder what it was going to be like to have THAT PERSON in MY HOME. What would we talk about? What would we serve for dinner? Should I get them a gift? Will they bring me one?

These are just some of the things we might do if a famous person announced they were coming over to spend the holidays. Truth is, though, for most of us, we will not get that call this Christmas season. However, I want to let you know something even more amazing to light up your holidays: God came to your house. That's right ... the One who created all things has come to us at Christmas.

Now hearing that statement, you might ask a couple of questions. First, how do I KNOW that God really came to earth on that first Christmas? Second, if God really did come at the first Christmas, what was it like? What did He do? What can we learn from it?

Well, this Christmas at Wildwood Community Church, we will be exploring one of Jesus' nicknames - Immanuel. This Hebrew word (translated "God with us") is attributed to Jesus in both Matthew 1:22-23 and Isaiah 7:14. Christmas is the story of God coming to be with us!

But how do we know that Jesus is really God? Over the next couple of weeks we will be looking at evidence to answer this question in daily devotionals (from November 27-December 11). These 15 daily readings will explore 15 Scripture passages revealing that Jesus is indeed God. These 15 passages are all rooted in the Gospel of John. John (one of Jesus' close earthly friends and followers) wrote His Gospel "so that you may believe

that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.” (John 20:31) John organized His Gospel around 7 miraculous signs, 7 revelatory statements, and one exclamation point (the resurrection) that all made the case of Jesus’ divine identity. We will explore these 15 passages of John’s Gospel from November 27-December 11.

And ... what is it like for God to be with us? We will explore this in 14 daily readings (from December 12-25). We will explore many excerpts from the historical account of the first Christmas to see what the experience of “God with us” is trying to teach us about what it is like to live in relationship (and in close proximity) to Almighty God.

This daily devotional is intended to help you understand more of what it means to say “Immanuel” this holiday season. Join us on this journey! Oh, and make plans to be with us on each of the Sundays at Wildwood between November 27 and January 1, as we will have a sermon series exploring these same concepts.

In addition, Wildwood has produced a [Spotify](#) and [Apple Music](#) playlist of some of our favorite Christmas songs to help serve as the soundtrack for our season. We also have a number of different ways for us to serve our community together this time of year. Find out more about all these opportunities on our website - wildwoodchurch.org/christmas.

We look forward to worshipping with you and your family this Christmas season!

In Christ,

Pastor Mark Robinson

November 27:

Jesus is God: Water to Wine

Read: John 2:1-11

The year was 1957. IBM had created a device which would change the world as we know it. This device was large by today's standards, taking up several cabinets of space. This machine was also expensive, costing nearly \$80,000 to purchase. What is this large and expensive machine that changed the world? An electronic calculator.

Now, I realize that we do not normally consider the calculator to be a world changing device, but that is because we have grown up with it. We have grown accustomed to it, and thus we take it for granted. If you were born prior to 1957, all math was done in your head. If you are like me, you grew up in elementary school learning to add, subtract, multiply, or divide by hand. And if you are like me, math became difficult for you when dealing with numbers that outstretched your number of fingers and toes! Because of my difficulty with math, I welcomed the day I got to use my first calculator to aid in solving problems in school. It was as liberating as it was accurate. It also opened new vistas into deeper fields of mathematics (things like trigonometry and calculus) which would be nearly impossible without the use of a machine. The machine IBM invented in 1957 did not invent math ... it was based on the same numbers and truths as long division ... but it did reinvent how higher math was computed, placing a powerful tool in the hands of people everywhere.

In John 2:1-11, Jesus performed a miracle filled with symbolism to reveal to His followers that He was creating a New Covenant by which mankind would relate to God. For centuries, God's people had related to Him under the Old Covenant based on the Old Testament Law which was filled with the Ten Commandments, ritual cleansing, and animal sacrifices. While the miracle of John 2 may look like Jesus was simply providing some good wine to a few thirsty guests at a wedding feast, a closer look reveals that Jesus was actually highlighting a significant truth about His identity and the gift He was offering. By taking the water from the Old Covenant ceremonial jars and turning it into something new (and better), Jesus was actually foreshadowing the fact that He was creating a New Covenant that would change the spiritual lives of all who would embrace it. This New Covenant would be very expensive, costing Jesus His blood. This New Covenant that Jesus was establishing was what we know of as Christianity.

Now, I realize that as Americans, we can take for granted the amazing revolution that life in Christ creates, but that is because many of us have grown up with it. If you lived your life before the time of Christ, all spiritual interaction with God was based on strict adherence to the Law. If you are like me, you find God's Law beautiful but too lofty to adhere to 100 percent of the time. Because of our inability to keep God's Law, we should welcome the amazing extension of God's grace to us in Christ. It is as liberating

as it is holy. It provides forgiveness for our sins once and for all in Christ and opens new vistas for our spiritual lives including mission, purpose, a close and personal relationship with God, and gracious provision to actually live out the Christian life. The New Covenant did not invent holiness—it was based on the same righteousness prescribed in the Law—but it did reinvent how our spiritual lives would be lived out, placing the powerful life of Christ in the hearts of people everywhere.

Like wine out of water, Jesus has saved the best for last. Take a moment and praise God for creating us as people who are arriving at the feast of history at this time. Like wedding guests in Cana, we can enjoy the blessing that Jesus creates out of an old pot.

Turning water to wine at the wedding in Cana was the first “sign” of Jesus’ divinity referenced by John. Only God Himself could initiate this new covenant. This miracle, and its symbolic significance pointed to Jesus’ true identity.

November 28:

Jesus is God: Healing of Official's Son

Read: John 4:46-54

Every year in elementary school, there was one event that attempted to separate the mental men from the boys ... one event that drew the attention of students and parents everywhere. What was this event? The Science Fair. Every year, I would make a project ... and I would lose every time.

While some students were discovering the theory of relativity, I was relatively impressed with my project, "Which carpet cleaner works best: Scotch or Resolve?!" While some students were putting together computer "mother boards" to power robots that could make dinner for you, my mother was impressed by my card board box covered with hand drawn images that represented video games I "designed," complete with a tape recording of me making the related sounds these games would produce.

Every year, as the projects would be displayed at the fair, and as all the ribbons would go to my friends, I would begin to rationalize my performance. "My friends must not have designed their own projects," I would muse. "Their fathers who are research scientists must have worked on their projects for them." Of course, in my reasoning, the answer could not have been that they were just better at science than me. There must be some other explanation!

As these friends have gone on in life to become engineers, research scientists, and medical doctors, however, I am forced to realize that my original assessment was not accurate. Though I had the right information (their projects were better than mine), I was drawing the wrong conclusions (they must have cheated).

I was thinking about this reality as I read John 4:43-5:15 and pondered the reactions people had to the miracles of Christ. Compared to the religious leaders of Jesus' day, His actions and methodology stood out in their power and authority. Though people all saw these same awesome acts of Jesus Christ, they all did not respond in the same way. When the royal official from Capernaum was told by Christ that his son would be healed, the official "took Jesus at His word and departed." In the next few verses we find out that the royal official and all his household believed in Jesus Christ. Later in the passage, though, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, after seeing Jesus heal a lifelong paralytic, assumed that Jesus was cheating the Father's Sabbath. The royal official in Capernaum and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem both got right information about Jesus Christ, but they each had different responses. Though the Jewish leaders had correct information, they made the wrong conclusion.

Jesus Christ is the Son of God (as these miraculous signs reveal), and His actions are always impressive, and they are always right; however, sometimes, we find ourselves not reacting rightly to the revelation of Jesus that we receive. Sometimes when things don't work out the way we had hoped, we might be tempted to draw the incorrect conclusion that Jesus is not in control or that He does not care about us in our time of need. While it may be true that things are not working out according to our plan, it is wrong to ever conclude that Jesus is anything less than our holy and loving God.

The spiritual life is not simply a life of observation; it is a life of our response to God's revelation. We should follow the example of the royal official and always take Jesus at His word and believe.

The healing of the official's son is the second "sign" that John records revealing that Jesus is God.

November 29:

Jesus is God: Healing the Lame Man

Read: John 5:1-18

In 1871, a wide spot in the road just outside of Washington DC got a new name - "Bethesda, Maryland." Up to that time, this little rural community was called "Darcy's Store" because the only store in the "town" was run by (you guessed it) a man named Darcy! In 1871, though, the postmaster changed the name of the town to Bethesda, naming it after a Presbyterian Church in that community by the same name. This community would have stayed small and off the radar were it not for two massive government buildings constructed in its city limits during the 1940's: The National Institute of Health (NIH) and the Bethesda Naval Hospital. These two places of health and healing are what the town of Bethesda are currently known for ... and the name is quite fitting!

The name "Bethesda" actually comes from a location in Jerusalem. In Hebrew, Bethesda means "House of Kindness" and in the first century (while Jesus was walking the streets of Jerusalem) there was a particular pool named Bethesda where sick people would gather and wait for a "supernatural stirring of the waters" believing that the first one to enter the waters after such a stirring would be healed of their infirmity. In John 5:1-18, the account of a particular lame man is told who had been sitting by the waters of the Pool of Bethesda for 38 years waiting for his healing. 38 years!

When Jesus finds this man, He asks him a peculiar question, "Do you want to be healed?" At first glance, this seems like a question only Captain Obvious would ask ... OF COURSE he would want to be healed! But look at the situation more closely. For 38 years this man's plan was to wait for the waters to stir and then be the first one into the pool. However, the man was at the Pool of Bethesda alone ... and he was unable to walk. So his plan for 38 years was nothing more than hopeless fantasy. IF the waters stirred, and IF there was supernatural healing in them (two big "ifs") then the lame man would have to somehow get down into the water himself, while being unable to move. Jesus sees the sad situation and calls it out. It is as if Jesus says, "Your plan is broken. But if you want to be healed, can I offer you an alternative?"

Seeing the look of longing and desperation in the lame man's eyes, Jesus says to him, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk." And guess what ... HE DID! The man who had not walked, walked. The man who had the hopeless plan, had a bright future! Jesus was able to do what the broken plan could not - give the lame man his legs back. Jesus was able to produce what was desperately needed - hope and life.

In this account we learn something important. Kindness is not found in a place (remember, Bethesda means "house of kindness.") Kindness is found in a Person. The

Pool of Bethesda had been there for years, but when Jesus showed up, He was able to truly deliver kindness to the lame man.

For a couple of millennia now, the term “Bethesda” has been placed on hospitals and places where care is administered to the sick and wounded. A town in Maryland that houses the NIH and a large military hospital appropriately bears this name. However, may we never forget the One who embodies Kindness, and the One who can deliver in Himself what no place ever could - hope and life and light.

We go to places like pools or churches (appropriately so) to gather and to seek hope and life. However, as we show up in church this Christmas season, don't just look at the decorations on the wall. Instead look for and learn about the One from whom Kindness flows: Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The healing of this lame man is the third miraculous sign John records pointing to Jesus being God.

November 30:

Jesus is God: Feeding of the 5,000

Read: John 6:1-14

When my son was young, I wore many hats. On any given day, I might have to serve the function of a jungle gym, an elevator, a taxi driver, and a tour guide ... and that is just after 5:00 PM! Before you begin to think that I was one of the original Wonder Twins from the 1970's "Superfriends" television show or a raging lunatic, I need to explain. While I was not actually becoming any of those tasks vocationally, I was performing their functions for my (then) sixteen month old son, Joshua.

Being so small at that time, Joshua found himself in situations of need frequently. If he wanted to climb and swing, he needed someone to climb on or to swing him around. If he wanted to go up one floor (from the floor of our sunken living room to the hallway leading to the rest of the house), he needed someone to lift him. If he wanted to get outside and see the world, I either needed to drive the car or push the stroller. Because of his need, he cried out frequently for help.

Now, as Joshua's father, I loved wearing the hats he asked me to wear. There has come a day when he no longer wants to wrestle on the floor while watching a basketball game. There will come a day when he will be able to drive himself where he wants to go. There has come a day when climbing the steps to the rest of the house became an after thought. But before those days came, I was all too excited to hear him cry out in need. I loved wearing all those hats to help meet his needs.

Two thousand years ago, as Jesus was living on this earth and was in the process of training His disciples (and by extension, training you and I who read of their experiences in the New Testament), He knew that a necessary component of a vibrant spiritual life would be a child-like sense of need. By virtue of our sinful tendencies and God's lofty calling, by ourselves—spiritually speaking—we are very small ... therefore we frequently find ourselves in situations of great need. Our spiritual need is not partial, it is total. Jesus wanted His disciples to know this, and that is why He led them to a remote place among a hungry crowd to teach them a lesson.

In John 6:1-15, Jesus led His disciples into the countryside among 5,000 men, not counting women and children. When it came time to eat, Jesus asked Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" This is a very funny question for Jesus to ask! Sure, Philip grew up in the area in which John 6 took place and most likely knew the whereabouts of all the grocery stores and restaurants nearby, but buying food for all these people would cost an amount far greater than the disciples had available to them. Even if Philip knew of a grocery store next door, they would not be able to afford the cost of giving everyone even a light snack, much less a full dinner. Jesus asked this

question, not because He was unaware of their financial situation, but because He wanted to “test him (Philip), for He (Jesus) already knew what He was going to do (6:6).” Jesus had planned all along to provide the food for the whole crowd in a miraculous way; He just wanted to make sure that Philip and the rest of the disciples recognized their need and thus could recognize God’s supernatural provision. In the end, Jesus blessed a few fish and loaves so that they fed everyone present, with twelve basketfuls of leftovers! Jesus gave each of the twelve disciples their own basket full of reminders that He was able to meet any need.

As adults, we tend to see problems as things we need to fix, pay for, or solve. Since we are grown, we tend to think that we do not need or even deserve any help; therefore we often do not cry out. We think we are supposed to have the resources necessary to meet all of life’s demands all by ourselves. We may fear that any cry for help is a sign of weakness and might even bother God or cause Him to think less of us. If this is you, then remember that Jesus wants us to have child-like faith. This is the kind of faith that caused a small boy to offer a few measly fish and loaves to a hungry mob. Any adult would tell you the boy’s offering was not enough, but any adult who said this would be forgetting the One who would be doing the feeding.

Spiritually speaking, we are like sixteen month olds with many needs requiring someone who wears many hats to come to our rescue. We need someone who can be a doctor, a counselor, and an empowerer every moment of our lives. When we realize this and cry out, Jesus hears our cries and comes to our rescue. In fact, He loves wearing the many hats we ask Him to wear because in this life, we will never grow out of our state of dependence.

The feeding of the 5,000 is the fourth miraculous sign John shares to argue of Jesus’ divinity. Only God could meet such a need!

December 1:

Jesus is God: "I am the Bread of Life"

Read: John 6:33-59

Growing up there were two toys I always THOUGHT I wanted, but never got. These toys looked awesome in TV commercials and on the pages of the JC Penny Christmas catalog. They were always surrounded by boys about my age looking like they had just won the lottery. What were these toys? The tabletop electronic football game, and the electronic slot race tracks.

They looked awesome, so I often asked for them for Christmas, or birthday, or whatever. However, I never got them. Why? Because I did not have parents who loved me? No. I did not get them because I DID have parents who loved me, and understood that these gifts were not all they were cracked up to be. They both promised happiness in a flashy package, but they did not deliver the lasting enjoyment that other gifts would.

The tabletop electronic football game (after all) was just a vibrating board. The slot race track was only fun the first time around. After the initial excitement of opening the package, disappointment would almost surely soon follow.

In John 6, Jesus was reaching new heights in popularity. He had just fed thousands of people and performed a number of other miracles that demonstrated His power and compassion. People were flocking to Him from throughout the Galilean region. Every time Jesus and the disciples would bring their boat ashore, a crowd was waiting for them. One day as Jesus went ashore, the congregation was asking Him to do more miracles. They had eaten the lunch at the feeding of the 5,000 and now had come back for seconds. They said to Jesus, "Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness." The implication ... God provided food EVERY DAY to the Israelites in the wilderness. So, they were saying to Jesus, "If you are really from God, then give us DAILY bread and fish, like God did during the days of Moses."

Jesus response is classic. A summary of His response goes like this, "You want bread and fish ... but I want to give you something even greater! I want to give you a 'bread' that is truly life giving." The people respond saying, "YES!! We want that! Can you give us this bread ALWAYS?" To which Jesus responds with the iconic statement, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to Me shall not hunger and whoever believes in Me shall never thirst."

Jesus did not give the people of Galilee another meal of bread and fish BECAUSE He loved them. They thought they knew what they wanted, but God knew what they REALLY wanted, and (more importantly) needed. They needed Him, not just fish and loaves. They needed Someone to fill their souls, not just something to fill their

stomachs. The One who would truly satisfy their deepest thirsts and hungers was Jesus Christ Himself, the “One who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

We think we know what we want, so we ask for it. We want happiness and joy so (like a child looking at the JC Penny Christmas catalog) we ask for the relationships, things, or experiences we think that will best deliver these emotions. What are you asking for this Christmas?

Our Heavenly Father hears our prayers and receives our wish list ... our Christmas catalogs filled with circled items we desire. As our loving Father, thankfully, He does not just give us what we ask for. Instead He gives us what we desperately need ... a real relationship with Him and the soul nourishing provision that comes from a relationship with Jesus.

He is the bread of life. And if we receive Him, He can satisfy our deepest hungers and greatest thirsts eternally.

“I am the Bread of Life” is the first revelatory “I am” statement Jesus made, further revealing His divine identity to us.

December 2:

Jesus is God: Walking on Water

Read: John 6:1-15

Growing up I had always feared the weight room. I played organized sports my entire life, but somehow, by playing football, basketball, and running track, I was able to avoid ever having an off season for weight training! It was not the weights that scared me, it was the other people I would find there. Now, my high school weight room was not the dwelling place of Arnold Schwarzenegger, but his picture was on the wall (an encouragement to participate in the Presidential National Fitness Challenge), and the weight room placed me in close context with other people who, no doubt, could lift considerably more than I could. I lived in fear that I would have to share a workout with D'Angelo who would be bench pressing 250 pounds while I was struggling to raise just the bar.

As an adult, I have a new-found interest in weight lifting. I have found that the gym is a place where many people, just like me, are just trying to stay fit and “tone their cores.” We all have roughly the same goal in mind. Sure, I may start with less weight on the bar than most, but raising that bar is still a good workout for me. Over time and with proper exercise, raising that bar will make me stronger so that I can lift more tomorrow than I can lift today. This is the progressive and proportional nature of weight lifting.

I was thinking of this idea as I was reading Matthew 14:22-33 (and its parallel account in John 6). In this story, the disciples were on a boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee amidst a fierce storm when Jesus came walking to them on top of the water. What an amazing site this must have been! There were twelve disciples in that boat that saw Jesus walking on the water. Upon seeing the figure on top of the water, eleven of them decided that it must be a ghost. Eleven of them kept their mouths shut. Eleven of them trembled in fear. One of them spoke. In Matthew 14:28, Peter said, “Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water.” Jesus said, “Come!” and while eleven other men watched with wide eyes, Peter hopped the side of the boat and walked ON TOP OF THE WATER in the direction of Christ. Now, after Peter got a good distance from the boat, he began to realize that he was walking on top of the water. This sudden realization led to Peter taking his eyes off Christ and sinking into the sea.

When Peter sank, Jesus spoke and said in 14:31, “You of little faith. Why did you doubt?” Now the question comes. Why would Jesus say this to Peter? Why not say this to the other eleven men cowering in the boat with their jaws on the deck. Why call Peter out? I think the answer to this question (while I cannot know for sure) is found in the weight room at the local fitness club.

You see, Jesus' goal for every person is that they would grow in their faith in Him. Jesus wants us to trust Him. Though His goal for each of us is the same, by faith, each of us (at different times in our lives) can "lift" different amounts. Some can only lift the bar and others can bench press a mobile home. Spiritually speaking this translates into the fact that our faith grows over time as we exercise it. It is a significant faith step for a mature Christian to trust God with cancer or the death of a child, but it is also an equally significant step of faith for a new Christian to trust God with the forgiveness of his or her sins—something that a more mature Christian had trusted Christ with long ago. Our faith grows over time, and as God grows our faith, each day/season/year is filled with different "weights" that God has placed on the bar.

Based on who Peter was and all that Jesus had taken Him through (including the initial steps he took on the water) Jesus wanted Peter to persist in that faith and lift even more. Once Peter walked on the water, Jesus expected him to keep walking. For the rest of the disciples in the boat, their faith steps may have had less "weight." Their faith steps may have involved just ceasing to be afraid, or believing that Jesus could really perform such a miracle. This is the progressive nature of growth in the Christian life.

What about you? As you live out your life today, what are the weights that God is asking you to lift by faith? It is probably different for every person, but they all have the same goal ... to grow us in our depth of relationship with Jesus Christ. Don't spend a lot of time comparing yourself to others, growing fearful of participating in the spiritual life because you don't think you can lift as much as the next guy. Know that Christ has put the weight on your bar that is appropriate for you to grow in faith. Believe that and then trust Him. If you do, you will find that your faith is stronger tomorrow than it is today.

Jesus walking on water is the fifth miraculous sign John records arguing that Jesus is God. May we grow in our faith in Him!

December 3:

Jesus is God: "I am the Light of the World"

Read: John 8:12-30

When I was a kid, I was terribly afraid of the dark. Each night, I would hate going to bed because I did not want to be alone in the dark. As a result, my parents tried several compromises. For a while, I slept in my sister's room ... being with someone helped ease the fear. When I wore out my welcome in Debbie's room, my parents went to "Plan B" which was leaving my lamp on when I went to bed. After I fell asleep, my Dad would come in (on his way to bed) and turn off my lamp. At the time, I was very appreciative of these concessions. Companionship and light allowed me to sleep easy even if I could not see what was causing the shadow from my closet or the monsters that I was certain were hiding under my bed.

What is it about the dark that makes things so scary? Being afraid of the dark is not just something that small children face. As adults, every scary movie we have ever seen is set at night. I have heard that elderly people in nursing homes often become afraid of the dark all over again. So, what is it about the dark that makes our hearts race faster?

I believe the reason we are afraid of the dark is because in the darkness, all of our world becomes unclear, uncertain, or unknown. In the light, we can tell that the mysterious figure in the corner of the room is a teddy bear, not a bad guy, but in the dark, we cannot be certain. In the light, the moving shadows on our floor are branches swaying in the wind, but in the dark, everything just looks more ominous.

Because of our natural fear of the dark, Jesus' words in John 8:12 offer incredible hope and promise. Jesus says, "I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Notice what Jesus says there. The "light of the world" that He represents is the "light of life." In other words, the greatest piece of darkness that people are fearful of is the darkness of death. One day, the lights of this life will come to an end for each of us, and (on our own) the darkness of death is terrifying.

What will life after death be like? On our own and without the revelation of God, we have no idea. Where will I spend eternity? Is death more of a "period" or a "comma" in the sentence of my life? Have I lived my life "good enough" to be in a preferred spot, or could my eternity hold the unthinkable as a final destination? These questions, like shadows on the floor of a child's darkened room, frighten us and cause us to long for help ... companionship or even light itself!

Jesus hears our cries of fear and does something amazing. He comes to be with us and He lets us know that He is our light. With Him, our future does not look so dark. With Him, our journey beyond the door of death is not filled with uncertainty and judgment but is filled with promise and paradise. Jesus says in 8:23-24, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.” Jesus was saying that eternity is a scary, dark place for those who “go it alone” because their sins will lead to an undesirable future. However, if we believe that Jesus is who He claims to be (namely the Son of God and our Savior), then our future is much different—and infinitely better!

If the darkness of death frightens you, fear not. Belief in Jesus Christ turns on the light of life to you for all eternity!

Jesus’ statement that “I am the Light of the World” is the second revelatory statement mentioned by John arguing that Jesus is God.

December 4:

Jesus is God: Healing the Blind Man

Read: John 9:1-17

When I think of how God worked in my own life to draw me into a relationship with Him, I think of golf balls . . . rocks . . . and car washes. I am sure you think of the same things.

When I was sixteen years old and pulling away (physically and emotionally) from all things “church,” the new youth pastor at East Cross United Methodist Church began to take a special interest in me. He pursued me on my terms and in the places where I liked to hang out. Thus, our very first spiritual conversations were on the golf course. It was somewhere near the fourth tee at Adams Municipal Golf Course that we began talking about forgiveness, and somewhere near the 18th green where I decided to start going back to youth group to hang out with my new friend, Dwight. Based on my experience, I am sure the golf course is where God got a hold of you as well.

On Easter Sunday, 1990, in the Fellowship Hall of East Cross, Dwight shared the Gospel with us in a unique way. He had each person walk through ten stations where a question was asked concerning each of the Ten Commandments. If you could answer yes to the question (thus indicating guilt), you were supposed to pick up a rock. By the time I ended my progression through these stations, I had a bag full of rocks—and a sudden realization that I was in need of a Savior. As Dwight spoke of the forgiveness found in Christ, I laid my “rocks” at the foot of the cross and began a relationship with the Living God. Based on my experience, I am sure that a bag of rocks is how God showed you your need for a Savior too.

Soon after coming to Christ, Dwight asked me if I wanted to lead the planning of a fund raising car wash to benefit the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. I reluctantly agreed to do so. This was the first time I had ever taken any leadership responsibility as a Christian. Through this process, I began to realize some of my gifts and my desire to serve Christ with my life. This small spark that began at the car wash was fanned into flame over the next couple of years until I felt God’s full call on my life into vocational pastoral ministry. Based on my experience, I am sure that God used a car wash to launch you into a lifetime of serving Him as well.

Golf balls, rocks, and car washes. These are the things that God used in my life. No one can deny that. It is my experience. However, is it proper for me to imply or expect that because God used these things in my life, He will do the same in yours? As we search for an answer to that question, let’s look at John 9:6-11 where Jesus came across a man who had been blind since birth, and He decided to show mercy on him. The story reads, “Having said this, He (Jesus) spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. ‘Go,’ He told him, ‘wash in the Pool of Siloam’ (this word

means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, 'Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?' Some claimed that he was. Others said, 'No, he only looks like him.' But he himself insisted, 'I am the man.' 'How then were your eyes opened?' they demanded. He replied, 'The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed and then I could see.'"

In that story, Jesus used spit to restore the man's eyesight. Jesus worked in this man's life using a very common thing coupled with some very common instructions. As the healed man reflected on the experience of what had just happened to him, he could easily recall the simple steps and commands that led to his healing. As we read this story, we might be tempted to think that healing blindness is a product of WWJD (what would Jesus do?). If we simply follow the formula that Jesus did, maybe we could get the same result. However, there is a serious problem with thinking that way: Jesus did not heal the same way twice.

When Jesus healed the royal official's sick son (John 4:43-54), He did not even go see the boy. He simply spoke a word and the boy was healed. When Jesus healed the woman who was hemorrhaging for many years, He allowed her to simply touch the edge of His coat, and her bleeding immediately stopped (Luke 8:40-48). Even when Jesus healed other people of their blindness, sometimes He would just touch their eyes with His bare hands (Matthew 9:27-31) or He would just have a conversation with someone that led to his healing (Mark 10:46-51). All these varied stories and encounters should remind all of us that the only consistent thing as it pertains to the "healing method" that is demonstrated in each story is the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus would work through many simple things to bring about healing. Words, clothing, spit ... all these things Jesus used to bring about healing, but what He used with one person, He often did not use with the next. The one constant, however, was His presence enacting the miracle upon the person in need.

This is very significant as we consider how God has worked in our lives. All of us who have experienced God's love and forgiveness have at least three things that He used in our lives to draw us closer to Him. For me it was golf balls, rocks, and car washes. For you, it might be Young Life Camp, scrapbooking, and cokes at Sonic. These are all simple things that God can use in our lives— the saliva and dirt of our contemporary landscape. However, before we begin to think that our salvation came through rocks, cokes, or saliva, we need to remember that whatever the methods, it is Christ alone who brings us grace. This should free us up from demanding or expecting that everyone will be impacted just as we were (contrary to my silly implications earlier in this story). God is a personal God who reaches out to us in many ways. Remember that the next time your friend does not want to go to the same camp you went to or someone else thinks your "rocks" illustration is cheesy. The same God who used saliva

in one place and the edge of His garment in another can just as easily personalize the way He reaches you and me.

The healing of the blind man was the sixth miraculous sign mentioned by John arguing that Jesus was God.

December 5:

Jesus is God: "I am the Good Shepherd"

Read: John 10:1-21

Who is the good leader? The good leader is the one who is working for the good of those who are following their lead.

Who is the bad leader? The bad leader is one who is working only for their own personal benefit without regard for the welfare of those they are leading.

This principle is true in parenting, business, church life, and politics. When leaders truly care for and develop those they are leading for their joy and welfare, they are leading well. All too often, though, we see leaders who are only in it for themselves ... their accolades, ego, compensation, agenda, or perks.

I think part of the reason people are so reluctant to follow leadership today is because we have seen so many leaders who are self-serving. But good leadership? Well, who wouldn't want to follow a leader that is willing to sacrifice for our benefit?

Let me ask you a question ... Is Jesus a leader? Of course He is! He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. He is the Leader of leaders. But let me ask you another question. Is He a good leader?

In John 10:14 Jesus makes the following assertion: "I am the good shepherd." What does He mean when He says this? He is saying that He is the perfect example of the Good Leader. So at least Jesus thinks He is a good leader ... in fact He believes He is THE BEST leader!

But what makes Jesus so certain that He is the good shepherd/leader? He continues and provides us the reason why, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." What makes Jesus such an amazing leader is that He is willing to lay down His own life for us.

This idea is further elaborated on in Philippians 2:5-11. Jesus (as God, the ultimate Leader) left the comfort of Heaven to come to this earth to ultimately lay down His life on the cross, paying the penalty our transgressions deserved, so that we might be forgiven of our sins and reconciled to God. He is the good leader because He lay down His life for us.

Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was the action of the best leader. Coming to educate us on who God is by showing us what God is like. And His birth gave Him a human life that He

would one day lay down as a sacrifice for us. Jesus, the good shepherd, is a leader we can follow in faith and obedience as He is seeking our ultimate good.

Jesus as the good shepherd also shows the pattern and style of leadership He longs for in His followers. Why would we want to be a bad leader/parent/boss? Good leaders follow the example of Christ and lay down their lives for those they lead.

So, this Christmas, remember that Jesus (whose birth we remember) is a good leader, unlike so many other “leaders” in our lives. Therefore, let’s follow Him together to the glory of God.

The statement “I am the good shepherd” is the third revelatory statement John mentions arguing that Jesus is God.

December 6:

Jesus is God: "I am the Sheep Gate"

Read: John 10:1-21

OK, let's talk about Santa Claus. This big man with a red suit visits your house one night a year, sliding down the chimney with his big bag of gifts. What if this guy really existed ... but what if you did not know about him? What if Santa Claus was a real guy who really did the entire "Night Before Christmas" thing, but you had never heard the story? Now if Santa Claus did exist, and you did not know anything about him, how would you react at midnight on December 24 if you heard a "thud" on your rooftop? As you would spring to your feet to see what was the matter, you would find a grown man in a red suit packing (or unpacking ... from your angle it is tough to say) an overgrown pillow case worth of stuff in your living room! What would you do? I know what you would do. You would either call the cops or grab your shotgun! But why would anyone do that to good old Saint Nick?

If we were unaware of the existence of Santa Claus, we would not be thinking that ANYONE breaking into our house at midnight was there to bring us stuff. Living in this fallen world has convinced us that people come to our houses unannounced to take stuff, not give stuff. This is why we lock our doors, install security systems, and "let the machine get it" when the phone rings at dinner time. For the most part, this world has shown us that people come to us primarily for their benefit, and not for our own ... and so we are skeptical.

With this as a backdrop, I want to remind you all of a true story of someone who comes to us to give rather than to take, and it is found in John 10:9-10.

In John 10:9-10, Jesus says this: "I am the gate; whoever enters through Me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." In these verses, Jesus is saying that He has come to us not to take, but to give something wonderful: "life ... to the full." If Jesus came to give, why do we have the perspective that what He really wants is to take from us?

Now, you may not have thought about this before, but we really do (sometimes) have the perspective that Jesus comes to take from us, not to give. We sometimes feel that He came to "take" the fun out of our lives. Many of the things we think we would want to do and that we are tempted to do are things that exist on the forbidden list in God's economy. Don't have sex outside of marriage. Don't get drunk on alcohol and don't use drugs. Don't tear each other down with your words. Don't harbor anger towards another. Sometimes we can think that all these commandments take more than they give. Our experience in the world has conditioned us to think that anyone coming to us

wants to take, not to give, so when we see what Christ is offering, we are waiting for the catch.

However, as I read John 10, I am struck by this incredible reminder that a thief takes, but Jesus always gives. In fact, He not only gives, but He gives unbelievable gifts! Jesus comes to us offering the best life possible. Being the creator and author of life, He knows what is best for us, and He guides us through the gates of everyday life to the green pastures of abundant living. All the things we thought He was taking away through commandments are really just directions guiding us to the location of abundant living.

Therefore, the next time you read the Bible and see commands from Christ, do not imagine that these are the words of someone who has come to take from us. Do not be unaware of Jesus' existence or be skeptical of His intentions—He has come for our benefit, to give us the abundant life!

Jesus' statement "I am the sheep gate" is the fourth revelatory statement John mentions arguing that Jesus is God.

December 7:

Jesus is God: Raising of Lazarus from the Dead

Read: John 11:1-44

There is a string of internet memes flowing across social media today with a common tag line, “show me you are _____ without saying that you are _____.” For example, show me a picture that you were a fan of the Oklahoma Sooners football team in the 1980’s without just saying you were a fan during that era ... then posting a picture of you with a “Boz” haircut.

This standard meme can be applied in any number of situations, so let’s apply it to people who lived at the time of Jesus. One question you might ask first century friends of Jesus is this, “Show me you believe Jesus is God without just telling me that Jesus is God.” If you were to ask this of Martha (sister of Lazarus and Mary), she might reply with the picture of John 11:17-27 ... with an emphasis on John 11:21 and 11:25-27.

In these verses, Lazarus (Martha’s brother) had died, and she is mourning his loss. While Lazarus was still sick, Martha (and her sister Mary) had sent for Jesus and asked Him to come and help, yet Jesus delayed, and arrived after Lazarus had already passed. In John 11:21, Martha says to Jesus, “If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died.” Now this is a massive statement. In it, Martha is acknowledging that Jesus had sovereign power over death and illness. Then, (in John 11:25-27) after Jesus tells her that Lazarus will be raised to new life, Martha says that she knows this will happen “on the last day.” Jesus responds that He is the One who makes salvation on the “last day” possible, and asks if Martha believes that to be true, and she nods her head in agreement. So in this meme of a scene, Martha is saying that Jesus is sovereign over illness, death, salvation, and the end of the world. Who could possibly be that powerful? Only God Himself. Martha’s actions indicate that she believes that Jesus is God.

How about you? Do your actions show that you believe Jesus is God? Do you turn to Him when things are tough, or do you look to other forms of deliverance? Who sits in the seat of authority over your understanding of “wrong and right,” is it Jesus and His Word (the Bible) or is it your ideas or the ideas of your friends? Whose “will” do you obey as the general pattern and direction of your life ... your will or His?

This Christmas, I want you to think about your life. Daily ask the question ... how can I show the world today that I believe Jesus is God? Martha provides a great example for us to follow, and Jesus shows Himself worthy of her trust. He will do the same for us.

The raising of Lazarus from the dead is the seventh miraculous sign John references to argue that Jesus is God.

December 8:

Jesus is God: I am the Resurrection & Life

Read: John 11:1-44

As we lined up along the free throw line, we were one miss, three seconds, and ninety feet away from victory. We were trailing our opponent by two points in the 12th Street Recreational Center Fall Church League Tournament, and one of their players was on the free throw line with a chance to clinch the game with a pair of free throws. If he missed, we would have a chance to take the ball the length of the court for a last second desperation heave for victory. I wanted the chance to take that heave. So, when his free throw fell short, I grabbed the ball, turned and began sprinting towards our goal. And that is when I fell down.

Now, I don't know how many times I have played in my mind or practiced in my driveway this very scenario (three seconds left, down two, with a chance to make the shot and win the game), but never in my fantasies has the play ever ended with me falling to the ground! But in real life, that is exactly what happened. I wanted to take the shot, but I ended up feeling as though I had been shot instead— a loud pop preceded intense pain as I ruptured my right Achilles tendon. Oh yeah ... and we lost the game.

The next day, I went to see an orthopedic surgeon who told me that he could stitch my leg back together and make me “just like new.” Sure enough, one week later I had surgery, but I soon found out that becoming “just like new” was not as simple as just having surgery. After surgery, my leg was casted, immobile and sore—it took six months of physical therapy and hard work to get the “just like new” leg I was waiting for. The surgery brought the possibility of life and mobility back to my leg, but actual life and function would not return to my leg for quite some time.

In John 11, Jesus received word that his friend Lazarus was very ill and in need of help. After waiting two days before beginning the journey to Lazarus' side, Jesus arrived at Bethany (Lazarus' hometown) to find that Lazarus had already died and had been in the tomb for four days.

When Jesus arrived, He talked with Lazarus' sister Martha. Jesus said to Martha in 11:25, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.” Jesus told Martha this (and John recorded it for us) so that when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, everyone might see the larger significance of this mighty miracle. More than just returning life to one dead man, Jesus was offering resurrection AND life to all who would believe in His name.

After making this declaration, Jesus moved to the tomb where He ordered the stone to be rolled back, opening the door for the dead man (Lazarus) to come forth. With a loud cry, Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!"—and out walked Lazarus, still bound in the clothes that they had used to bury him. Jesus then ordered people to cut the grave clothes off of his body, freeing Lazarus to live life. John 12:2 records for us that Lazarus' health did return immediately, and he was seen at a feast with Christ just a short time later.

When Jesus said that He was both the resurrection and the life, He was implying something very significant. Sometimes we may think that Jesus' salvation is like surgery. He, our heavenly Surgeon, goes in and creates the potential for life by stitching up our wounds and extracting sin's ultimate consequence from our lives. Though we understand Christ's role as Surgeon, we often think of our spiritual lives as physical therapy ... a lengthy process where we ourselves have to work very hard to restore life to an otherwise dysfunctional situation. When we hear that Jesus is the resurrection, we sometimes think that as Christians we are like the "living dead," saved from our sin eternally, but fully bound by its restrictive grave clothes in the present. If this is your attitude, remember that Jesus says that He is both the resurrection AND the life. He not only restores the potential for life, but He also provides the life itself—immediately. Like Lazarus who was not just given breath, but was cut free from his grave clothes, so Jesus offers us not just eternal hope for tomorrow, but every help for today!

Therefore if you know Christ, remember that He has done more than just raise you from the consequences of your sin; He has offered you the abundant life here and now with Him. Remember that He has cut off the grave clothes of your sin and invited you to a feast, living in obedience with Him today.

Jesus' statement "I am the resurrection and the life" is the fifth revelatory statement John mentions arguing that Jesus is God.

December 9:

Jesus is God: "I am the Way, Truth, Life"

Read: John 14:1-14

At the top of a waterfall, high above beautiful Lake Louise in Banff National Park, Canada, sits a most peculiar tea house. This tea house is a beautiful site: a log cabin equipped with a wood burning stove to heat hot tea for weary hikers. The cabin was built atop this waterfall by the Canadian Pacific Railway many years ago as a diversion for passengers to enjoy while the train was stopped in this mountain villa.

Back in the summer of 2000, my sister-in-law, her husband, and I decided to hike the 2,000 foot ascent to get to this tea house while on vacation in the Banff area. Before we began our hike, we asked someone in the Chateau at the Lake's edge how to get to this tea house. They told us that you had to take the "horse trail" to the top. This was because heavy snow still covered the ground on the high country trail and made any other route impassable to the tea house's locale. Upon receiving these instructions, we were faced with two options: 1. We could take their expert advice, ascend the horse trail, and enjoy the benefits of the tea house experience. 2. We could assume that the instructions we received were an exaggeration, and we could try to find our own way to the top.

While those two options do exist, only one of the two of those options is really a valid or wise choice. We had never been to Lake Louise before, but the people we got the advice from were employees of the park and were paid good money to help people like us get to the top of that tea house trail. Therefore, we took their advice and hiked the "horse trail" to get to the top.

After having our tea in those beautiful surroundings, I decided to test the advice we had been given. Instead of heading down the horse trail like my brother-in-law and sister-in-law, I decided to blaze my own trail and follow a different path back down the mountain. About ten minutes into my journey, I realized what a mistake that was. I soon lost the "path" and found myself waist deep in powdery snow, trying to find a way to retreat back to the tea house and gallop back down the "horse trail." Some might have thought the advice we received was closed-minded and narrow, but in reality, it was just plain fact. If we wanted to go up or down the mountain, there was really only one trail to take.

I was thinking of this story as I read John 14. In John 14, Jesus told His disciples that He was going to heaven to prepare a place for them . . . a place He would one day come back and take them to. After Jesus told them of this place, He also told them of the only way they could make it to heaven: through Him. He said in John 14:6, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me." In a sense,

Jesus says that at the pinnacle of life is a beautiful place prepared for you. However, in order to get to that place, there is only one trail you can take: through Him.

Now Jesus' exclusive claim on the way to God may sound narrow or closed-minded to our 21st century ears, but in reality, it is just plain fact. If there were other ways, He (who knows all) would have told us about them. However, Jesus knew that there is only one way to God, and that all other efforts to reach Him will only leave us "waist deep in snow" and helpless on the hillside of life. The only way to a holy God is by means of someone who can make us clean and acceptable in His sight. Since we are all sinful people, we all need cleansing, and the kind of cleansing we need can only be provided by Christ Himself. The paths of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Secularism sound promising, but do not lead you up the mountain of God. Only by faith in Jesus Christ can we make it to paradise.

Faced with these instructions, we are faced with two options: 1. We could take Jesus' expert advice, place our eternity into His capable nail-scarred hands, and enjoy the unspeakable joy of an eternity in "the Father's House." 2. We could assume that Jesus' instructions are an exaggeration, and try to find our own way to the top. While both of these options exist, only one of them is really a valid or wise choice. There is only one path that leads to the top. As we follow Christ, He will always keep us on the right trail.

Jesus' statement "I am the way, the truth, and the life" is the sixth revelatory statement John mentions arguing that Jesus is God.

December 10:

Jesus is God: "I am the Vine"

Read: John 15:1-17

We live in a neighborhood with lots of trees. In part, it was those trees that helped to attract us to our house. This towering canopy of sycamores, oaks, elms, and maples keeps our back yards shaded, and our streets lined with beauty. Over the years of living in this house, however, I have come to learn a few things about trees.

First of all, I have learned that tree branches that fail to stay connected to the trunk of the tree become a real hassle. This never became more real than in December 2007 when an ice storm dumped a half inch of ice all over every tree branch in the neighborhood. At first the ice was pretty; then we realized it became very destructive. Under the heavy weight of the ice, branches all over our yard and neighborhood began snapping off and crashing to the ground. The damage was so bad that CNN, The Weather Channel, and NBC nightly news all broadcast about the damage within a short walk from my house. After the temperatures warmed and the ice melted, my neighbors and I began surveying the damage. We lost thousands of pounds of branches. Over the course of the next couple of weeks, I would drag all these branches to the curb for the city to pick up. My neighbors would do the same. Eventually, our entire neighborhood looked like it had a log cabin hedge lining every street. The beauty of the branches that once hung green above the streets below now lay in lifeless, brown piles awaiting destruction in the fires of the city collection areas.

Second of all, I have learned that trees require care if they are to remain vibrant. Left to themselves, trees will actually overproduce branches. We once had an apple tree. That apple tree would produce thousands of grape sized apples if I let it. Over time, however, I found that by trimming several branches off the tree, the tree would actually produce bigger, tastier apples. Without the strain of those extra branches, the tree could produce better fruit. This made pruning a priority for me, because the reason you have an apple tree is to produce apples!

These two truths that I have learned about trees are echoed in John 15:1-17 when Jesus compares His relationship with His followers with the relationship between a tree trunk (the vine) and its branches. This parallel is true in at least a couple of ways.

First, Christians who fail to remain connected to Christ in their daily lives cease to be beautiful. Now, I am not talking about physical beauty, but spiritual beauty. When Christians live their lives dependent upon Christ and allowing Jesus to produce His fruit in and through them, their lives are beautiful and attractive. People want to be around them, and they reflect God's glory. However, when these same Christians decide to do their own thing, rely on their own strength, and detach themselves from Christ, they

quickly dry up and wither. Their lives may have once had a spiritual vitality or beauty to them, but now they lay lifeless by the roadside of life. As Jesus says in John 15:6, "If anyone does not remain in Me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers."

Second, it can be noted that God's purpose for Christians is to produce His fruit in our lives. In John 15:8, Jesus tells us "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples." In order to have a life that produces Christ's fruit, however, we must remain dependent upon Christ AND allow the Father to prune us for maximum growth. In Jesus' metaphor, God the Father is the gardener who comes into our lives and cuts away "extra" things so that what is left might sustain more of the fruit He desires that we produce. John 15:2 says, "He (the Father) cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful." This can be a scary thought to think of God pruning our lives of the "extra branches," but it need not be. God is always good and always right, so the things that He cuts away are things that we never needed in the first place and that were getting in the way of what we really want ... to glorify God with our lives. Pruning is a priority for the Father because the purpose of Christians is to produce Christ's fruit!

As you have read and reflected on this passage, I want you to examine your own spiritual life for a moment. How are things going? Is your spiritual life alive or dead? Are you producing Christ's fruit, or are extra things getting in the way? This passage reminds us that spiritual vitality comes from abiding in Christ as a branch remains in its vine. The key to spiritual life and growth comes from living a life of dependence upon the Savior. Further, if you find your spiritual life producing some fruit, but not "much fruit," then think for a moment about what is in your life that might be an "extra branch" that the Father might need to prune off to allow for more growth. Maybe your extra branches are relationships that pull you away from Him, addictions, time wasters, etc. Whatever they are, invite the Gardener to examine your life and see if He might want to clip a branch here or there to encourage future growth.

All Christians are a collection of branches attached to one tree. When we stay attached to Him, it becomes a beautiful sight for all to see.

Jesus' statement "I am the vine" is the seventh revelatory statement John mentions to argue that Jesus is God.

December 11:

Jesus is God: The Resurrection

Read: John 20:1-31

Over the past 15 days in this devotional, we have been reading John's Gospel, seeing 7 miraculous signs and 7 Messianic sayings that argue that Jesus is God. At Christmas we celebrate Jesus' birth - His arrival on the earth as the God/Man. That first Christmas began a 33 year exhibition, witnessed by thousands of eye witnesses in real time, and recorded for all time by four Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) so that we might know what happened. John writes His Gospel arranging certain key facts from Jesus' life to demonstrate that Jesus is really God. As John 20:31 says, "... but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name." It DOES take faith for us to believe that Jesus is God (no question) ... but it is not a blind leap of faith. Jesus provides evidence as to His identity, and based on that, invites us to believe in His name.

Jesus didn't have to do it this way. He was under no obligation to provide evidence to us of His divinity, but He did. In His grace, He reaches out to us and invites us to believe in Him. Of all His signs and sayings, though, there is one piece of evidence that stands above them all. That is why each of the Gospels ends with this "closing argument" - the definitive evidence of His resurrection.

I was once talking with a non-Christian friend about Jesus. The topic landed on Jesus' resurrection. My friend asked me, "Mark, what makes Jesus' resurrection so special? After all, several people have been resurrected. That does not make THEM God? Why is Jesus any different?" Of course my friend was partly right. There are several biblical accounts of resurrections. In our study these past two weeks, we looked at the resurrection of Lazarus, but there were others ... the widow's son in Nain (Luke 7) and Jairus' daughter (Mark 5) to name two. Even in the Old Testament, there were resurrections performed by Elijah and Elisha on the widow's son in Zarepheth (1 Kings 17) and the Shunammite woman's son (2 Kings 4). Additionally there are other resurrections in the book of Acts performed by Peter and Paul (in Acts 9 and 20). So what DOES make Jesus' resurrection different?

Well, first of all, it is different because Jesus "called His shot" before it ever happened. Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus saying that He would be crucified, and then would be raised again on the third day (Matthew 20:19 is a good example of this). Unlike the other resurrections (that were surprises to those resurrected), Jesus knew what was coming and talked about it often. This demonstrates something unique about Jesus' resurrection and speaks to His omniscience - something only God could have.

Second, Jesus' resurrection is different because it happened without the agency of another person. Of course, in the case in Nain, and with Jairus' daughter and with Lazarus, Jesus Himself is the One performing the resurrection. But in the other cases (both Old and New Testament) God used another to be the conduit for the resurrection (Peter, Paul, Elijah, or Elisha). In the case of Jesus, God raised Him through the work of the Spirit alone ... without human intervention. This highlights the uniqueness of this event, and draws our attention to the omnipotent power of God.

Third, Jesus' resurrection is different because (once raised), Jesus walked about in a glorified body, and never died again. The others that were resurrected (Lazarus, etc.) came back in a healed version of their same old body, that would continue to age and deteriorate until one day they would die again. To say it another way, Lazarus was raised to new life in John 11, but he later had a second funeral, as he died of another cause some years later. Jesus (on the other hand) rose to a glorified body, and ascended to heaven, never to die again! So the KIND of resurrection experienced by Jesus is of a different quality, and reveals His identity as the First Born from the dead!

So, we have seen that Jesus is God, and have surveyed how the Apostle John details to us His divinity through miraculous signs and Messianic sayings ... culminating in His resurrection from the dead. John records these for us SO THAT we might believe in Him SO THAT we might have life in His name. How about you? In light of the evidence, do you believe?

Over the next two weeks, we will look at the events surrounding Jesus' birth to see what we can learn when God came to be with us - Immanuel.

December 12:

Jesus is God with us: The Word

Read: John 1:1-2

There is a great scene in the 1995 movie “Apollo 13” where Tom Hanks (playing the part of Astronaut Jim Lovell) sits in his back yard staring at the moon. Lovell was soon to pilot the famed Apollo 13 spaceship all the way to a lunar landing. As he sat in his suburban backyard on terra firm, however, Lovell was thousands of miles away from his destination. While staring at the moon, Lovell closed one eye and extended his hand in front of him. The captain then extended his thumb up into the air. The camera switched to Lovell’s perspective and showed us the captain’s ability to make the moon disappear behind his thumb.

Now, two possible explanations exist regarding Lovell’s disappearing moon technique:

1. The disappearance of the moon was an optical illusion created by the close proximity of the finger to the eyeball. In other words, it was a matter of perspective.
2. Tom Hanks has an extremely large thumb! In other words, his thumb is bigger than the moon.

Of course, option one is the correct answer. It also serves as a helpful reminder to you and me.

In our lives, the problems we face everyday have a very close proximity to our eyes. Medical issues we deal with, relationships that crumble, dreams that are dashed, are so close to where we live that they feel absolutely enormous. In fact, they feel so big, they can even cause us (as we close one eye of perspective under the strain) to not be able to see God in the midst of our difficulty. As we ponder this phenomena, two possibilities exist:

1. We have some really large problems ... larger than the God who created the universe.
2. We are allowing our current circumstances to create an optical illusion, blinding us to the reality of the presence of our God.

This Christmas season, many of you are no doubt dealing with difficulty. In fact, I would hazard a guess that virtually all of us are facing a tough trial of some kind. Because of that, we might have a tendency to miss God this holiday season. Under the stress and strain of life, we squint our eyes and see only that which is attached to our own hands. However, do not be fooled. God is there! The infant born in Bethlehem is not small in stature . . . He is larger than life, and He is our Immanuel – God with us.

In today's verses, we see Jesus described as the "Word." John begins His Gospel in eternity past, not in Bethlehem in the first century. The reason for John going that far back is to underscore the GREATNESS OF JESUS! He has always been. He created all that there is. His birth in Bethlehem was His arrival in bodily form, but it was not the beginning of His story. He has eternally existed as the second person of our Triune God. This reminds us of just how important Jesus really is. He is God ... and that reminds us that He is bigger than anything we face.

We can have great joy because when we open both eyes of biblical perspective, we can see that the Lord Jesus who came to us has been here all along. And, remember Jesus last words to His disciples were, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." This promise opens our eyes to dispel the allusion that we are alone. He is here, and He is bigger than all of the problems and issues we face. We can trust Him with all our problems, big and small.

December 13:

Jesus is God with us: The Light

Read: John 1:3-5

3,500 years ago, God called His people (the Israelites) out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the land that He had promised them. This is the story of the Exodus, and is recorded for us in the second book of the Bible. As the Israelites left Egypt God led them at night represented by a fire the people could see. Like a child is comforted by their night light, so the children of Israel were comforted in their journey by the fire in the sky, reminding them that God was with them.

Fast forward 1,500 years to the time of Jesus. While the rest of the Israelites were celebrating the Festival of the Tabernacle (remembering when God led them like a fire at night), Jesus makes an amazing assertion. He says in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." In this statement, Jesus was making a few VERY important points:

1. Jesus is the light. In the time of the Exodus, the people saw a fire cloud in the sky. That was nice. But, Jesus is even better! The fire in the sky was a presence, but it was a presence that did not talk or provide a 3-D example of what God was like. Jesus is our reminder that God is with us, a Living Light!
2. Jesus is the Light of the World! In the time of the Exodus, the fire was only for the people of Israel. However, by saying that Jesus was the light of the world, Jesus was pointing out that ALL people, regardless of nationality can be encouraged by His presence.
3. Jesus invites us to Follow Him. His Light is not just meant to comfort, it is meant to direct.
4. If we follow Him we will not walk in darkness. Jesus will never lead us to sin. He only leads us towards righteousness. He is out for our growth, not our destruction.
5. If we follow Him, we will have life. Darkness leads to death. Don't believe me? Put your favorite flower in the dark closet for a week and see if it survives. Jesus is the Light of Life . . . He came to give us life, not take it from us!

This same designation of Jesus as the "light of men" is found in John 1:3-5 as a part of the Christmas story that John shares. At Christmas time, we often have lights as a part of our decorations: on trees, on our homes, etc. This is so appropriate, because Jesus is the Light of the world! As we sing look at Christmas lights, be reminded of God's presence with us, and His desire that we walk in obedience following Jesus' commands and example. If we do, we will have life as God intended! Rejoice! Jesus lights the way!

December 14:

Jesus is God with Us: Will God dwell on the earth?

Read: John 1:14, 18

The year was 959 BC. 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 . . . 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. Yet another reason for joy this year!

December 15:

Jesus is God with Us: The Giver

Read: John 1:16-17

One day, Kimberly and I went Christmas shopping. Faced with a long list of “to dos” that needed to get done, I took a day of vacation and we headed out in the All Wheel Drive sleigh trying to fill it with presents to deliver on Christmas morning.

As we worked our way around the malls looking to make purchases, we were guided by a list of names of people we were buying for. On this list were friends and family, and because they are so dear to us, the opportunity to bless them with a gift is always a real privilege. The problem, however, was what kind of a gift do you bless them with? Moments like this are a great object lesson for understanding the need for a budget. If I were to let my love for the people on my list dictate what I bought them, I would never be able to pay off the balance of the bills! I simply have more love in my heart for the people on that Christmas list than I have money in my bank account – or even than I WILL have in my bank account if I did not spend a cent between now and when Jesus returns. Therefore, I could not determine what to give them based on how much I love them, because I do not have a matching resource to offer to the scope of my love.

A second way I could determine what to give them would be to play the principle of reciprocity. By this, I mean that I would try to give a gift back to someone of equal value to what they have given me. 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 as we shopped, 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. As John 1:16-17 remind us, Jesus has given us "grace upon grace" ... literally gift after gift.

As I was shopping, however, a second thing stood out to me. 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 on the mission field" 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 that day 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 remember the gifts you purchased this December, may they remind you of the gifts we have received from Him that we can never repay. Jesus brings the joy of gift after gift ... grace upon grace!

December 16:

Jesus is God with Us: To Those who receive Him

Read: John 1:9-13

Christmas time is a season of gift giving. Most of you reading this will be buying at least ONE Christmas gift for someone this year. Maybe it is a toy for your child, a sweater for your dad, a gift certificate for your nephew, or a piece of jewelry for your spouse. Gifts are a part of the Christmas experience for many of us ... but have you ever stopped to wonder why?

The reason why we give gifts around Jesus' birthday is because His birth WAS A GIFT - and an extremely generous gift at that. Jesus birth in Bethlehem gave us a picture of who God really is. Jesus birth gave the opportunity for Jesus to die on the cross for our sins later on. Jesus birth gave us the knowledge that God really knows what we are going through since He has literally walked where we walk. These are some BIG GIFTS! And they are just some of the presents given to us through that very first Christmas morn. Remembering this Gift, so many of us give gifts to others this time of year.

But with any gift given, it must be received to be enjoyed. I can buy my dad a sweater ... I can wrap it in a beautiful package ... I can address it to my dad ... I can tell him it is from me ... but if he never opens the package, then the sweater will never keep him warm on a cold winter night or have him looking stylish out at dinner with friends in the weeks ahead. Those intended purposes for the gift remain covered up if it is not opened.

Jesus came into the world to give gifts to the world. Wrapped up in His advent were so many blessings God intended people to have. However, many people miss out. The warmth of salvation is prepared with heavenly style for all, yet many refuse to open this gift. In our verses for today in John 1:9-13, we see this reality spelled out. Jesus created the world. He created us. Then in Bethlehem He came to us to offer us His gifts of life and light. But many people did not receive Him. They rejected the gift. They left it in its wrapping. However, not all rejected Him. To all who received Him, He gave the right to become children of God! I love that phrase ... to ALL who receive Him.

What that tells us is that the gifts of salvation and life that Jesus offers are ready for us ... and can be effective for us ... if we will just open them. But how do we open them? The passage tells us. We believe in Him.

Do you want forgiveness of your sins? Do you long to have a personal relationship with God? Do you want a better direction and trajectory for your life today? Do you want to have an assurance of eternity? THEN believe in Jesus. Believe He is the Son of God.

Believe that His death on the cross paid the penalty for your sins. By faith, take Jesus out of the box and rejoice! He is our biggest gift.

December 17:

Jesus is God with us: Mary's Song

Read: Luke 1:46-58

When I was a child, I remember my parents occasionally hosting a "Bridge" group some Saturday nights. When they would host this group, my sister and I would retreat to my parents' bedroom where we would watch "Solid Gold" and "Hee Haw" on the 12 inch black and white television. As we would watch this TV, I never thought of it as small or poor quality, because it was all we had. However, when you compare that 1970's era TV to the HD flat screen in my living room right now, it is easy to point out how much "better" today's technology is.

A lot of descriptors we have in our language only gain their meaning by comparison. To a small child, I am tall, but not to the roster of the OKC Thunder. To my parents I am young, but not compared to the kids in Wildwood's children's ministry. Old/young, tall/short . . . these terms gain their meaning when they have a point of reference.

Let me ask you a question . . . a MACRO-LEVEL question: When it comes to your life, what is your point of reference? Honestly, I think that our point of reference for our lives can be centered in one of only 3 places:

- Our self
- Others
- God

These are the options.

If your point of reference is yourself, then you determine your own reality. What is "needed" is what you want. What is "good" is what is "good for you at that moment."

If your point of reference is "others" you allow another human or group of humans to define your world. If they say something is important, it is important. If they say something is right, it is right.

If your point of reference is God, then He is your vision. He determines right from wrong, truth from error, good from bad.

Here is what I have noticed, both in my life and in the lives of those I know. When our primary reference point in life is a person (us or someone else), "God" tends to be small in our lives. When God is our reference point, people tend to be small. To say it another way, when people are big, God is small, but when God is big, people are small. By this I don't mean that people are not valuable, but I mean that when God is our reference

point, we tend to not fear the reactions of men, but when people are our reference point, we tend to not fear the presence of God.

In Luke 1:46-56, Mary reveals her response to the news that she would be the mother of Jesus. Her response (called the Magnificat due to the Latin word for the first word of the “song” recorded here) shows that her reference point was God. In this song, she magnifies the Lord, thereby properly understanding that she is small . . . and so are the problems around her. Not small as in insignificant, but small compared to the greatness of our God.

And even though Jesus was still in utero at that point, measuring just a few inches in length, He stood tall over all because of who He was and what He would do for His people.

This Christmas we will spend a fair amount of time comparing ourselves to others. Are the gifts we are giving our kids too much or not enough? Are our holiday plans good or bad? Is this year’s celebration better than last? In the midst of these comparisons, spend a few moments magnifying the Lord using Mary’s example from her song. As we make the Lord our reference point, as He “becomes” big, we will find our problems small by comparison.

December 18:

Jesus is God with us: Genealogy

Read: Matthew 1:1-17

I am the son of Dick and Beverly Robinson . . . the grandson of Don and Boonetta Davis and Glen and Alice Robinson . . . and so on, and so on. These facts are personally very meaningful. They describe my earthly heritage and contain the names of people who have shaped my life in profound ways.

Every person reading this ALSO is a part of a family tree. Though my experience as a descendant of the “Robinson” and “Davis” families is very positive, your experience may have been rocky. For good or for bad, we are still connected to and marked by our lineage. Personally, it bears great meaning to each of us.

However, there are some people whose family trees are not just PERSONALLY interesting, but have implications that impact the world. Think about members of the British Royal Family. Their blood lines bring with them responsibility and authority that impacts the society around them.

In Matthew 1:1-17, we see the family tree of Jesus Christ. This family tree lets us know a few things:

1. It shows us that Jesus (the Son of God) became fully human at His earthly birth. He did not just become “human-like,” He PERSONALLY took on flesh and dwelt among us. Therefore, we do not have a Savior who cannot relate to us, but we have One who knows what it means to live in this world. His lineage is a reminder of that.
2. It shows us that Jesus genealogy sets Him up for a WORLD-WIDE impact. He is a descendant of Abraham, reminding us that He is ethnically a Jew, thus continuing the fulfillment of God’s promises to His people long ago. Also, we see that Jesus’ great, great, great, great, great Grandpa was David – a reminder that Jesus would be the promised descendant of David to sit on the throne of God and reign forever. His family tree supports and qualifies Him for not just personal influence.
3. It shows us that God’s grace in Jesus is for all who believe in Him. Inside of this genealogy are foreigners (Ruth and Rehab), the publicly disgraced (wife of Uriah), and those who have committed very consequential sins (David - among others). Yet all these show up in the royal lineage of Jesus. They are there NOT because they are great people, but because our God is gracious. . . . and He wants us to know His grace runs in the family.

At Christmastime, we sometimes skip the beginning verses of Matthew 1:1-17 and begin our Scripture reading when the Angels show up in 1:18ff. When we do that, we miss the

blessing of generations . . . reminding us of the PERSONAL and WORLD shaping reality of Jesus' life. Scan over the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 and see how many names you recognize.

December 19:

Jesus is God with us: The Word to Joseph

Read: Matthew 1:18-19

For good reason, Mary (the mother of Jesus) gets a lot of attention in the Christmas story. After all, the Gospel of Luke gives us a number of details (throughout Luke 1-2) about Mary's experiences while Jesus was in the womb and at His birth. Further, it seems as though Joseph died by the time Jesus' public ministry took off, while Mary lived on. Therefore, there are more biblical records of Mary's experience than Joseph's.

All that said, it is important for us to think through Joseph's experience in the story of Jesus' birth – as it is a remarkable story of faith and faithfulness.

Matthew 1:18-25 tells the story of Joseph's experience during the time Jesus was inside Mary's womb. Joseph and Mary were betrothed, but not yet married. This meant that they had made the commitment to spend the rest of their lives together, but they had not yet begun to live together and sleep together. This month, we have already looked at Mary's experience from Luke 1 as God announced (through an Angel) that Mary would be pregnant (even though she was a virgin) and have a Son who would be the Messiah. This was HUGE news, and certainly would have been hard to believe for anyone who was not talking to Angels! And at first, Joseph was NOT talking to Angels. God first brought the news to Mary before He brought the news to Joseph. So, with Mary pregnant, and Joseph looking only to natural explanations for this situation, Joseph decides to divorce Mary quietly – probably so that she could then marry whoever was the father of the child.

But it was not God's will that Joseph would leave Mary. So, an Angel intervened and visited Joseph to tell him that Mary's child was indeed supernatural, and that Mary was telling the truth that the Baby was the Messiah.

Can you imagine being a fly on the wall of Joseph's room as he prays out loud, processing the news of Mary's pregnancy and the Angel's visit. What must Joseph have been thinking in that moment? Ultimately, Joseph chooses to trust the Lord (and not his emotion, reason, or logic) and stay with Mary. As a result, generations of people all over the world have named their kids "Joe" and put statues of him out each Christmas season. What a great choice Joseph made!

Take a moment and ponder the things about God that don't make sense to you. Things you might wish to "dismiss quietly" instead of receiving them as true. Though God's ways are sometimes "strange" to us, there is salvation and blessing in God's plans in this world.

December 20:

Jesus is God with us: Angelic Announcement #2

Read: Matthew 1:20-25

Common sense is a form of the common grace God has given to humanity. When we see a burner on the stove that is glowing red, we don't touch it - assuming it is hot. When we see a thunderstorm brewing on the horizon, we don't start a round of golf - knowing that the metal clubs in our hands would be all too attractive for a stray bolt of lightning. Patterns in nature and our experience in practice help us form expectations from which we interact with the world around us. It is a blessing that we have instincts that guide and protect.

This phenomena is not new to us in the 21st century, it has been around since the beginning of time. 2,000 years ago, Joseph (Jesus' earthly father) also had common sense, informed by the patterns he had experienced in the world. That is why when Joseph hears that Mary is pregnant he assumes she has slept with another man. Being a noble man whose relationship with Mary was pure, Joseph knew he could not be the father, but common sense told him that some other dude must be responsible. This made all the sense in the world to Joseph.

Only thing is ... Joseph was wrong. Mary had not been sleeping around. The child was from a supernatural origin - a virgin conception.

The way God lets Joseph know about this is through an angelic visitation. In Matthew 1:20-25, an angel meets with Joseph and reveals that Joseph's instincts (in this instance) are wrong, because God had intervened. The child was not a cause for shame, but was the Savior of the world! Thankfully Joseph listened to God's proclamation, even when it went against his first instincts.

As we reflect on this principle today, I know that we will not be visited by angels with similar announcements in our lives. That said, all us will encounter things that don't jive with our instincts. We think that salvation has to be about us being "good enough." We assume that certain behaviors the Bible calls sin can never be overcome in our lives. We imagine that there is no way for certain people to really experience life change. We just assume that is the case, because in our lives, we have seen patterns confirming the rationale of these opinions. If you are thinking along these lines today, may you be visited by the revelation of Scripture today to remind you what God can really do.

- "For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith. It is a gift of God. Not as a result of works that no one should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is not about being good enough, salvation is about God's goodness and grace saving us in spite of us ... simply as we respond in faith.

- “... the body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.” (Romans 6:6) “walk by the Spirit and you will in no way carry out the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16). Because of what Jesus has done for us, we HAVE BEEN liberated from sin’s necessary rule in our lives, and by faith, we can depend on the Spirit’s power to guide us away from even the strongest of temptations.
- Paul was a persecutor of the church. But Jesus changed Him. This lets us know that He can change us as well!

Thankfully God gives us common sense ... but sometimes things don't fit the pattern. In these cases God gives us special revelation in the Scriptures (just like the special revelation God gave to Joseph through the angel) to recalibrate our thinking and let us know of a greater reality.

Like Joseph, have the courage to take God at His Word this holiday season.

December 27:

Jesus is God with us: Caesar as a footnote

Read: Luke 2:1-2

Growing up I was very optimistic about my future. Let me give you an example. Back in 1984 when the Olympics were in Los Angeles, I remember dreaming that one day I would be a part of the U.S. Olympic basketball team. I loved playing basketball, and thought I had a “realistic” shot at making the team one day. I actually did the math and thought that I would only have two chances to make the team – 1992 and 1996. I thought I would only have the chance for those two Olympics because I would be in the NBA in 1997, thus making me ineligible for an amateur competition (the Olympics at that time were only open to amateurs). Best I can tell, I wanted to be an Olympian for two reasons:

1. A love of America. Putting on the stars and bars and taking on the world was an incredibly motivating idea.
2. A love of Basketball. I thought I had the skills to compete.

By the time 1992 rolled around, I no longer lived in Bartlesville . . . and I no longer thought I could be an Olympian. Though the inclusion of the professionals did not help me (thanks a lot Dream Team), the reason I did not make it to the Olympics in 1992 was that I was not good enough to make the team. Time has an incredible ability to kill our dreams, doesn't it? The longer we live, the more we are in tune with our own abilities and liabilities. The more basketball I played against better and better competition, the more I realized that I was not going to be the next Mark Price or even the next Tim Legler. My talent ceiling was 6A sports in Oklahoma. Getting a realistic picture of what I could accomplish caused me to alter my idealistic notion of being an Olympic champion.

What about you? What did you used to think you were going to grow up to be? How has time changed your hopes and dreams?

While it is fun and nostalgic to look back on our dreams of fame, it is tragic when we let the passing of time ebb away at the confidence we have in our spiritual lives. For far too many of us, we trust God with less each passing year. This happens because over time we become more and more acquainted with our lack of ability to accomplish things we genuinely desire. Year after year, an illness remains, a relationship deteriorates, a sin struggle lingers, depression clings on. Because of the persistent nature of some of our struggles, and our lack of ability to change them, we begin to trust God with less. As we become aware of our liabilities, we begin to limit our expectations. When we limit our expectations, we shrink our dreams. When we shrink our dreams, we have a tendency to shrink our God as well.

The flaw in all this is that we are attaching our hopes and dreams in the areas that matter most to us only to our own ability. As believers in Jesus Christ, we have a God we can trust for things way larger than that! Think about it: if you are a believer in Jesus, you are trusting God for forgiveness of all your sins. Your ability to be forgiven has nothing to do with your ability to accomplish something yourself, but it has to do with God's ability to do more to you and through you than you could ever do alone! God forgives by sending His Son to die on the cross for us. That is how we are forgiven. However, as believers live out their spiritual lives, we can allow time to cause us to focus more on what we can do and less on what God can do. When we do that, our vision for tomorrow deflates.

This year, this Christmas, I want to encourage you to inflate your vision again. Trust God more this coming year for things bigger than what you can accomplish on your own. I want to encourage you in this direction by looking at the first few words in Luke 2. At the beginning of the story of Jesus' birth, Luke says this, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus. . ." If you have been a Christian for a long time (or if you have recently watched the "Charlie Brown Christmas" special), no doubt these words are very familiar to you. In fact, the name Caesar Augustus is one of the most famous names of any Caesar in the history of the Roman Empire. But who was Caesar Augustus and why do we know his name today? Answering that question is a very interesting story.

In 63 BC, a young man named Gaius Octavius was born. Octavius was in the Roman army. At that time, a man named Julius Caesar was the dictator of Rome. Julius noticed the great skill and leadership ability that Octavius had. Octavius was Julius's nephew. Julius had no children of his own. Unknown to Octavius, Julius had written into his will to adopt Octavius upon his death, and make him the heir to his fortune and political successor. On the Ides of March, in 44 BC, Julius Caesar was assassinated by political adversaries in the Roman Senate. Octavius was summoned to Rome to hear a reading of his late Uncle's will. In the will, Octavius found out his future would be changed forever. He had been post-humously adopted by his uncle Julius and at the age of 19, Octavius had become the leader of Rome. As a tribute, Octavius took on Julius's name "Caesar," making him Octavius Caesar. In 42 BC, the Roman Senate deified Julius Caesar, making him the "Divine Julius" and Octavius, "The Son of the Divine" or as we might say, he became known as the "Son of God." Then, in a twist that changed the course of Rome, Octavius changed the Roman constitution making himself an Emperor and Rome an Empire. At that time, they changed his name to Augustus . . . which means "Sacred one" . . . Thus Augustus Caesar became known as the Sacred One, the Son of God. He was the apparent leader of the world at the time of Jesus birth.

Caesar Augustus was such a powerful man that he was able to speak a word and make the entire Roman Empire move. When you are an emperor and people think you are a god, you have lots of power. That is why when Caesar developed a new tax code and

said that people needed to go to their ancestral homes to register, people started walking – among them Mary and Joseph.

Now imagine that you were alive in the Roman Empire on the night that Jesus was born, and imagine that you were walking with a set of travelers to the town of Bethlehem to register for the census. Imagine that someone were to say to you that alive in the world at that time was one known as the Son of God, the Sacred one, who would be known for 2,000 years and counting into the future. Imagine that someone were to tell you on the way to Bethlehem that 2,000 years later all of human history would hinge around this Son of God and what He would accomplish with His life. Imagine that someone were to tell you that 2,000 years later, people would look at pictures and symbols of this Sacred One and think of how the Son of God had changed their lives. Imagine that. I would imagine that if someone would have told you all that on that night, you would have thought they were talking about Caesar Augustus. In reality, however, they were talking about a child that would be born later that night in a cave and placed in an animals feeding bin.

Despite the drastic differences between Jesus and Augustus on the first Christmas night (one in a manger, the other on a throne), the world has come to remember the one, only because of His association with the other. Think about it, the man who was responsible for starting the Roman Empire . . . the man who was known as a god by the most advanced civilization in the world at that time, would be known to us only because he was the ruler at the time of the birth of Jesus Christ. As Andy Stanley has correctly said, Augustus Caesar is merely a footnote in the history of God's Story in Christ. Men and women, we serve a God who can make a baby born in a manger infinitely more powerful than the leader of the "free world."

This Christmas, as you ponder anew what the Almighty can do, I want you to stop limiting what God can do. I want you to renew your belief that God can do big things. As the Christmas story is read and you hear of Caesar Augustus, I want you to remember the power of God. Caesar thought he was a god and tried to make himself famous, but in the end, he was a footnote in history. Time has taught us of the limitations of human power. However, time has also taught us of the enduring nature of God's story. When we are attached to Christ, He can do infinitely abundantly beyond all we ask or think. I want you to trust God again for big things this year, because we serve a big God.

Now, I want to ask you this question. Who are you trusting tonight? For the problem of our sin. For the problem of our uncertainty. For the problem of our mortality. For the things you truly long for. Who are you trusting? Yourself? The best a person could do is what Augustus did . . . and he is rotting in a tomb. Trust instead in the One who has gone from the manger to a throne that will never be unseated. He can offer us forgiveness, and hope. He is the One we orient our history around. His story gives meaning to ours. My dreams are bigger because I am a part of His team.

December 22:

Jesus is God with us: Moving the pieces into place

Read: Luke 2:3-5, Micah 5:2

Football is the ultimate team game. It takes 11 men on each down to make a play work. This sounds like coach-speak, but it is actually gospel truth. For instance, if the quarterback drops back to throw a deep pass to the wide receiver, everyone must do their part for the play to work. If any member of the offensive line does not make their block, the quarterback does not have time to throw the pass. If the running back does not pick up the blitzing linebacker, the quarterback will be sacked. If the other wide receivers (the ones not being thrown the ball) do not run their routes, the intended receiver will be double-covered. If the quarterback does not throw the ball on target the receiver does not have a chance to catch it. If the receiver does not catch the ball, the play is a failure. Everyone must do his job for a single play to work. This makes football the ultimate team game.

Even when a play is not “about them” everyone must do their part in order for the play to work. This is different than other sports. On a baseball team, the right fielder does nothing on a routine ground ball to the short stop. On a basketball team (while a very good team game), a great player can score lots of points playing a “one-on-one” kind of game. Only in football must everyone participate in order for the play to work.

I was thinking about this today as I was reflecting on the Christmas story . . . particularly the part of Jesus being born in Bethlehem. The fact that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem was promised by God through the prophet Micah in Micah 5:2, “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah. From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.” In light of our analogy here, Micah 5:2 is like a play that God was calling in the “huddle” with Israel 700 years before the birth of Christ. As Israel broke the huddle though, and prepared for the play, it would take millions of people in motion to pull off this “play” for the team.

Mary and Joseph did not live in Bethlehem. They lived in Nazareth. Nazareth was a small town about 70 miles from Bethlehem. In a world without planes, trains, or automobiles, it was certainly not likely that Mary would give birth in Bethlehem. So, in order for God’s play to unfold, everyone had to do his or her part to get Mary to Bethlehem. Luke 2:1 tells us that Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census to be taken. In order for all the people who lived in the Roman Empire to be counted, Caesar wanted everyone to travel to their ancestral home. While Caesar did not do this intending to see the Messiah born in the proper town, God used Caesar’s decree to properly execute His play. Imagine the scene . . . in order to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem (their ancestral home) at the time of Jesus birth (as Luke 2:3-5 indicates), the

decree for the census had to be issued at just the right time and would mandate that 4.2 million people would travel to their home towns to be counted. (4.2 million is the count Caesar took from this census).

Think about that for a moment. 4.2 million people probably wondered why they were traveling . . . why they needed to be counted. Even though the “ball” was not coming to them, they were playing an important part in the unfolding of God’s play.

As I ponder the significance of the 4.2 million people moving around the Mediterranean in response to Caesar’s decree, I am reminded that at times the events of my life will unfold in ways that have me playing a significant part in God’s plan, but will not feature me “getting the ball.” We sometimes ask questions like “Why do I have this job?” “What was that all about?” “What was the point of that relationship/conversation/etc.?” Usually when we ask these questions we ask them because we assume that we will be featured in the “play.” In reality, we are always playing a part in God’s purposes, though sometimes we are not the ones getting the “ball.” From Bethlehem we see that the unfolding of God’s will is ultimately a team experience.

December 23:

Jesus is God with us: Angelic Announcement #3

Read: Luke 2:6-7, 12

A “manger” is an animal’s feeding trough. After Jesus’ birth, Mary and Joseph placed Him in one such trough. This reality is sung about in the song “Away in a Manger.” This fact is so commonplace to us since the Christmas story is so familiar. However, have you ever stopped to wonder exactly WHY God had Jesus placed in a manger that first Christmas day?

While certainly the repurposed manger helped symbolize the humility of Jesus, Luke 2:12 gives us the specific reason for the trough. “And this will be a sign for you, you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in the manger.” These words (spoken by the Angels to the shepherds, inviting them to visit Jesus after His birth) indicate that the manger crib was the sign to let the shepherds know which baby Jesus was. In other words, there were other babies in Bethlehem that night, but only one was wrapped in cloth and lying in an animal’s feeding trough. That One was Jesus.

Since every Jewish mom would wrap their child in cloths, it was the manger that highlighted Jesus’ identity as the Son of God. The Angels basically used the manger as a spotlight. The shepherds would go house to house until they found the baby in the feeding trough. When they found THAT child, they would worship Him.

I think it is important to reflect on the BED Jesus lay in being the distinguishing factor as to His identity. This lets us know that He otherwise LOOKED like a normal child. He was not glowing in holiness . . . He looked normal. He was not talking in perfect language . . . He sounded like a normal baby (meaning He probably was crying, despite what the lyrics of the Christmas Carol might suggest). Everything about Jesus looked normal, so the Angels could not identify Jesus to the shepherds through His physical appearance. So they described the bed He lay in.

Friends, this simple point helps remind us that the Son of God really did become the Son of Man. Jesus really did become fully human, identifying down to all the sights and sounds of “normal.” This reminds us that, “For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:15-16)” Jesus knows what it means to live a normal human life. He lived a “normal” human life in every way . . . except that He did not sin. Therefore, He can help us and forgive us as we deal with the sin in our own life as well!

As you sing “Away in a Manger” this Christmas season, be reminded that Jesus’ bed (not His body) revealed His uniqueness that first Christmas night. He knows normal, and so He can help normal people – like you and me.

December 24:

Jesus is God with us: Shepherds' Response

Read: Luke 2:15-20

Imagine that you were the shepherds that first Christmas night. You were gathered out on the hillsides surrounding Bethlehem watching your livestock. You were bundled up to keep warm. Having never been a rancher or taken care of any animal larger than a Beagle, I have a hard time imagining what they were doing. My best guess is that they were sitting by the fire . . . maybe singing a song.

As the they sat there, these shepherds saw an impressive sight. It is hard for me to imagine what shepherds were doing on that Christmas night, but it was even harder for the shepherds to imagine the sight they were getting ready to behold. Out of no where angels appeared in the sky singing a new song. They were singing "Gloria in Excelsis Deo!" For me today, it is easy to imagine the shepherds seeing the angels . . . this is a story I have heard since I was born . . . but for the shepherds, this was a very "out of the ordinary" situation. It was not normal for them to see angels on the hillside. This was a unique event! The angels told the shepherds to go to Bethlehem and see a baby which was the Savior of the world.

The shepherds quickly took off for Bethlehem. Can you imagine the conversation they may have had with each other all the way to the stable? "I wonder what He looks like? What could this all mean? I wonder if everyone got this same announcement . . . if so, I wonder how long we will have to wait in line!?" The questions would have no doubt fired back and forth throughout their walk/run to the manger.

Upon arriving on the scene, however, I am sure the shepherds were probably scratching their heads a bit. There was no line outside the stable filled with government and religious dignitaries and local celebrities. Upon entering the stable, the place smelled more like a barn full of animals than the temple incense. As they approached the baby in the manger, no halo circled His head, and the child was probably crying for His mother to give Him more milk. While the text does not say it, I am guessing that the shepherds were probably wondering (either aloud or to each other) if they had heard the angels correctly. Given the disparity between what they saw and what they had heard, these old school cowboys were placed in a spot that is very familiar to us . . . they were being asked to take God at His Word.

I walk through this story today because many times as I read the Christmas story I think, if only all people could see what the shepherds saw then all people would believe that Jesus is the Savior of the world. To my old way of thinking, the shepherds, based on what they had seen, would not have needed a lot of faith to believe in Jesus as their

Savior. The reality, though, is that I still think it took LOTS OF FAITH for the shepherds to believe. In fact, they did not have some of the benefits that we have.

When the shepherds saw Jesus in Bethlehem, they had never heard Jesus preach; they had never seen Him work miracles; they had never imagined the cross; they had never conceived the empty tomb. While they had an angel declaration, there were many facts of the story that they did not have. Based on what they knew, they were asked to take God at His Word (through the angels) and trust Him with the rest. As people today, we have record of His preaching, miracles, death and resurrection. We have the testimony of 2,000 years of Church History, and the corroborating evidence of ancient historians. Given that, however, we have never seen Jesus face to face, and angels have not visited us on hillsides. Based on what we know, however, we are asked to take God at His Word (through the Bible) and trust Him with the rest. When we do this, great blessings come our way.

The Apostle Peter wrote a letter to the first generation of Christians who were growing up in our present reality . . . people who had the testimony of eye-witnesses and the Scripture, but had not physically seen Jesus. To this group (to us) Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:8-9, "Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." Peter celebrates the faith of those who have not seen Jesus, but still love and believe in Him. This verse of Scripture is talking to you and me!

1 Peter 1:8-9 further indicates that when we believe in Jesus based on what we know (but have not seen), we reap the same benefits that His first followers experienced, "an inexpressible joy" ("Good news of Great Joy") and "the salvation of our souls" ("a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord").

At first glance, it appears that we have very little in common with the shepherds that first Christmas night, but in the end, we have something big in common . . . we are both being asked to embrace by faith that the child born in Bethlehem is our Savior, Christ the Lord. Upon hearing this announcement this Christmas will you run to the manger as the shepherds did? Will you believe in Him based on what you know and trust Him for the things that are harder for you to understand? If you will, then joy and salvation await. Those are two Christmas gifts that are on everyone's list.

December 25:

Jesus is God with us: Magi's Response

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

Each nativity set in our house is arranged similarly. All the pieces are crowded together around the baby Jesus . . . as they should be. After all, Jesus was at the center of it all that first Christmas night. However, what is sometimes lost in nativity sets is how those pieces ARRIVED at the manger scene. Unlike the pieces that adorn our mantles, the participants at the first Advent did not all come out of the same box.

Most nativity scenes include 3 “wise men” or “magi.” Sometimes they are riding on camels and most every time they are carrying three neatly wrapped gifts. They are often painted the same color as the other pieces in the set. In our nativity scenes, they look like they totally belong. However, those familiar with first century Jewish culture would have been quite surprised at their inclusion in the story.

By the first century, the Magi were considered to be more “wise guys” than truly wise. The Magi were an ancient order of star-gazers from Babylon who made a living interpreting dreams and foretelling the future. While there were certainly some honest men among them, their reputation had deteriorated toward “snake oil salesmen” – people who would tell you what you wanted to hear just as long as they could make a buck. Most people did not view them as honorable, and certainly, no one viewed them as godly. Metaphorically, these Gentile heathens were about as far away from the birth of the Jewish Savior as you could possibly be. The Christmas song, “We Three Kings” talks about them traveling far to see Jesus, but their distance was even further spiritually than physically. For the wise men to look the part in our nativity sets, we should paint them contrasting colors and place them at the beginning of December in the garage while the rest of the pieces nestle together in the living room.

Yet in God's mercy, those who were far off are brought near by the birth of Jesus.

Further, they were brought near INTENTIONALLY. The Magi made it to the manger at the end of a very long and well thought out plan:

- 1400 years before the birth of Jesus, Balaam issued a prophecy about a star rising for the Messiah. This led Jews to a belief that a real star would one day be a sign that Messiah had arrived.
- 700 years before the birth of Jesus, Micah prophesied that the Messiah would be born in the little town of Bethlehem.
- 600 years before the birth of Jesus, the Jews were taken captive by the Babylonians. The Babylonian foreign policy of the time was to take the best and brightest people of the lands they conquered back to Babylon to work for the improvement of their culture.

- One of the Jews exported to Babylon in this captivity was Daniel. After demonstrating his ability to interpret dreams, Nebuchadnezzar promoted Daniel to become the overseer of (you guessed it) the Magi – see Daniel 2:48. Daniel would have been in a position to influence this group with his understanding of Jewish prophecy, which would have included the idea that one day the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem and a star would mark his arrival. This story was passed on from generation to generation of Magi until the birth of Jesus.
- At the time of Jesus' birth, God sends a special star in the sky to guide the Magi from Babylon/Persia to Israel to see the newborn king (see Matthew 2:1-12).

For 1,400 years, God had prepared a plan to invite those who were far off to come near and into a relationship with Himself. The night Jesus was born, the star rising in the sky made sense to the Magi because of years of divine planning. The pieces that began in the garage were brought into the living room by God's grace.

Contrast the response of the Gentile Magi with the response of the Jewish religious elite. In Matthew 2:1-12, we see the chief priests and scribes correctly answer the question, "where will the Messiah be born?" BUT, they do not do anything with that knowledge. Though the Savior of the world was right down the road from them, they were too busy or preoccupied to go check Him out! The absurdity of the Jewish leaders' actions might be best reconstructed in script form:

- HEROD: Hey Jewish religious leaders . . . there are some Magi out here who have traveled hundreds of miles over hard terrain following a special brand new star that they believe is leading them to see where the Savior of the world was born. Do you know where the Savior of the world is supposed to be born?
- RELIGIOUS LEADERS: Yeah, the Savior will be born in Bethlehem. The town directly underneath that brand new and bright shining star.
- HEROD: Oh really? Should we go check it out?
- RELIGIOUS LEADERS: Nope. Can you pass the pretzels? We are busy watching some paint dry.

The religious leaders of Israel WERE in the same box as Jesus. They were painted with the same colors. They did look like they belonged in the same room . . . however, the story of Matthew 2 shows us that sometimes those who look near are really VERY FAR away spiritually.

The contrast between the Magi and the Scribes and Priests is shocking. Those who were far are brought near while those who looked near are revealed to be very far away. The implications of this are extremely important to us at Christmas time.

Are you someone who is currently very far away from the Savior? Someone who is painted a totally different color than most church people? Maybe your life is marked by addiction, abuse, or sensuality. Maybe you are known by your peers for your marginalized business ethics or immoral lifestyle. Maybe you even follow another religion and do not own a Bible. Because of the sin in your life, you appear to be in another zip code compared to Jesus, much less in the same room. This Christmas, are you someone who is far from Him?

Or, are you someone who has grown up inside the church. You were dedicated at First Baptist Church, confirmed in the Catholic Church, and attend a non-denominational church . . . you just want to make sure your bases are covered! Do you have multiple bibles in your house, never miss a History channel documentary about the historical Jesus, and have a set of Jimmy Stewart "It's a Wonderful Life" morals. Do you realize that it is possible to have all these things . . . to look like you belong . . . yet to never really have begun a real relationship with God?

The beauty of the Christmas story is that there is hope . . . for people who are both FAR AND NEAR. If you feel very far away from the Savior today, know that God has been working since the foundation of the world to get the message of salvation to you. The combination of the life of Christ, the preservation of God's Word, the sending of the Holy Spirit, and your network of friends, family, and opportunities have served as a "star" to invite you to the manger this Christmas. The same set of signs have also been shared with those who are "near" the church. The big question is: will you (like the Magi) follow the signs God has given and worship the Savior this year, or will you simply enjoy some pretzels and ignore the real reason for this season (like the Jewish religious leaders)?

To those who are far or near, Jesus is the "good news of great joy for all the people." He is our Savior, so come let us adore Him.