

WORD & CRAFT

LIFESTYLE THEOLOGY FOR THE WOMAN OF GOD

advent 2016

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An Invitation to Wait

Read: Luke 1 & 2

I hate waiting.

Ever since I was a kid waiting has made the top-10 list of my least favorite things to do. Whether I waiting for my turn on the slide, waiting to use the glitter when the girl next to me in Sunday School was finished, or waiting through the previews for the movie to start, I would tap my feet and audibly sigh in anguish.

As an adult, I would like to imagine I am better at waiting, but my imagination isn't that good. Waiting for change, waiting for the doctor to call with the results, waiting for plans to play out or dreams to come to reality can easily be my undoing.

Waiting gets to the grit of life. Waiting suspends us through time, extending our hopes and fears, and exhausting our endurance. We can tap our feet, fumble with our keys, and sigh in exacerbation, but, more often than not, we are powerless to bring our waiting to an end.

I used to think that waiting came in seasons. And, while in some ways it does, the reality is that we're all waiting for *something*. We're waiting for the light to turn green, waiting for an opportunity, waiting to be done with school, waiting for a job, waiting for a spouse, waiting for a baby, waiting for direction, waiting for healing, waiting for comfort. It may be our least favorite thing, but here we are nonetheless.

Advent is all about the fulfilment of waiting. The reality of the Christmas narrative in the New Testament is the fulfilment of the Old Testament's promises; those who were waiting for a Savior for hundreds of years find that

their waiting has come to a screeching halt in the birth of Christ. So if Advent is about the fulfilment of what was waited for, why does the season so easily provoke our longings? Why it is that when we set out the holiday décor we are pinched by the pang of what is not-yet? When you're waiting, even this season of fulfilment can provoke your longings all the more.

So this is the invitation I want to extend to you: Come in, sit down. Have a cup of coffee and wait with me. Together we will meander through the Biblical Text and meet characters who are also waiting. We will meet long-known characters and consider the many ways their waiting looks a lot like ours. And most importantly, we will sit in the thick of God's Word. We will, in the midst of our own waiting, plant our feet solidly on the promises of God. We will fix our eyes firmly on His character knowing that everything else will disappoint us.

Will you join me? Wait with me?

Spend some time reading Luke 1 & 2. Consider the various characters in the Advent narrative, and imagine what each might be waiting for. Spend some time thanking God for His Word, the Advent season, and that we are not alone in our waiting. Thank Him that we're in this together.

God, would You Yourself come and sit with us? Would You speak to us through Your Word and teach us through Your Text? Would You come and collide with us in Your way of power and gentleness and make Yourself known to us? Please come. We're waiting.

waiting for **child**

Divine Silence

Read: Luke 1:1-13a

The Old Testament closes with a thud. For years prophetic voices called out to the people of God to repent from their disobedience and return to their God. These prophets, the mouthpieces of Yahweh, have reminded Israel of God's promises and commands in every season of their lives. When they wanted a king just like the surrounding nations had, the prophets reminded them that only one King would rule with holiness and justice. When they wanted a place to call home the prophets reminded them that the Messiah would not have a place to lay His head. Year after year the prophets pointed the people to God, and year after year the people call for the prophets to hush. They stubbornly put their fingers in their ears, and, just like when they demanded a king, God gives them what they think they want. Silence falls over the Biblical narrative. Prophecy, God's words for God's people, ceases for more than 400 years.

The book of Luke opens into this Divine silence. God has not spoken in centuries. Entire generations have passed in which there is no utterance from heaven. When we arrive on the scene in Luke 1:5 we see that the priestly order is still intact; God's people are still faithfully attending to the ordinances of worship that were outlined in God's law. We can be encouraged and corrected by the faithfulness of the priesthood in the face of a silent heaven. And there, amidst the towering temple pillars and pristine worship spaces, we meet them: a temple priest named Zechariah, and his wife from the priestly line, Elizabeth.

We aren't told much about this couple, but in a few words the author of this narrative paints the whole of their lives for us in vivid detail:

they are righteous. Zechariah is of the division of Abijah, one of the most highly regarded divisions in the temple priesthood; Elizabeth, though not a priest herself, is from the line of Aaron and has priestly blood coursing through her veins. They are righteous, they follow God, they walk before Him in obedience to all His commands.

"But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years." (Luke 1:7, ESV used throughout)

For all their piety, for all their priestly bloodline, Zechariah and Elizabeth were not exempt from one of the most painful of human experiences: barrenness. It is safe for us to assume that for years the couple has asked the Lord for a child, and waited with anticipation and routine disappointment when their prayers were not answered. It might seem a bit odd to us, and even a bit cruel, that the author lines up the litany of their righteousness against the brokenness of their barrenness. The contrast seems a bit cruel, doesn't it? But what the author wants us to know is this: God is silent. As a priest, Zechariah serves in the temple of the Lord, and we can imagine that he has presented his request that Elizabeth's womb would conceive time and time again. Elizabeth, as a righteous and blameless woman, likely clung to the promises of the Old Testament that children are a blessing from the Lord, and likely called to mind the Psalmist: "Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them" (Psalm 127:3-5a). We have just heard that Elizabeth is a righteous woman. Why

Divine Silence

Continued

then was her quiver, and her womb, still so empty? In the face of their prayers and in the mist of their brokenness, heaven was silent.

“Now while [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.” (Luke 1:8-9)

The priestly order had a scheduled system of duties. One temple duty that was highly esteemed was burning incense in the inner courts of the temple. The Old Testament teaches us that each priest could only perform this holy ceremony once in his life (Exodus 30:7-8; 1 Samuel 2:28; 1 Chronicles 23:13; 2 Chronicles 29:11). This time, the lot fell to Zechariah. This was to be the very height of priestly experience and career.

We can imagine he prepared to perform this duty with some trepidation. As he adorned the layers of priestly garb, I imagine he did it with extra care. As he walked up the temple steps, I imagine there was an extra measure of sobriety in his steps. And as he stepped into the holy space, I imagine his every movement was calculated and consumed with care.

“And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard ...’” (Luke 1:11-13)

As Zechariah prepares the ordinances of worship, as he follows the memorized procedures he likely learned in childhood, he is struck by the unexpected. In the midst of what should have been a predictable procedure, an angel appears by the altar of incense. Appropriately so, Zechariah staggers back in fear. For centuries the priestly line has prepared him for the order of this custom, but nothing and no one has prepared him to come

face-to-face with a messenger from God. After all, in the face of such heavenly silence, would could have anticipated this?

“Do not be afraid ...” The angel’s words come as a welcome command. And do not miss this, sisters: *“for your prayer has been heard...”* God has heard the prayer of His servant. God has heard, and for the first time in centuries, God has spoken. God saw it fit at this moment in history, as Zechariah stands before the alter of incense, the pious husband of a blameless and barren wife, to break the silence of the ages. God has spoken. The wait is over.

Tomorrow we will look at the rest of what Gabriel said but today I want us to sit in the holiness of this moment. God broke the silence of heaven with these words: *“your prayer has been heard.”* Let us savor the promise this holds forth for us that when God is silent He is not deaf. When heaven does not answer our prayers, they have still been heard.

We worship a hearing God. In the pages of the Old Testament we hear prophets mock those who have turned from Yahweh and have, instead, worshiped idols saying that their gods *“have ears but cannot hear”* (Psalm 115:6). They looked at these little statues made of stone and said, *I see that your idol has ears, but this piece of stone cannot hear your prayers.* Not so with our God. Our God is a hearing God, and in our Text for today we see that He is a speaking God as well. Praise the Lord that in our cries for heaven help, though we may feel the weight of Divine silence, we can be confident that our prayers have been heard.

Spend some time today thanking God that He hears your prayers. Thank Him that His is able to speak and ready to listen to His people.

Answered Prayers

Read: Luke 1:13b-17

God has not only broken the age-old silence, but the messenger of God, Gabriel, tells Zechariah that his prayer has been heard. He follows with this statement: "and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John." An interesting aspect of this verse is the nature of the word "prayer." Though we can use this word to mean a long-standing, ongoing prayer, the word tense in the original context is referring to a specific prayer, a single prayer – most likely the prayer that Zechariah performed in the ceremony of burning the incense.

An initial reading of this passage would lead us to think that Zechariah spent time in the holy of holies praying for a son, but we know that this is not likely. Because of the stringent training and revered task of standing by the alter, it is not incredibly likely that Zechariah took that opportunity to present a personal request before the Lord. In fact, it is much more likely that Zechariah prayed one of the scripted prayers for Israel's redemption, according to the liturgy of the priesthood.

What this teaches us is that after Zechariah has prayed for Israel's redemption, according the ordinances of the priesthood, God's messenger tells him that his prayer has been heard and that Elizabeth would bear a son. Don't miss this: God's response to a request for Israel's redemption is the promise of Elizabeth's child, who will be named John. Gabriel goes on to describe the way in which this child will be set apart to prepare a way for the coming of the Messiah. The answer to Zechariah's request, the long-time request of the people of God, is the entrance of the Messianic era. God has answered Zechariah's prayer for Israel's redemption, and has invited him and his family to be a part of the entrance of the Redeemer into the world.

This is more than Zechariah could have ever hoped for! Not only has God answered his personal request to have a child, but that child will be a part of God's answer to the cry of the people of God throughout the Old Testament. Zechariah's child will be set apart, like the holy of holies in the Temple in which Zechariah stands. But more than that, the child will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb – a promise given to none other in the Scriptures. Old Testament believers were occasionally filled with the Spirit of God, and the Temple served as a physical location for the people to meet with God, but this child would be personally filled with the Spirit. It won't be until the New Testament Church experiences Pentecost that we see this kind of personal filling of the Spirit; even then, these individuals are not filled by God's Spirit from birth. This child, this prophet, and this filling of the Spirit are unique in every way. Everything Zechariah and the people of Israel know is about to change. The Messiah is coming! He is on His way! And John will be a part of the preparation for His coming.

We must never forget that everything we have as Christians hinges on the reality that God promised a Savior and that the Savior came. Every hope we have, every longing of our hearts, every area of waiting in our lives pales in comparison to the generations of waiting for the Messiah to come, and our current expectation that He will come again. Everything we have hinges on Christ. And guess what? He's on His way.

Spend some time thanking God for sending the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Thank Him that He kept His promise of sending the Messiah, and that, like Zechariah, He invites us and our families to be a part of His work.

a barren womb

IS FERTILE SOIL
— *for* —
GOD TO GROW OUR

birth

Faithful Still

Read: Luke 1:18-23

On the heels of Gabriel's promise of a child that will "make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Luke 1:17), Zechariah voices his unbelief. Perhaps it was his old age, or the fact that the Lord hadn't answered his prayer for years that made him question whether or not the angel was speaking the truth. In distrust Zechariah blurts out, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." Zechariah echoes the confusion and disbelief of Abraham when a child is likewise promised to the patriarch in his old age. Somewhere along the line, while Gabriel was speaking, Zechariah gains a little boldness because he boldly denies that what the Lord's messenger has promised can be fulfilled. Zechariah reminds Gabriel of his old age, the age of his wife, and just how unlikely it would be for them to conceive. And, testing the validity of the messenger's words, Zechariah asks for a sign.

The messenger of God does not respond with a reminder of others who have conceived in old age, nor does he list the litany of Yahweh's miraculous works throughout the Old Testament. No, he rightly reminds Zechariah who sent him.

"And the angel answered him, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.'"
(Luke 1:19-20)

Gabriel is speaking on behalf of God, and he reminds Zechariah that he bears the name,

authority, and glory of one who eternally abides God's presence. Sometimes, when we doubt God's Word or His promises we would do well to have a similar, firm reminder: the Author of those Words, the Anchor of these promises, is the glorious God of the universe.

Zechariah gets a sign, though I imagine it was not the kind of sign he had in mind. Gabriel promises that he will be mute. God has broken his silence, and the unbelief of God's promises poetically results in Zechariah's silence. The miraculous point that we cannot miss in the Text is this: regardless of Zechariah's unbelief, the words of God's messenger is that he will be silent "until the day that these things take place." The promise remains intact, the words will still come to be. Our disbelief does not render His promises ineffective. Our faithlessness does not render our God unfaithful. In the face of our doubting, in the midst of our unbelief, God is faithful still – with Zechariah, and with us.

Spend some time thanking the Lord that His Word is true. Confess times that you have neglected to esteem as holy the Author of His Word. Thank Him that when we are faithless He is faithful still.

Thorough Redemption

Read: Luke 1:24-25

God keeps His promises.

It is the story of the Old Testament, woven through many characters, lives, and longings: God keeps His promises. Just as Gabriel announced to Zechariah, Elizabeth's belly swells with the promised child. I can imagine the wonder she felt as she placed her hands tenderly on her growing abdomen. Though she was old, though her hair had long since grayed, this was an entirely new experience for her. She was pregnant. God had heard her prayers.

Though we are not told exactly why Elizabeth decides to keep her pregnancy hidden for five months, we are given a glimpse into her heart.

"Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people." (Luke 1:25)

Since children were considered a blessing in Old Testament covenants, childlessness was considered by some to be a curse. We are not told this in the Text explicitly, but we can imagine that other women reproached her, jeered at her, dismissed her due to her infertility. With careless words they wrote off all Elizabeth's known piety; in spitefulness, they discounted her blamelessness before the Lord and her obedience to His commands. I imagine that as these words played and replayed through Elizabeth's mind, the narrative of shame grew stronger and stronger. *Was this what her life would be about? Would she carry this shame with her for the rest of her days?* And with that child tucked securely in her womb, Elizabeth knows: God is about to rewrite the story.

I am quick to forget that when God redeems He redeems thoroughly. My requests for redemption are often not much more than empty shells compared to what the mighty arm of our Redeemer can do. Elizabeth experienced the total redemption of God firsthand. Her prayers had been heard, even after her husband failed to believe. Her desire for a child was met, even after her body aged beyond child-bearing expectations. God redeemed her longing for a child, and He didn't stop there. God was about to undo all the years of shame, guilt and fear that she carried around in her barren womb. God was in the business of removing her reproach, teaching her – and us – that nothing is beyond the redemptive power of our God. With Him, even a barren womb is fertile ground for God to grow our faith in His redemption. When our God redeems, He redeems entirely.

Spend some time thanking God that He is a capable and thorough Redeemer. Confess to Him any areas of your life that you have believed were beyond His redemption, and ask Him to restore your belief that He can redeem every aspect of your situation.

fulfilmment

WAITING FOR

Humility & Grace

Read: Luke 1:26-30

Gabriel's work is not done. His mission is not complete.

Gabriel, the same messenger of God who appeared to Zechariah, the same angel who only a few verses previously reminded a priest that he was sent by God and stands in the presence of God, is now sent to appear to another, a girl named Mary.

The Text tells us that Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth. At first, this might seem inconsequential. These location details may seem minute to our twenty-first century ears, but they harkened to the mind of the original hearer echoes of promises past. God sent His messenger to Nazareth, a small, seemingly unimportant town in Galilee – just as He promised. The Old Testament prophets assured the nation that their Savior would not come as a king in Rome or a warrior in the East, but that He would come in the most unlikely form – as an infant – and to the most unlikely of places – a small, unimpressive village in Nazareth. As the angel of God arrives on the scene, before we even hear the words he was sent to proclaim, we know that God is up to something.

We are not told much about the woman who his message is for, but similar to the announcement of Elizabeth's fertility, we are here told Mary's sexual status: she is a virgin. This virgin woman is betrothed to marry Joseph, and likely they are in the first of their two-stage betrothal process. First, a man would offer a gift (or bride price) to the father of the bride and the marriage would be arranged. This kind of commitment was as serious as if the wedding had already taken place; it was a season of preparation for the second stage of the

betrothal, when the bride would leave her father's house to live with her groom. Breaking the betrothal in either stage was considered serious and required divorce.

"And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!' But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.'" (Luke 1:28-30)

Gabriel greets Mary with a double expression of God's grace. He first calls her "favored one", indicating that God's grace rests on her, and tells her that she has found favor with God. It should not surprise us that the introduction of the coming of the Messiah is dripping with grace. The way that Christ comes is entirely fitting for the grace that God extended to the world in the act of sending His Son.

The Text tells us that Mary is confused by the words, and while we are not told why the words confused her, it is safe to wonder. I wonder if she may have questioned the favor of the Lord, thinking herself too average, too normal, too ordinary to experience the favor of God. While many will tell you that Mary was none of these things – that she was extraordinary, was supremely spiritual, and was somehow uniquely holy – I want to emphasize that if Mary speculated about her ordinariness, she was right. The beautiful thing about this narrative is that God acted in abundant grace, in extraordinary favor, on an ordinary girl. Yes, we are going to see that Mary responds with profound faith that many of us wonder if we could have possessed in the face of such an announcement. But what makes Mary unique

Humility & Grace

Continued

is not her self-possessed holiness or piety, but that our God chose her to be a woman of His blessing and invited her to play a specific role in His redemption plan. Let Mary's story draw you to worship the Lord who shows His favor to the most unlikely of people – you and me and Mary – not to worship the one who was chosen.

Gabriel's announcement of God's favor on Mary, and the coming announcement of the birth of the Messiah that we will look at tomorrow, strikes a sharp contrast to his meeting with Zechariah. Gabriel announced the birth of John in the temple, in the midst of the highest of holy ceremonies, to a pious priest. Here, he comes to an everyday woman, somewhere in an unnamed place. The announcement isn't grand or glorious, it isn't impressive or imposing. It is markedly simple, and surprisingly unstriking.

And isn't that just like our Jesus?

For all the ways God's people hoped He would come, He came in profound humility. He didn't come as a military general, but as a babe. He didn't come to a royal family, but to a betrothed virgin girl. His coming wasn't announced with trumpets and cymbals, but with favor and grace. This is our God. This is our Savior.

Spend some time reflecting on the humility of our God, and the lavish grace He extends to us – ordinary people – in Christ.

A King like David

Read: Luke 1:31-33

Gabriel, sent by God to Mary, gets to the heart of what He has been sent to proclaim: Mary is going to conceive and bear a Son. Gabriel tells Mary that she is to name this Son Jesus. Jesus was a fairly common Jewish name, but it holds an uncommon meaning. Jesus means: "Yahweh (the Hebrew name for God) saves". In the very name that Mary is given for her Son she is told that this child is not an ordinary child, but a child who is sent from the heart of God and stands at the heart of God's plan of redemption.

"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." (Luke 1:32)

Interestingly, after Gabriel announces to Mary that she is about to become a mother, he tells her that her child will be called the "Son of the Most High". Though she will be a mother, this child will claim God as His Father. This title, "Son of the Most High", has historical roots in the Old Testament (Luke 1:76; Luke 6:35; Acts 7:48; Mark 5:7). This is the name that the prophets proclaimed would represent the Messiah, the Savior who had finally come to rescue His people. Israel has repeatedly put their trust in men, and had been repeatedly disappointed. They needed more than a man to save them, they needed God. Israel needed the Son of the Most High to come and rescue them from their sin.

"And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:32-33)

When Israel put their trust in men to save them, those men often came in the form of a king. When Israel demanded a king like the nations that surrounded them, God gave them Saul. Saul was an impressive and imposing man, standing tall among his peers. In our modern day, we might say "he looks presidential." But Saul had a

divided heart, and often acted in spite and revenge (1 Samuel 15). God then blessed His people with a king of an unexpected kind: the shepherd boy, David (1 Samuel 16). Unlike Saul, David was unimpressive. He was a stinky shepherd who stayed out in the fields caring for his flock, likely for months on end. He was not spectacular, but he had a heart after God's. David was a true worshiper of God, and is the author of many of the Psalms. For years, Israel flourished under David's kingship; in many ways, his rule comprised "the golden years" of Israel's history. But as all earthly kingdoms do, his reign came to an end. Ungodly king after ungodly king followed, and Israel longed to return to the days of king David.

It was promised by the prophets that the Messiah would come in the line of king David (Jeremiah 23:5-6). This meant two things: 1) the Messiah would be a descendant of David's bloodline, and 2) He would, similar to David, have a heart after God's. Gabriel's announcement to Mary affirms to us that the Messiah had come to be King over the nation of Israel. Israel would finally have a king like David again, only this time His rule would last forever.

The Messiah was coming, and He was going to fulfil all the promises and expectations of the Old Testament prophets. He was coming just as He was promised to come, and he was coming through the virgin Mary. In these few verses we are reminded that we worship a God who keeps His promises. Just as the Messiah was predicted to come, just as the Lord promised He would come, He comes. Not one promise of our God falls idle; not one word He has spoken will fail to come to pass. God keeps His promises.

Spend some time thanking God that He is a promise-keeping God. Thank Him that He kept His promise to send a Messiah, our Savior.

loneliness

CAN SERVE TO REMIND US:

———— *we were not* ————

MADE TO BE SATISFIED WITH

this world

Nothing Impossible

Read: Luke 1:34-38

Mary is understandably confused by the angel's words. Gabriel has just told her that she will conceive and bear the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior of the world. Yet, Mary's betrothal has not yet fully been instated; she is still a virgin.

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

Do you notice the drastic difference between Zechariah's disbelief at Gabriel's words and Mary's honest confusion? Zechariah questions Gabriel by saying, in essence, "How can I know what you're saying is true? I need a sign," Mary's response expresses genuine belief mixed with an honest question. She doesn't demand a sign or insist that it is not possible for her to conceive, but she asks the messenger how it will come about given her state.

"And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.'" (Luke 1:35).

Gabriel tells Mary in no uncertain terms that her conception will be miraculous. Her pregnancy will be a direct result of God's intention, power, and activity. There were many religions in that day (and many that remain today) that taught that divine beings would breed with humans, particularly virgins, in order to increase their own sphere of influence or power. There were many myths and legends about gods forcing themselves upon women in order to reproduce a divine-human hybrid that would increase their rule. Note how different our God is than the false gods of this world. Gabriel expresses this incredibly powerful act of God in the most delicate of terms. And the child that would be

born would be called "holy." There is no indication that God is seeking to breed a half-human, half-divine child. No, this child will be fully human and fully God. He will be holy. There is no distortion or shame, nothing unholy or unwholesome. By the power of the Spirit, Mary would conceive a holy child who would be the Son of the Most High.

"And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'" (Luke 1:36-37)

Unlike Zechariah, Mary does not ask for a sign, but she is given one. Gabriel tells Mary that Elizabeth, who was known to be barren, is pregnant. As an expression of the capacity of God's power and love, Gabriel tells the tale of Elizabeth's redemption from her reproach, the story of her long-awaited child. In these few words we are reminded of God's power. It is as if Gabriel is telling us, "You thought a barren woman conceiving a child was miraculous? God is about to bring His Son into the world through a virgin womb." Gabriel contrasts Mary's conception with Elizabeth's to show the full breadth of God's power. And as we read, we agree: nothing will be impossible with God.

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

Mary humbly receives the angel's words. The woman who the angel referred to as a woman of God's favor, refers to herself as the servant (literally "maidservant") of God. Showing deep humility and reverence for the Lord and for His messenger, Mary submits herself to God's plan.

Nothing Impossible

Continued

Mary knows that this prophecy will bring suffering, she knows that it will bring pain, but she also seems to know something about the power of God. And in that knowledge she gives herself fully to the Lord.

The Messiah is coming. God's power and grace are lavishly displayed in these few verses, painting for us a portrait of our God's character and activity.

Spend some time praising God for His character, praise Him for using barren and virgin wombs to bring Himself glory, praise Him that nothing is impossible with Him.

Mary Visits Elizabeth

Read: Luke 1:39-45

Almost at once, Mary sets out to visit Elizabeth. Gabriel has told her that Elizabeth would be with child. In a way, this was the sign of God's power and activity that Gabriel gave to Mary, though she didn't request or demand a sign. Though we don't know exactly where Elizabeth and Zechariah live, the Text tells us it was in the hill country, which would inevitably require a journey.

"...and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb." (Luke 1:41a)

As Mary's voice reaches the ears of Elizabeth, John, though still in the womb, leaps with joy. Though John is still tucked safely in the abdomen of his mother, he is already expressing his prophetic voice. Before Elizabeth can see Mary with her own eyes, John is already preparing the way for the Christ child. Let this stand as yet another reminder in the Advent narrative that our God uses the most unlikely of people to play a central role in His redemption plan. We live in a world and an age that is utterly dismissive of the unborn, that still insists on calling an image-bearer in development "tissue" or a "bundle of cells." We see systemic strength exercised over these weak babies in development. And in this Text we are reminded that God chooses to use the weak things of this world to shame the strong (1 Corinthians 1:27). The child in Elizabeth's expanding abdomen is the first to recognize the Messiah. Before even the priest or his wife of priestly bloodline, John makes a way for the Christ.

"And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me

that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.'" (Luke 1:41b-44)

Elizabeth's first words to Mary are a poetic echo of the angel's; she called Mary "blessed", recognizing the favor of God upon her. Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit and inclined by the child-prophet in her womb, recognizes that Mary is pregnant and that she carries the Messiah. Elizabeth humbly and graciously wonders why she has been so blessed to receive a visit from the mother of her Lord. Though Elizabeth, finally carrying a child in her old age, could have clung to the prophecy over her own child, she rejoices with Mary. Elizabeth could have jealously fostered competition with Mary, a young mother who is not yet even married. But in the Spirit and in great graciousness, she genuinely rejoices in the soon-coming King of Israel that Mary is now carrying.

"'And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.'" (Luke 1:45)

Elizabeth praises Mary for her faithful response, for believing the words of the angel, as Zechariah failed to do. Even as she speaks these poetic words over Mary, her husband is mute due to his disbelief. Elizabeth rejoices with Mary that she has believed the words of the Lord, and with great hope awaits the fulfillment of God's promise.

Reflect on the many ways our God uses the weak things of this world to shame the strong; thank Him that He does so. Consider the areas of life where you experience jealousy; confess those things to the Lord and ask Him to help you rejoice with those who rejoice.

WAITING FOR
redemption

The Way of the Kingdom

Read: Luke 1:46-53

Mary responds to Elizabeth's poetic expression with poetry of her own.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed ... "(Luke 1:46-48)

We finally have a glimpse into Mary's inner person. When Gabriel told her that she would bear the Messiah, she doesn't say much. But here we have insight into her inner dialogue. First, Mary rejoices. The word "magnify" connotes an ongoing expression of praise and worship. Because of the prophecy of the coming Messiah, and the news that she would be His mother, Mary praises the Lord. Mary does this specifically because God has "looked on the humble estate of His servant." Similar to her words to Gabriel, Mary expresses the true humility of a maidservant, and is humbled and honored that God has looked on her. She is overwhelmed and blessed that, for generations to come, women will consider her blessed for the role she is privileged to play in God's redemption plan.

"... for He who is mighty has a done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation." (Luke 1:49-50)

In her prose that follows, Mary dwells on three aspects of God's character: His might, holiness, and mercy. Mary knows that it is by God's power that she is pregnant, by His holiness that the Messiah is coming, and by His mercy for remembering His generation-old promises to His people.

"He has shown strength with His arm; He has

scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; ... "(Luke 1:51-52)

Mary takes on a prophetic tone and proclaims the significance of what God has done in sending the Messiah. Though many said that He would not come, God has revealed His power in sending this Child. The mighty rulers of the day are put to shame by God's expression of power – instead of choosing a royal ruler to bear the King of the heaven, God has chosen the lowly.

"He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty..." (Luke 1:53)

In a world in which the rich lived in abundance and the poor often went hungry, Mary rejoices that in God's kingdom this injustice is reversed. The God that chooses the most unlikely of people to play central characters in His salvation narrative, fills the hungry with good things. The kingdom of God is a powerful reversal of the unjust world that Mary and Elizabeth are living in.

The Messiah's arrival will usher in a new era of God's work in the world. The coming of Jesus marks the beginning of God establishing His Kingdom. And the way that the Christ is coming tells her (and us) something about the Kingdom Jesus has come to establish. Mary rejoices that God's economy is a reversal of the economy of the world. The lowly are chosen, the humble are exalted, and the poor have full bellies. The Kingdom of God does not resemble the kingdom of man. This is the way of the Gospel.

Spend some time thanking God for the way of His Kingdom. Thank Him for coming to us, the least of these.

Promise Kept

Read: Luke 1:46-56

Yesterday we read Mary's joyful words that remind us that God's Kingdom is a reversal of the Kingdom of man: the lowly are chosen, the humble are exalted, and the poor have full bellies. Mary now turns her poetic praise to the bigger picture of what God is doing. She lifts her gaze from the way God has looked upon her, and to praise Him that He has also remembered her nation.

"He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our father, to Abraham and His offspring forever." (Luke 1:54-55)

Mary proclaims that what God is doing in sending this Child is not a new thing but the fulfillment of His age-old promises. This is not a new story, but a climactic chapter in the age-old tale of His grace. God promised to bless Abraham with a child that would result in the blessing of all nations, and He is keeping that promise by sending Jesus. The Child growing in her belly is the Child of the Abrahamic line who will embody God's blessing to the world; through Jesus' coming, the promises God spoke long ago will finally be fulfilled. Though Israel wandered from God, God did not forget His promise. In this Advent act He has not only remembered the promise He spoke, and in His great mercy, He is keeping that promise.

Mary overflows with praise for what He has done for her with one major underscoring theme: God's work in sending the Messiah is all a result of God's character. Because Mary knows the character of God, she sees His words to her as an expression of who God is, who He has promised to be, and the faithful way that He keeps His promises.

We do not live in a world of kept promises. Parents who hurt, spouses who leave, pastors who keep secrets and others who don't keep ours. Because we are a people with flawed character, we live in a world of broken promises. Let Mary's words sink like salve into the deep brokenness of our hearts, into every crevice of our broken relationships: God always keeps His promises.

He promised to give Abraham a son: promise kept (Genesis 18, 21).

He promised to free Israel from Egypt's grasp: promise kept (Exodus 6:6, 14).

He promised to send a Savior: promise kept (Genesis 3, Luke 2).

Do let the broken promises around you keep you from worshiping the One who always, always keeps His promises.

Spend some time thanking God for His character. Name some specific attributes that you are thankful for. Thank God that, because of His character, He always keeps His promises.

“

MY DAUGHTER,

**DO YOU
TRUST ME**

WHEN THEN ANSWER IS

WAIT?

”

Merciful Redemption

Read: Luke 1:57-66

After Mary returns home Elizabeth's due date arrives. Just as the angel promised, the child is a boy.

The interest of Elizabeth's neighbors and friends is proportionate to the years of barrenness that she experienced. Her acquaintances and relatives rejoice with her that God has been merciful, and in her old age has given her and Zechariah a son to carry on their family line.

"And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have him called Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, 'No; he shall be called John.' And they said to her, 'None of your relatives is called by this name.'" (Luke 59-61)

As the Old Testament law dictated, baby boys were to be circumcised when they were eight days old. Even from such a young age they were to bear the physical marks in their bodies that God had set the nation apart and called them to be His people. Because of Zechariah's and Elizabeth's clear piety and obedience to the law of God, it is not surprising that, surrounded by fellow Israelites, the newborn was given this sign of the covenant.

The friends and family that are present are a bit presumptuous in assuming they would have any naming influence over the child. While it is not uncommon for a child to be named after the father, particularly a first born son, it was not a cultural standard. I imagine that the onlookers assumed that after all these years of waiting that Zechariah would want a mini "Z" running around the house. But Elizabeth's words are absolutely emphatic: No. Elizabeth insists that his name will be John. Embracing the promise of God through Gabriel, she calls her son by the name of that promise: John.

"And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name will be John.' And they all wondered." (Luke 1:62-63)

The company seeks to have Zechariah overrule Elizabeth, and they gesture to him (perhaps forgetting that he was mute and not deaf), insisting that he weigh in. Asking for something to write with, Zechariah writes a single sentence that is dripping with faith: His name will be John. In the original Text, "John" is the first word; in a way, it reads, "John his name will be." Zechariah left no room for question, emphatically placing the name of the promise at the forefront of his answer. By stating name given to him by Gabriel in the temple the place of prominence in his answer, he expresses the very faith that he formerly lacked.

And Zechariah is given the gift of redemption. For nine months has sat mute, unable to speak due to his disbelief in the promises of God. How many times, I wonder, did he wish he could take back his careless words? How often did he replay the scene and feel shame over his demand for a sign? How many long nights passed in which he longed for redemption from his unbelief? God does not have to give us opportunities to redeem our past, but sometimes, in His great mercy, He does. Just like He did for Zechariah. And as the rest of the Christ story will tell us, we worship a God of redemption.

Spend some time reflecting on God's character as a Redeemer. Thank Him for His mercy in often giving us the opportunity to redeem past choices.

The Sun Shall Rise

Read: Luke 1:67-80

Zechariah receives his much-awaited redemption. As soon as he pushes the final bit of ink to spell out, "John will be his name" his speech is returned. His restoration is full and immediate. Though several months prior he disbelieved the promises of God, Zechariah has professed and proclaimed full belief, and his speech is fully restored.

The first words off his lips compose a joyful song of thanks to the God who has restored him. Similar to Mary's song, Zechariah's evidences the work of the Spirit and proclaims God's character.

"And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old ...'" (Luke 1:67-70)

Zechariah praises the God who has visited His people. After years of seeming absence and centuries of prophetic silence, God has come to His people in the angel Gabriel. Though he was once confused and confounded by Gabriel's visitation, Zechariah has fully embraced the God who visits His people. Zechariah sings that God has raised up a horn of salvation. Throughout the Old Testament we see the word "horn" used to connote strength (2 Samuel 22:3; Psalm 18:2) and Zechariah praises God for His strength to save. By sending the Messiah, Zechariah knows that God has been strong in His salvation, just as He promised through the prophets long ago.

"...that we should be saved from our enemies

and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.'" (Luke 1: 71-75)

Zechariah rightly recognizes that God is not up to something new, but that the coming of the Messiah is the fulfillment of the promises He made to generations past. We might assume that Zechariah's loosed tongue would cause him to revel at the long-awaited son that Elizabeth just delivered; after all, John was the fulfillment of a promise as well. But Zechariah does not miss the bigger thing that God is up to. God has not just given him a son, God has not just sent a prophet, God has not just filled someone with the Spirit from the womb. No, God is keeping His age-old promise, the promise originally spoken to Abraham centuries before Zechariah (Genesis 12). God is sending a Savior.

"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'" (Luke 1:76-79)

Turning his attention to John in the cradle, Zechariah tells his son about God's glorious plan for him. Echoing the words the angel Gabriel spoke, Zechariah tells John that he

The Sun Shall Rise

Continued

the privilege to play a poignant role in God's redemptive plan: John will prepare the way for the Most High.

Zechariah says that John will be a prophet of the Most High. This should stagger us, and drop our jaws to the floor! There has not been a prophet in over 400 years – not one in Zechariah's lifetime. And now, this disbelieving priest has embraced the promises of God and tells his son, John, that he will be a prophet of the Most High. God will speak. Finally and fully, God will make His word and will known among men, and He will do so through John.

John's prophetic voice will have one key message: make way for the coming of the Christ. John will serve as a guide for the people, directing them to Jesus. John will serve as a sign post, always pointing God's people to God's Son. And His message about Christ will proclaim that the end of the darkness has come in the person of Jesus! John will profess and proclaim that in Jesus the night is finally over. The Light is dawning.

Spend some time reflecting on the ways God has redeemed you; thank Him. Consider the way that your story of redemption is a part of the grander story of God's redemptive plan; thank Him. Praise our God that He has sent the Light of the world to us in the person of Christ.

The Fall & Redemption

Read: Luke 2:1-7

Mary and Joseph set out on the long journey from their hometown to the home of Joseph's ancestors. The Text reminds us again - as if to make it painstakingly clear that the child in Mary's womb is the Messiah - that Joseph is from the bloodline of King David, the line through which the Christ was promised to come. After miles of travel, likely by foot or mule, they finally arrive in Bethlehem. And Mary's time comes.

Can you imagine the fear that accompanied her - this new, young, inexperienced mother? Can you imagine the anxiety that throbbed in Joseph's heart? Entrusted with such a sacred task, bearing the King of the world, and they couldn't even find a sanitary room for His delivery. They were invited to play a central role in the redemptive narrative of God, and couldn't even find a room in an inn.

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

And then in the simplest and most sacred terms, we read that the Christ is born. Just as the angel promised, the child is a boy. Mary swaddles her Son in strips of torn cloth that bound His little body tightly and securely. That Mary wrapped Him herself shows that this was a lonely delivery; there was no midwife nearby to assist her, no experienced mother to show her how to nurse the first time. But with the bravery of a woman of God and by the comfort of the Spirit of God, Mary births her first Son, alone in a stable. And she lays Him to sleep in a feeding trough.

This is the glory of God, dear sister! For all the

hustle and bustle going on outside that stable, for all the Israelites who were awaiting a king to come and overthrow their political enemies, for all the pious Jews in the temple speculating about the savior who would restore their lost territory to them, the Messiah arrives unnoticed, in quiet humility. And in the midst of the straw and animal stench, we see the majesty of our King! Our God did not come to thrones or royalty, palaces or piety, but He came to a virgin teen mother, in a stable, lying in a manger. He came while we were all preoccupied with other things, too busy to notice, and too occupied to grant Him room in our inn - and He still came!

The glory of our King is not found despite His lowly birth, but precisely because of it. No other God would come in such humility, no other King would proclaim strength in weakness, no other Savior would see redemption of the world in such loneliness. There was no cohort to welcome Him, no entourage awaiting His arrival. But as He lay in that manger, and was tenderly cared for and nursed by an inexperienced mother, we behold our King!

When Eve reached her fingers to take the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, and she and Adam disobeyed God causing sin to enter the world, God handed down promised consequences (Genesis 3). Adam and Eve would be banished from God's immediate presence, and the world of blessing that they lived in would be broken. For Eve, this meant she would have great pain in childbirth. As Mary delivered the promised Son of God, through the toil and pain of birth, she experienced the reality of this fallen world. As her body contorted and writhed with pain, she

The Fall & Redemption

Continued

intimately knew the nearness of the fall. But as she held the Christ Child in her arms, she experienced the beginning of God's undoing of the fall as well. Though by human disobedience man could not be in the presence of God, God had come near. As Mary held that Child to her chest, she simultaneously experienced the reality of sin and the nearness of redemption. Though the fabric of creation is laced with sin and brokenness, in the coming of the Messiah, a single thread has been pulled, and the whole thing is started to unravel.

This is the way of the Gospel, sister! This is the way of our God! As followers of Christ we know the depth of our sin, but because of Christ - because of this very Child - we also know the extent of God's great redemption. Let your heart today swell with the paradox that is life in Christ; see the majesty of your God in His humility, and see within yourself the simultaneous reality of the fall and of God's redemption. And know this: He is just getting started.

Spend some time reflecting on the birth narrative of Christ. Thank God that He came in such humility to reveal His glory. Thank God that He is undoing the fall even now by the power of Christ.

waiting for
welcome

God Came Near

Read Luke 2:8-10

I watched her little hands wrap around the miniature cafe cup in her lap. A small mirror of her mother in every way, she sipped her hot chocolate, mimicking her mother who was drinking a latte beside her. She was pretty and petite, and couldn't have been older than seven. Her eyes wandered around the frost covered park, taking in the birds and the sun and other kids walking home from school.

That's when she saw him. A white-haired park attendant, his back bent by the years, collecting the public trash. His clothes were stained with mystery fluids from the garbage, his face and hands were dirty from the hard day's work behind, and his eyes were resigned to the work still ahead. Her little eyes watched him move from trash enclosure to trash enclosure, making his way through the park. Eventually reaching the trash can by her bench, her face twisted in a look of disgust as the smell of garbage reached her nose. She let out a little cry, "Mommy, can we go? I don't want to sit here next to *him*." Of course, her mother was horrified, but the park attendant's eyes revealed that the damage had already been done. He lifted his head ever so slightly, met the mother's eyes for a moment, and dropped his head with a slight nod. "I'm almost done here," he said.

The scenario is painful even to recall. This elderly man, working a hard and respectable job, bore the brunt of society's shame. He was dismissed because of his occupation and his appearance. He was relegated to the lowest rung of society's ladder. He was a shepherd.

In Luke 2, we read that shepherds were watching over their flocks at night in a field outside of Bethlehem. Though organic farming has come into vogue recently in the U.S., that wasn't the case in Bethlehem. Shepherds were

considered the lowest rung on the societal ladder. They worked at night, they worked long hours, and they worked with animals. They likely smelled, many had a reputation of being drunkards, and very few would associate with them. All of Jerusalem, like the little girl in the park, turned their nose up at shepherds. They were not welcome in town, they were not welcome in others' homes, and often were not even welcome in the Temple.

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

And so God comes to them. The sky bursts with light and life and the angels who stand in the courts of the Most High come – not to the religious elite or the entitled of society – but to the shepherds. Filling the sky with the very glory of God, heaven reaches out to those who are waiting for welcome. And in a moment of Divine appointment, God welcomes the outcast to participate in His salvation narrative.

This is the way of our God. These few verses remind us of what we have seen throughout the book of Luke thus far – God, in His grace and power, does the unexpected. Our God has historically chosen the least likely, "the least of these", as His own. He doesn't announce the birth of His Son in the temple, but to a humble girl. He doesn't send His Son to be born in a palace, but in a little-known town. He doesn't send His son to an experienced mother, but to a virgin girl. He doesn't announce the birth of His Son to royalty, but to shepherds. Our God shows lavish grace to those who least expect it.

Spend some time thanking God for His unexpected grace. Praise Him for the way He comes to us, the least of these.

Good News for You

Read Luke 2:11-12

God's invitation to the shepherds does not stop with His presence. Though we rejoice that God seeks out those who are unwelcome in society, His glorious work doesn't stop there.

"And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.'" (Luke 2:10).

As they stood in that field in the dark of night, surrounded by their sheep, the angels declare that they have come to proclaim good news. And the good news is not just for the elite - this is not a tax break for the upper class. No, this good news is, "for all the people."

Yes, even the shepherds camped outside the city gates, this good news is for them. The angel proclaims this good news: *"For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord"* (Luke 2:11). Did you catch that? The good news is for *all* people, and the Savior has been born, the angel says, to *you*. In this seemingly small statement, the angels extend the promises of old to the shepherds in the field. The Savior that was promised has come, and has been born to *you*, to the least of society; to those unwelcome in the corridors of temple, the Savior has come.

This may have fallen on the shepherds' ears with surprise and confusion. The Jewish elite believed that the Savior would come as a military leader to advance a rebellion against the Romans. What could a captain of an army want with shepherds? What could this Christ have to do with them? But the angel tells what sign will point out the One who is the Christ, *"You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger"* (Luke

2:12). The Savior did not come in a chariot, He did not come leading an army, but he came as an approachable Babe. The shepherds, likely adorned in tattered clothing, would find their Savior dressed to match. The shepherds, who spent their days surrounded by and caring for animals, would find their Christ in a manger, a familiar feeding trough. The Christ had come, and He came in a way the shepherds could understand and approach.

Like the shepherds, we are often people who are waiting for welcome. Regardless of our income bracket or education level, whether we live in a high rise or a garden-level studio, wear designer brands or second-hand clothes, all of us long to be insiders, and all of us, at times, feel like outsiders. As you consider the areas of your life in which you are waiting for welcome, let this be salve to your heart - Christ became like us. Perhaps chronic illness keeps you from the life your peers so effortlessly have; Christ bears your same humanity. Maybe your calling is to work among the poor, in ministry, as a public servant, which precludes you from the luxuries that come with higher income; Christ came in your likeness. Christ became like us, came in a way we could approach and understand. It is this glorious Christ that in His life and ministry called Himself the Great Shepherd. Though a King, He has come near to us, everyday people, with welcome. Today, if you feel the pang of waiting for welcome remember that Christ drew near to you to draw you near to Himself. He welcomes you to His side and, in His Divine humanity, He welcomes you.

Spend some time thanking our God for His welcome, thank Him that He became like us so that we might know and worship Him.

“

IT DOESN'T MATTER
WHO HAS
DISMISSED YOU IN
YOUR PAST.

the king

WELCOMES

YOU

AS HIS OWN

”

Glory & Peace

Read Luke 2:13-15

In the middle of their night watch, the shepherds see the sky suddenly illuminated with a multitude of heavenly beings. To these men who are watching their flocks, to these men who were not likely welcome in the Temple, to these men who were not highly educated, the hosts of heaven appears. Though they likely feel far from the presence of God, those who worship God in His heavenly presence come and appear to them. To those who could not imagine a way to ascend to the glory of heaven, the glory of heaven has come down.

And these heavenly heralds have one central message:

"Glory to God in the highest ..." (Luke 2:14)

God has sent messengers to speak on his behalf to Zechariah and Mary, but now he sends a host of messengers, and they are sent precisely to proclaim the glory of God. If Gabriel's words in the temple were the breaking of the prophetic silence of the Old Testament, then this appearing in the shepherds' field is like a cymbal clanging God's words. And their message is one primarily concerned with God's glory.

We cannot miss this. As we consider the ways that God has welcomed in these shepherds, He does not do so simply out of charity. God isn't just showing pity because it is the novel thing to do (as we can often be convinced to do), but because it displays His glory. At the end of the day, underneath all of God's activity and initiative is a fundamental concern for His glory (Isaiah 42:8, Habakkuk 2:14, Psalm 24:7-8, Revelation 21:23-25).

In the midst of this Advent season, and in the midst of any season of waiting we may find ourselves in, let us not neglect the glory of God. It is all too easy for us to focus our gaze on the object of our immediate waiting – the child we hope for, the job we're seeking, the reconciliation we long for – but we must never neglect to fix our eyes firmly on our glorious King. We serve a powerful, majestic, awe-inspiring God. He is full of glory.

"... and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14)

The host of messengers proclaim that this glorious God has come to bring peace. The same God who prophesied through Zechariah's newly-loosed lips that Jesus would guide the people's feet in a path of peace, has come to establish peace. The shepherds likely did not consider themselves "those with whom [God] is pleased," but this is the way of the Gospel. Through this new Child, through – this Savior – God has made a way for peace between God and man. Through the coming of Jesus, God's pleasure can be extended, even to the least of these.

Spend some time praising God for His glory. Name some specific ways in which you see His glory. Thank Him that, if you are united with Christ through faith, God has made a way of peace for you.

Everything's Changed

Read: Luke 2:16-18

Let your mind wonder with me. What was it like as the shepherds approached the stable where Mary and Joseph sat with their newborn child? Did they call out to announce themselves to these strangers they had been told by the angel to find? Did the space smell familiar to them, full of animals and hay? Did the stable, in some ways, feel like home? As they knelt by the manger, did they weep? Did they laugh? Were they confused? Did they tentatively ask to hold the newborn? Did they tell Mary and Joseph the story of how the angels came to them in the field, hoping they would believe them, knowing they sounded just a bit crazy?

We don't have the answers to all these questions. The Text doesn't depict the scene in literary detail, but it does tell us what they did next:

"And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them." (Luke 2:17-18)

After coming face to face with the newborn Christ, the shepherds went pouring through the city telling everyone what they had seen and heard. The shepherds, who were relegated to the outer limits of the city, went through the streets of Bethlehem telling everyone about this newborn Savior. Those who were marginalized in society went to the heart of the city to proclaim what they had seen and heard.

Something changed.

We may not know the details of their meeting with Jesus, but we know that they came away

different people because of it. We know that being welcomed into the narrative of Christ coming gripped them with a ferocity that caused them to abandon all the societal norms that they had grown accustomed to. Being brought near to the cradle of the King so powerfully reoriented their lives that they spread the word about this Child-King. The marginalized have become the first evangelists of Christ's coming. Meeting the Messiah changed them.

Meeting Jesus changes us today. In all the spaces of our lives in which we are waiting – and continue to wait – for welcome, the embrace and welcome of Christ changes us. The Gospel of Jesus is our promise that we have been brought near to God, and that His invitation is always extended in our direction. It does not matter who has rejected you in your past; the King of the universe welcomes you. And that changes us! This reality has the power by the Spirit of God to reorient where we find our source of belonging – our hope of welcome. The coming of Christ is our assurance that if we wait the rest of our lives for a welcome that may never come, we are welcomed in the presence of God through His Son. Nothing we can do or say or be could gain us access to the Father but Christ who welcomes us in. You, sister, are welcome by God. Let that sink into your soul today, and let it change you.

Spend some time reflecting on the good news that Christ has come. Thank God for granting us salvation through Jesus, and ask Him how He might desire to change you as a result.

WAITING FOR
comfort

Greif in the Presence of God

Read: Luke 2:21-25

I have never seen such grief on a woman's face. Her face, usually soft and kind, was twisted and distorted with anguish. Spotting me across the funeral hall foyer, she darted over to me and flung herself on me. I was lucky to catch her. This mother had just lost her daughter, and my nineteen-year-old self was helpless to provide any comfort. In that moment I learned a lesson that will stick to my ribs for the rest of my life: grief is tangible and comfort does not come easy.

Comfort can be elusive and tricky and horribly temporary, which makes waiting for comfort such an exhausting endeavor. Waiting for comfort, in some ways, requires more endurance than waiting for anything else because it is difficult to define and, therefore, difficult to know when our waiting has come to an end.

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him." (Luke 2:25)

Simeon waited for comfort. The Text tells us that he was waiting for God, after Israel's years of disobedience and faithlessness, to come and bringing solace to the nation. The ache of his heart and the cry of his prayers was that God would remember His people, have compassion on them, and come to be their consolation. Like many of the prophets and faithful Israelites throughout the Old Testament narratives, he waited for the permanent consolation – the eternal solace that Israel was awaiting in a Savior.

As Mary and Joseph obey God's command in the Jewish Law to present the Christ-child at the temple, we meet Simeon. We are told two things about him: he is waiting for the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was on him. This may seem small, inconsequential even, but this pair is rarer than it ought to be. Though he had waited decades and decades to see the Comforter – the Messiah – come to Israel, Simeon continued to press into God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

How often can the same be said of us? When I am seeking comfort, I often give myself the subtle and secret permission to pull away from God. Like the mother who lost her daughter, waiting for comfort is unpredictable and unstable. So I self-contain, turning away the comfort of others and leaning away from the comfort of God. Pain is all the more poignant in the presence of God, and so I pull away and turn in on myself.

Simeon did not. Simeon walked in the Holy Spirit in the midst of his waiting. He kept his heart open to the Spirit, kept himself unbridled by bitterness. Can we say the same? Dear friend, as you wait for comfort of a lost loved one, a lost season of life, a lost or wayward child or spouse, may you keep your heart open before God in surrender and willingness to listen to His Spirit.

Today, as you consider the many ways you are waiting for comfort, with discipline and intentionality turn your heart and mind towards God. Invite the Spirit to be at work in your life, even as you wait.

Faith for Today

Read: Luke 2:26-33

Simeon was resilient in hope. The Spirit of God ensured Simeon that he would not pass from this earth until he had seen the thing he hoped for: the consolation of Israel, the Comforter. I imagine that in the faith of youth this promise was more easily embraced. The early days of waiting, filled with excitement and anticipation, pass with much less pain than the days when hope has aged and worn. But as the days drew on, and years passed yet the Comforter was not yet on the horizon, hope was a commodity much more difficult to come by.

For the past few years, my husband and I have been waiting on jobs. We met in seminary and dreamed of the day when we get to do vocational ministry together, believing it was God's best for us. As graduation approached, we applied for jobs with excitement and waited to hear back with anticipation. Graduation came and there were no viable positions on the horizon. We applied for more jobs, still hopeful that God would lead us into what we felt was His plan for our lives – working in ministry together. Three years later, we are still waiting. I look back at those early days and think about how easy it was to remain hopeful. From my vantage point today, hope takes more intentionality, more resilience, more faith.

“And he came in the Spirit into the temple...” (Luke 2:27)

While I'm sure Simeon had days where hope was hard to come by, the Text tells us that he stepped out of his home and into the temple. Each day, Simeon chose faith. Like the Israelites picking up manna each day in the desert, Simeon woke each morning, went to the Lord, and gathered the faith that he needed to believe that day.

In what ways do you need faith today? What promises of God have you stopped believing simply because your hope dried up? Today, we have the invitation of following Simeon's example. We can go to the Lord with our hands tired and

worn, confess that we have failed to believe, and ask from Him the faith we need to step out in hope again. As you walk into your day today, don't do it on your own. By the work of Christ and through the Spirit, approach God for the strength you need to believe again.

We may not have the assurance from God that our waiting will come to an end before our lives do, as Simeon did. But, with our hope in the same God that Simeon hoped in, we can rest assured that, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Consolation will come.

In our pain, grief, and suffering, we will do well to remember that our God is both our Comforter and our Suffering God. Jesus Christ can only be a Comforter to us, and we are only able to wait with real hope on His comfort, because He was first the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. Jesus Christ suffered remarkably more than we can imagine, taking on hell itself on our behalf.

No matter how deep your grief, no matter how dark your suffering, you cannot fall beneath the nail-pierced hands of the suffering Christ. Though your pain may threaten to drag you to the pit of despair, though you fear your hurt will drag you into the depths of hell itself, you cannot – will not – sink so far that the blood-stained hands of our Savior will not be there to catch you. His suffering was deeper, His grief more profound. So when your heart is overwhelmed with sorrow and the brokenness pangs your chest, turn your eyes, dear sister, to the One who has suffered for you. And with your eyes fixed on the slain Lamb of God, know that He suffered alone so that you never have to.

Spend some time confessing to God the areas of your life where you have lacked faith. Confess to Him your lack of faith and thank Him that He gives us everything we need to believe today.

NO MATTER HOW DEEP YOUR GRIEF,
NO MATTER HOW DARK YOUR SUFFERING,
YOU CANNOT FALL BENEATH

the nail-pierced hands

OF THE SUFFERING CHRIST.

Not Finished Yet

Read: Luke 2:34-35

Simeon's waiting comes to an end. We are privileged to be onlookers of this scene as recorded in Luke's account.

"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32)

Simeon, likely aged by time and waiting, takes the young Messiah in his arms and bursts into poetry. This kind of poetic proclamation from a prophet is not unusual, and it echoes themes from Eden when the created man first meets the newly created woman and bursts forth in song (Genesis 2:22-23). Simeon's waiting, like Adam's, is over. The meeting he has longed for is at hand.

Holding the babe that his eyes have been searching for years to see, Simeon does something unexpected. Turning to Mary and Joseph, Simeon blesses the young parents with these words:

"Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." Luke 2:34-35

It seems a bit strange to call this a "blessing," doesn't it? To our ears this may seem quite different than a blessing we would want to pass along to new parents. But Simeon knew something that we also need to know in our waiting: God is not finished yet. Simeon knew

that Christ's coming was the beginning of a new thing God was doing in the world. Though the coming of the Child marked the end of Simeon's waiting, it certainly didn't mark the end of God's plan.

In the coming of Christ, God was instigating His plan for the redemption of His creation. At the Incarnation, God initiated His plan to win back His wayward creatures. Like the Old Testament Law, the coming of the Messiah would reveal the hearts of many and would point to our desperate need for a Savior. For Simeon, seeing the coming of the Christ Child brought fulfilment to the prophecies and promises that fueled his hope. But even so, the end of Simeon's waiting was just the beginning of something new God was doing.

This is the Gospel-hope that we have in our waiting: God is not done yet. The great plan of our God is painted throughout the metanarrative of Scriptures that God is redeeming people, reconciling people to Himself, and exposing the hearts to many that His name might be made great.

Today, even if your heart is weary from waiting, cling to the promises of God that He is not done yet. God is still at work in this world, and will be until He comes again. The story isn't over. Wait on Him, dear one. Watch for Him. He's not finished yet.

Spend some time thanking God that His work will not be complete until He returns. Reflect on the ongoing work of God in your life and thank Him.

A Grieving Prophetess

Read Luke 2:36-38

Simeon wasn't the only one in the temple who was seeking comfort. Though Simeon was seeking the comfort of the nation, on the temple steps we meet another – a woman seeking personal comfort.

“And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.” (Luke 2: 36-37)

Anna's pedigree should remind us of Elizabeth's – she is from a noble line, the daughter of a reputable man. Anna, likely married in her youth, was a wife for a few years and a widow for decades. Her life rings of disproportionate grief. Like a parent who buries their child, Anna was a widow longer than she was married. I imagine her grief was profound.

While we are struck by Anna's heritage and situation, something else in the Text should make our jaw drop. Do you see it? Anna was a prophetess.

Don't let your mind numb to the reality of heaven's prophetic silence in this day and age! Though it is hard for us to imagine or relate to, the reality that our God has spoken through an angel, Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Mary should startle and shock us! God is at work! This is the notable shift in redemptive history – God is starting to speak to and through His people again. And we cannot miss that He has raised up a grieving woman to be His prophetess.

Anna bears the signs of a holy life. She spends her days in the temple, worshiping God by fasting and prayer. As a widow and as a prophetess, she likely lived on the temple grounds, which allows for her to stay at the temple night and day. But even her living situation indicates to us that her life is not as she had imagined or planned. According to Jewish tradition, widows were to be cared for by family, children or relatives. The fact that we find Anna living in the Temple could indicate to us that she either has no children or relatives, or that perhaps she is not welcome with them. Anna's life is not what she had hoped, planned, or expected.

“And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:38)

Seeing the Christ Child in His mother's arms, Anna prophetically knows that this child is the Messiah, and she bursts into praise to God. Not constrained by bitterness for the past, nor bound by the life that was lost, Anna has left room in her grieving heart for praise. And she doesn't let her words stop there; no, she begins to speak to “All who were waiting for the redemption ...” – Anna. Anna is waiting for redemption. Anna is waiting for God to put all the pieces back together. Anna is waiting for the great Comfort of the nation to come. And Anna goes door to door, to all the Jews of the day who are waiting for their Lord and Savior to come, and proclaims to them that the Messiah has come, and their wait is over. A grieving woman on the temple steps, the first prophetess of the New Testament, proclaims that the Comforter has come.

A Grieving Prophetess

Continued

We, too, are people who feel the pangs of the life we did not expect. We, too, can survey our lives and take note of all the ways it has not gone according to plan: the career path we had to leave, the loved one that walked away, the broken family life that disintegrated in a minute. In these moments, let Anna be an example for us. Every once in a while, give yourself permission to grieve the life that isn't. Weep over how you thought things would turn out, how they didn't go as planned, and the dreams that didn't come true. Give yourself the grace of a good cry, and as your tears hit your cheeks release all that could have been and all that is not into the hands of your loving and capable Father. Like Anna, in the midst of despair and grief – in the face of the life that would not be – let the coming of the Savior be the sure hope of comfort and redemption that your soul longs for.

Spend some time considering the ways your life did not go as expected or planned. Then, in prayer, turn your eyes to the Savior. Thank God that in Jesus Christ we have sure hope of comfort and redemption.

● WAITING FOR ●
direction

The Passover Lamb

Read: Luke 2:39-47

I remember the panic on the young mother's face as she frantically darted back into the foyer. The church service had ended twenty minutes ago, and the same old stragglers stood talking in the fellowship hall. Of course, I am always one of them.

She looked hurriedly around the room, her distraught voice shaking just a bit: "Has anyone seen Jonathan?" My heart sunk for her. She had made it almost home from church before realizing that the third of her four children, Jonathan, was not there. When a child goes missing, even for a moment, everything in the heart of a mother wants to protect her child at all costs.

"Yeah, he's back in the Sunday School rooms," a teen shrugged. Her face evidenced a severe ignorance of understanding for the mother's experience. Within minutes, Jonathan was found and buckled in the minivan. All the dust and panic had settled, and the mom gave into a good cry.

For every parent who has left a child behind at church on a Sunday morning, let this passage be a comfort to you. When we reflect on the lives of the parents of the Messiah, we must remember that they are only human. We've all left a child behind, haven't we?

"Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom." (Luke 2:41-42)

Mary and Joseph are clearly raising their Son in the Jewish faith tradition. They are honoring and respecting the tradition of the Passover celebration by making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The annual ceremony was a

reflection on the Passover of the Old Testament. When the nation of Israel was enslaved in Egypt, God promised to deliver them and sent Moses to tell Pharaoh to release God's people to follow Him into the land He promised to give them. Pharaoh, who neither respected nor revered the God of the Jews, was unmoving in his determination to keep his slave force intact and would not let the nation leave (Exodus 10:3-11). God, in His power and mercy, tells the nation of Israel that He is going to give the nation of Egypt a sign of His power and punish them for their refusal to release the people of God (you can read the full narrative in Exodus 12). God was going to send an angel of death through the land, killing the first born son of each home. But His promise wasn't without hope: for those who trusted in God, those who believed that His promises would come to pass, God provided a way out. If they would take an unblemished male lamb, slaughter it, and mark their homes with the blood of the lamb, then the angel would pass by their homes. This promise was for the Israelites as well as the Egyptians; the line of blood on the doors traced the lines that divided those who believed God and those who did not. Just as promised, the angel of death passed over the homes of those who believed – those who marked their homes with the blood of the lamb. That night, Israel gained their freedom.

And this is what the Israelites celebrated each year. The Passover celebration commemorated the promise God kept to pass over the homes that followed His commands, and were marked with the lamb's blood. The Israelites, years later, would sit and eat the lamb of the Passover meal, and they would remember the day in which death passed over their ancestors.

The Passover Lamb

Continued

Take it in, sister – the young Jesus Christ sat and ate the Passover lamb. The One who would be for all of the slaughtered Lamb of God that those marked by His covenantal blood might be passed over by eternal death celebrated the Passover as a young boy. Jesus Christ, our Lamb, ate that Passover meal knowing that one day He would go to the cross as true and better Passover Lamb, that eternal death might pass over you and I.

“And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him.” (Luke 2:43-45)

Mary and Joseph cannot find their Son, even after they have started for home. As they search for Him, like the mother in the church foyer, their hearts must have wanted nothing more than to protect their Son. When a child wanders in the store, from the park, or around the corner, all our gut-instincts tell us that we are to protect them. And while Mary and Joseph were entrusted with raising, training, and yes, protecting Jesus they know that He ultimately came to protect them. Their panic after the Passover stands as a reminder to them – and to us – that their Child would suffer, that He would die, and that He would do it that we might be saved.

Spend some time today thanking God that He sent His Son so that eternal death might pass over you. Thank Jesus that He came suffered

on your behalf, that He knowingly became the slaughtered Lamb of God.

I WILL

worship

WHILE I WAIT

The Grand Narrative

Read: Luke 2:48-52

Mary and Joseph have been searching for a total of four days for their Son. I imagine their hearts were worn thin with worry, and their hope was growing increasingly weary.

"After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.'" (Luke 2:46-48)

Finally, Mary and Joseph find their Child in the Temple. They find Him ironically un-anxious, and surprisingly at home among the religious teachers in the Temple. They arrive to find that while they were frantically looking for Him, He was not looking for them. And Mary's mothering heart snaps: *How could you do this to us, worrying us like this*, she says. Her heart is tired and her words are well-intentioned, but Jesus reminds her of the bigger picture that she has failed to see:

"And he said to them, 'Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'" (Luke 2:49)

At first, it seems that Jesus is being dismissive of His mother's worry and disrespectful of their days of searching for Him. But with just a few simple words Jesus reminds His parents of God's grander plan for His life. He reminds them that it was explicitly to be about His Father's business that He was sent. Though they seem to have forgotten, the Lamb of God cannot stray from the will and work of the heavenly Shepherd. There is a bigger plan at play, a bigger purpose in view.

"And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart." (Luke 2:50-51)

Mary and Joseph don't understand what Jesus is saying. They don't see the bigger picture of God's redemptive plan, but they will. Jesus, the Messiah, goes with them and is submissive to their parenting. Jesus, the One who came in humility, lives out this humility by submitting to the parents God has given Him. Humility has marked His birth, and now it must mark His life.

"And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52).

The Text leaves us with a bit of a cliffhanger. At the end of Luke two, we are left with a picture of the growing Christ, the Son of God who is also the Son of Mary and Joseph. He is growing up, physically and mentally, and He is growing in the grace and favor of God.

As we leave the Advent narrative, the Text leaves us with a great sense that the story is just getting started. And that's because it is! The story of God's redemption of fallen humanity has started in the coming of the Messiah, and is not complete until the crucified, risen, ascended Christ comes for us again. We close Luke two with a great sense of anticipation; God is not done yet. In fact, He is just getting started.

Spend some time thanking God for the grand narrative of salvation. Consider God's promise to come again, permanently establishing His Kingdom. Praise Him that He is just getting started.

AWAITING
THE KING

Awaiting the King

Read: Luke 1 & 2

It is easy for us to think of our King as a baby lying in a manger. Particularly during the Advent season, we can be convinced that our God is an adorable little babe, wrapped in swaddling cloths, with gentle animals grazing contentedly nearby. While this part of our Savior's narrative is important and vital to our understanding of our God we do well to remember that though Jesus came as a child, He was a child born to be our King.

As Advent season draws to a close we look forward with great hope to the time in which our King will come again. We look back at the past 24 days of walking through God's Word and lingering with waiting characters in the Text, but we also fix our eyes ahead on an eternal horizon and the promise that our King will return. Though we have beheld His infant self, we look ahead to the moment when we see Him on His glorious throne. Even as we bow at his cradle side with the shepherds, we await the worship of all believers – a chorus of all people, tongues, tribes, and nations – who will gather in His holy courts and give praise to the Lamb of God.

"After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" (Revelation 7:9-10)

Even as I write these words, and as you read this in your home, on the bus, or in a little coffee shop somewhere, around the throne of the King is a hoard of worshipers who proclaim

day and night that He is Lord and His reign will be forever (Isaiah 6:3). Though this world will rob us of this vision, though we in our faithlessness will forget, though the kingdoms of this world will convince us that they are predominant and threaten to consume us, the reality of Kingdom of God is this: Jesus Christ is King, and His Kingdom will have no end.

In this life, amidst our waiting for other things, our fundamental posture as a people of God is awaiting the King who has promised to one day come for us, to one return and establish His eternal throne. Among all the things you've hoped, dreamed, and longed for, nothing compares to the good that will come to the follower of Jesus Christ at His return. Nothing can compare! No child compares with the Christ-Child who has been crowned King. No earthly comfort compares with the eternal rest that awaits our souls. No invitation or welcome compares to being welcomed in with the words, "well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23). No earthly redemption compares to the permanent, irreversible redemption of your person at the resurrection of the dead. No earthly fulfillment can compare with praising God in His courts on that day and singing, "Behold, the Lamb that was slain!" In light of the magnificent, preeminent, glorious King who has promised to return, all other longings fade and dim. So, do not be fooled, dear sister. When life has stretched you thin with waiting, or your spirit grows weighty with unmet hungers, call to mind the reality of the of our coming Christ. And when all feels stagnant around you, you can rest assured – the King is on the move.

In this great and very real hope, I wish you the merriest of Christmases.

EVEN
WHEN ALL
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