



ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2021

IMAGINE BEING ASKED BY GOD WHAT THE GREATEST GIFT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED IS.

What would your honest response be? Would it be Jesus? We believe that knowing the person of Jesus Christ is the greatest gift anyone can receive.

To help you appreciate this magnificent gift, we as a church have written this special Advent Devotional. We invite you to use this each day to read the biblical account of the Christmas story and accompanying devotionals that illuminate different aspects of Jesus's birth and what His life means to us.

This compilation was written by Island ECC staff who lead key ministries, so it's also a great way to remember how God has gifted our church with some amazing ministries.

Our hope and prayer is that you experience an unprecedented encounter with God that leads you to treasure this Christmas season and the wonderful gift of the living Christ.

Charlotte Lui and Rick Bates
Directors of Prayer Ministry

God is With You

And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel." Isaiah 7:13-14

Years ago, our care group asked each person to prepare a 30-minute presentation of their life story. Depending on how much life you've lived, it can be kind of intimidating, but this exercise has paid dividends in deep, meaningful relationships that we treasure and that I know will last a lifetime.

When you want someone to know you, you have to give them some information about who you are. Incredibly, the God of the universe has done the same thing with you and me. From Genesis to Revelation, there are dozens of names God uses but one stands out to me as especially significant.

Immanuel – God with Us

The name evokes a very intimate picture of God to me. One who knows that we were never meant to be alone. I believe we are at our best when we are in community and we are known by others but so often circumstances of life prevent that and give us deep wounds that seem to take forever to heal. But here's God, recognising this byproduct of our fallen world and entering in to our story to say "I'm with you".

This is the meaning of Christmas. It's not about presents, though they are a great way to commemorate this amazing ancient gift from God. It's not even about family, though being with family is a wonderful aspect of this holiday for many. The meaning of Christmas is that you are not alone.

As you begin your Advent journey, take time to thank Him for this truth that He is desperate for you to know. He shattered all time and space and sent His own Son as a child, to be born to a virgin, and to be given a very special name, so that you would know that God is with you.

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You for personally giving us a sign where the virgin shall conceive, bear a son and name Him, Immanuel.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

JEFF CAYLOR, WORSHIP

Island ECC's Worship Ministry inspires, encourages and empowers believers of all ages to whole-heartedly engage with God in spirit and in truth.

Created To Do The Extraordinary

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favoured 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 favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." Luke 1:26-33

You are extraordinary. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, you become reconciled to God and a bringer of light to this world. Like Mary, you too are chosen by God to make this world look more like heaven, to do the extraordinary.

Mary was a young teenager when God called her to do the extraordinary. God partnered with Mary, using His spirit and her DNA to give birth to the long-awaited Messiah. Mary partnered with God to birth, teach, raise, and love the creator of the universe. Mary was called to bring to life the culmination of a promise made back in the book of Genesis. She was created for the extraordinary, and so are you.

Raising the Saviour of the world was probably not the glamorous job we envision. As a mom, I assure you that as amazing as it is to raise a child, it is also hard work. There is pain, worry, exhaustion and frustration. Mary was no stranger to hardship, uncertainty, and unglamorous moments, but her work was extraordinary.

God has chosen and created you to do something extraordinary. Perhaps like Mary, you are called to do the miraculous and raise the next generation. Maybe God created you to work alongside the poor or bring light to your workplace. He may task you with creating new policies, inspiring young minds, inventing, researching, or even creating wealth to bless others.

Day-to-day, your work may not seem extraordinary, and truthfully you may not see the fruit of it until the other side of heaven (Israel waited 2,000 years for Jesus), but the work you were created to do is extraordinary. May God bless and reveal your chosen work and that you would know how highly favoured you are.

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You God for revealing the details of Jesus's conception and identity not just to Joseph and Mary but to us, who are reading it now.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

JESSICA RICHMOND, YOUTH

Our Youth Ministry strives to anchor students in Christ's eternal hope, freeing them to live unshakeable lives for Jesus in service of others.

Don't Be Surprised

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God. 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." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to Your word." And the angel departed from her. Luke 1:34-38

Every time God tells you to do something, it's a test of your faith. This question is: Do you trust God, or do you trust yourself? Do you trust the Word or do you trust the world?

Mary submitted. She believed the angel's words and agreed to bear the child, even under humanly impossible circumstances. She is an example of submissive faith, and we find great blessings seeing God's grace poured out on this obedient believer.

Situations like these are a test. Faith is believing when you don't see it, but also obeying when you don't understand it. If you don't learn to obey, you'll miss out on so many blessings God has in store for you. But if you learn to submit yourself to God without question, even when it seems impossible, then you will grow in faith and be blessed.

We are called to make the most God-glorifying decision we can and are not expected to know the future. Nothing is impossible with our God. Our responses to His demands should not be of doubt, but willing acceptance.

What have you thought impossible in your life that you later realised God could handle?

What step of faith can you take during this season so that you are obedient to God?

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You for encouraging us through telling Mary how nothing will be impossible with You, our powerful God.

TIFFANY TSE, CHILDREN

The hope of Kids Club is that every child grows up with an authentic and growing faith in Jesus. The staff and volunteer team have one priority – to love God!

The Joy of His Presence

Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

And she cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" Luke 1:39-42

Leaving in a rush was young Mary's response to angel Gabriel's greeting and pregnancy news. Though she might have still been figuring out what she'd heard, it didn't stop her from simply believing in the God she had been worshipping.

It seems like she was only focusing on the good news and not on the challenge of days of walking to see her relative nor on the complexities of her being a virgin and pregnant – the presence of Jesus in her made it joyfully unique.

I guess she was even surprised when Elizabeth's baby leaped in her womb after hearing her greeting and being blessed by her older relative.

All these wonderful responses were made possible because of the presence of Jesus – even as a baby in the womb. I'm in awe of their reactions and these drew me to think that while I meditate on Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me," am I believing it and as joyful as Mary and Elizabeth? If not, why?

I haven't always been intentionally inviting and enjoying Jesus's presence wherever I am. I have many excuses and allow them to draw me away from Him. But in moments when I listen to the Holy Spirit's prompting and invite Jesus into my relationships and tasks despite my unbelief, I see a huge contrast – I feel the joy of His presence tangibly!

I feel like we are yet to fully grasp the preciousness of His presence and, though it may seem like a waste of energy and time, it isn't because it's part of our DNA as God's children. May we encourage each other to take the time to respond to His invitation of experiencing His presence in every area of our lives and witness His joy.

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You Jesus that Your presence as a baby in Mary's womb made the baby in Elizabeth's womb leap.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

CHARLOTTE LUI, PRAYER

Our Prayer Team exists to encourage and facilitate different aspects of prayer that enliven the church in actively connecting with God in all stages of life.

Songs of Praise

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation.”

Luke 1:46-50

When was the last time you found yourself bursting into songs, praising God? Or better yet, praising God after realising you are in an adverse situation you can't get out of? Most of us would naturally pray for immediate relief, or at most reluctantly accept the course of events and hope for the best. But praising God?

Consider what Mary was going through. An unwed teenage girl who had a supernatural encounter and found herself pregnant. Feeling perhaps anxious, perplexed, full of self-doubt and alone, Mary travelled far to visit her cousin Elizabeth. But before Mary uttered a word of greeting, Elizabeth began to prophesy and affirm everything Mary had quietly and bravely gone through.

God knew. No matter how daunting the task seemed or how ill-qualified she felt, no matter where she found herself, God's eyes were ever on her. He had given Mary an impossible task, but instead of moving on to His next project, He attended to her heart. He followed. In His mercy, He orchestrated miraculous situations that would continue to confirm Mary's divine circumstances, giving her hope and confidence to step into the role He had prepared for her.

God is indeed our greatest cheerleader. “He has looked upon the humble state of His servant” (Luke 1:48) and “knows that we are dust ... from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear Him” (Psalm 103:14,17).

If only we have eyes to see and minds to rise above our circumstances, those who fear Him will see His hands that scaffold our path, however unfavourable it may seem. And when we realise our holy God will be that near, that real and that close to heart, how else would we respond but to turn towards Him in praise and worship?

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank you God for Your promise of mercy for those who fear You from generation to generation.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

VIVIAN LAW, ART AND DESIGN

Our Art and Design team serve to make His Church beautiful.

God with Us

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). Matthew 1:20-23

When I look back in the past two years, and see how the world has changed, the famous quote from the movie “Forrest Gump” comes to mind: “Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re gonna get.”

Every month and even every week, we see surprises like we’ve never seen before, we face challenges like we’ve never faced before, and we feel uncertain like we’ve never felt before. We find ourselves losing grip of our future as life became so unpredictable that we really don’t know what we’re gonna get.

Joseph’s life also made a drastic change when he found out that Mary, his wife-to-be, was pregnant before they came together. Joseph was described as a righteous man and because he didn’t want to expose Mary to public disgrace, he decided to take this matter into his own hands by divorcing her quietly.

God knew exactly how Joseph felt and what he planned to do. He sent an angel to Joseph and told him that He was there all along. The son was conceived by the Holy Spirit and He was there to fulfil the prophecy. His son would be the Saviour and was to be named Jesus, and people would call Him “Immanuel”.

When the unexpected happens and things don’t go as planned, we sometimes isolate ourselves and try to take things into our own hands, just like what Joseph did. We think we can handle situations ourselves quietly but God is there all along and His plans always exceed our imagination.

Joseph chose to obey and let God take full control of his life. Two thousand years later, we are still blessed by his faithful decision. Be reminded that Immanuel God is with us no matter what happens.

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You loving God, for always thinking about what’s best for us and for sending Jesus to save us and fulfil Your gift to be with us.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

HILL CHAU, ALPHA

Alpha is a place where people from all ages can ask life questions in a safe and laid-back environment. It is a community for sharing life, faith, and hope in Jesus.

Respond to God?

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called His name Jesus.

Matthew 1:24-25

In this passage, Joseph responds to God with lots of actions. In life, we need to make many decisions: some needing quick responses, some requiring counsel, and some where it seems impossible to have faith to trust God to press on.

How do you sleep after meeting an angel of the Lord? What was going through Joseph's mind? What about us as believers – who do we listen to? What is stopping us from believing? Why is it so hard to follow heavenly commands? When do we follow and when do we not? Why do we question? Where are we struggling with God?

How does this passage speak to us? As simple as this passage might be, when we sit and reflect upon it, it seems like we often respond to God with incredulity.

My personal application is simple. Do you have a deep enough relationship in this season of your life to trust God after He speaks to you? This might be on a Sunday service, through a worship song, a testimony night, in your care group or other encounters with God and His church and people.

If faith is simply trusting what was spoken and simply following because we believe God without any doubt, then we will be like Joseph who was blessed to be forever remembered as an earthly father to Jesus.

It's such a great honour and privilege to serve our King and to bring glory to His living name. Are we willing today to trust in Jesus's life, trust Him with our lives, and trust the entirety of the Word of God?

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You God for Joseph's belief in You and doing what the angel commanded him.

ALAN LEUNG, MEN

Island ECC men work together to invite the Spirit of God's presence to dwell in the brotherhood, as the Word of God transforms them to become authentic men of God.

Required Registration

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. Luke 2:1-3

This passage is typically overlooked when reading the account of Jesus's birth. However, like all Scripture, it contains truth worth considering. The writer Luke records an unexplained detail that grounds the story in a history known to the first readers. Caesar decided it was time for a census of all the inhabited lands of Palestine and required that everyone be registered in their hometown. All residents were required to respond, which came with significant impact on their normal routines, schedules, careers, family and travel.

Sound familiar?

It is not difficult for us to identify with the disruption that Joseph had to face along with Mary. While dealing with pregnancy, they had to make a hard journey to Bethlehem. Found within this detail is a great truth.

In this chapter of Luke, we read a great story about a loving God who has begun to reveal His involvement with us through Jesus. It's the beginning of God's new work. From the viewpoint of the earthly ruler, Caesar, registration was needed at individual hometowns to keep confusion down for a reliable basis for tax-lists. However, God was working on the fulfilment of prophecy whereby the parents of Jesus were brought to Bethlehem, the place where the Messiah was to be born!

We face requirements that cause us inconvenience and stress on a regular basis. And we should follow what little we know of Joseph and strive to responsibly manage these, while at the same time realising we're unaware of all that may be involved, including how God can be active in blessed and personal ways with His sustained work to this day in the person on Jesus Christ.

RESPONSE PRAYER

Help us, gracious God, as we consider the ways You may be at work in the requirements we face.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

RICK BATES, COUNSELLING AND PASTORAL CARE

As a church we endeavour to assist individuals, couples, and families who have heartache, stress or trauma descend upon them. We do this with care from pastors, Godly leaders and experienced Christian counsellors.

Scandalous Obedience

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. Luke 2:4-5

We learned yesterday that Joseph went with Mary to register for the census. Buried in these two verses is a scandalous statement that we may miss. “Joseph went with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.” They had not consummated their marriage and she was pregnant.

Joseph was willing to go against prevailing practices in order to obey what he had heard from God’s angel. It took a good and godly man willing to go against the forces of accepted norms to fulfil “the mystery of God’s will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ” (Ephesians 1:9). So much was yet unknown and unseen at that stage.

Every moral and cultural fibre in Joseph must have resisted swimming against such a strong tide of potential ostracism in that patriarchal culture. If Joseph had chosen his reputation, his comfort, his reluctance to rock the cultural boat over protecting Mary and the child she was carrying, God’s glorious purpose would never have reached its fulfilment.

Mary’s scandalous submission to God was met by Joseph’s scandalous obedience. Together, they became the blessed alliance through which God’s glorious purpose could be fulfilled.

The life of following God is often filled with calls to scandalous submission and obedience. Do we listen more to our own logic and arguments that support our ease and comfort, our status quo, than radical obedience? If we obey, God can change the world through us. In Isaiah 55:8, God says, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways.” We thank God today that both Joseph and Mary responded in scandalous obedience – their obedience paved the way for the coming King whom we are celebrating in this season.

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You Father God for Joseph, who is of the house and lineage of David, on his way to register with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

KWEN IP, WOMEN

The Women’s Ministry, also known as The Village, is the intergenerational and diverse sisterhood hub of Island ECC for women to be activated to the full life that God made us for.

A Significant Crib

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 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 2:6-7

Everything about Jesus's arrival was "unfitting" for a King. From His peasant parents to His barnyard delivery room, His birth was barely fitting for any new arrival, much less the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah.

Every detail of His birth reveals something. In fulfilment of prophesy, His birth would be tracked by astronomers, and would be illuminated by a giant star. No room at the inn was a problem that night, but in hindsight, serves as another hint at the prophetic.

His crib was a manger. Though often portrayed as a wooden trough, it was more likely a stone feeding basin. Like the stone cave he would be placed in at death, Jesus begins His life on a stone bed.

This infant King was placed in a stone manger. A throne might have been appropriate, but thrones are intimidating.

And so, Jesus enters the world as the accessible One. Laying in a manger, His posture is approachable and His presence is welcoming.

Isn't it so good that we follow a Saviour that is welcoming of us? Isn't it soothing to be reminded of the gentle nature of the One who rules the world?

He is no longer a baby, and He is no longer in a manger. In fact, He is enthroned on high, as He should be. But His throne is not one of intimidation. We know by His birth that intimidation and power displays were not His method. Rather, we are invited to come confidently before Him, as One who is certainly our King, but simultaneously our Friend.

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

Be refreshed today with the reassurance of a God who has made Himself not only knowable, but also welcoming.

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You Jesus for Your birth in a manger.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

BRETT HILLIARD, PASTORAL

Our Senior Pastor oversees the pulpit ministry and guides church leadership and programming in alignment with the overall church vision.

Are you really talking to us?

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:8-11

Around the time Jesus was born, shepherds were lowly, forgotten people. They were homeless outcasts who had menial jobs that no one else wanted to do. And here they are, watching their flocks by night – the night shift. They sat quietly, tired from being sleep deprived, and then all of a sudden heaven opens up and the angel of the Lord appears to them.

It says “the Glory of the Lord” shone around them. Just try to imagine what that would look like! These lowly shepherds were surrounded by the light and majesty of God! At a time where they were the most forgotten, God remembered them and sent His angel.

At first, they were terrified, but the angel said, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.” Notice the words “I bring YOU good news.” Wow. A personal message, just for them.

God singled out these men and brought them a message that was to change the world.

Have you ever felt forgotten? Have you ever felt lonely? Have you ever felt like you’re unsure of what you’re supposed to do in this world? When those feelings come, remember this episode with these shepherds. Remember how these men, who were very unimportant in society, were given one of the most important tasks in history. Remember how God sent an angel to them directly and speaks personally to them.

Remember that because it’s the same for us. God remembers all of us and gives us an important call to follow and serve Him. Once we surrender to that call, He will take us on a journey that will be completely inconceivable!

RESPONSE PRAYER

We praise You, the God of all comfort! You knew the shepherds’ fears and not only comforted them but also brought them good news of great joy that is for all people.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

TIM LATOUR, MARRIAGE AND PARENTING

This ministry strives to see couples and families grow in their relationships by providing Biblical and practical encouragement, helping marriages and parents thrive.

God's Abiding Peace

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

After the angel declared the birth of Jesus, a vast number of glorious angels, an army from heaven, appeared. They formed a celestial choir that gave glory to God who was moving in a mighty way. And they brought with this worship a message of both peace and hope.

All those who have a personal relationship with Christ don't have a life free from pain and suffering because we're still living in a broken and sinful world. We still get hurt, afraid and broken, but the good news is, as God's children, there is promise of peace in all circumstances. A peace we are told that surpasses all our understanding (Philippians 4:7). This body of angels proclaim and give honour to God who grants hope that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us (Romans 8:1).

God, through the person of Christ, not only gives us peace but is our Peace! The angels delivered the good news about the Saviour that was born and would later die to save us from our sins. That was news filled with such hope that it was declared in praise.

May you be encouraged today as you go through difficulties to rest on God's promise that He will never leave or forsake you. Pause to let your heart be filled with His perfect and abiding peace.

RESPONSE PRAYER

We echo the multitude of the heavenly host praising our holy and wonderful God: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased".

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

RIZA GUEVARRA, FILIPINO

Island ECC's Filipino Ministry equips, mentors, empowers and mobilises Filipino ladies through training, courses, Bible study, fellowship and outreach.

Go. See. Found!

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. Luke 2:15-16

Amazed by astonishing salvific news and having witnessed the angels returning to heaven, the shepherds did not analyse the phenomenon: "Were they really angels?" They instead decided to "go" and "see" what God had made "known" to them, and to do so right away.

The shepherds felt compelled to act immediately without delay, even though it was the dead of night and they were likely tired and would have been looking forward to getting some rest. Instead they went in "haste" and "found" Jesus, which forever changed their lives!

As we travel through ups and downs in this journey of life, what is something the Lord is telling you to "go" and "see" so you can experience Him? What does He wish to make "known" to you?

How are we responding in "haste"? How can we take action with a sense of urgency when prompted by the Holy Spirit?

The shepherds "found", and were counted amongst the privileged few who encountered God in the flesh on His touch down to planet earth! Because of their decision to "go" they were witnesses to the most important and amazing arrival of a person ever in the history and future of this world. Take a moment and let that sink in.

They were blessed through and through because they decided to "go" and "see" what the angel told them that the Lord would make "known" to them! I believe their hearts were filled with true eternal joy and peace, so even should they have faced calamity thereafter, they would have been able to rejoice and be glad.

They saw the Messiah made known to them because they responded in "haste" and "found" eternal hope in Jesus Christ and it changed their future forever! Will you do the same today?

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You God for letting the shepherds encounter Your angels and see the baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

DANIEL TSE, PURE DESIRE

Pure Desire is a biblical and scientific based ministry that forms authentic community and equips people suffering from sexual brokenness in order to restore integrity.

The Story that Never Gets Old

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, 20

The shepherds were a lucky bunch. They were the first to be told about the birth of Jesus through the messenger angel and then saw heaven open up to reveal an angel choir praising God. They hurried to Bethlehem to see the baby Jesus.

Even as a meek and mild new-born, Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Even though He couldn't speak or do much as a baby, simply His divine presence was impactful and transformative. (Just plain ol' human babies can melt hearts with that special smell on their head and their peaceful expression when sleeping.) The shepherds were not highly educated and probably didn't know much of the Scriptures, but after seeing the little Messiah radiating God's glory, they went out and told everyone what had happened. Everyone who heard the shepherds' story was amazed, but not because they were great public speakers. The shepherds simply shared what they experienced and what the angel had told them.

For many of us, telling others about Jesus isn't easy. I understand why it makes us nervous, but at the same time, it shouldn't be difficult, especially if we follow the shepherds' example: we tell people what has happened in our life because of Jesus, and we share about what God has been telling us through His Word or through prayer.

For the shepherds, their encounter with Christ did not get old – or rather, they did not let it get old. After going around the city of Bethlehem and telling everyone what they had seen, they went back to their daily lives in the fields, still glorifying and praising God.

We celebrate the birth of our Saviour once a year on December 25, but we should celebrate the wonder and glory of Jesus every day of the year.

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You God for fulfilling everything that was made known to the shepherds concerning Jesus.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

SHERMAN CHAU, OUTREACH

Our Outreach Ministry exists to continue the advent story through missions by helping people meet Jesus and equip them to go out and tell others the Good News of Christ.

Pondering The Unseen

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. Luke 2:19

Mary is surrounded by the miracle of the baby Jesus and all the visitors that our Messiah would bring in the days to come. She does the wisest act: she pauses, she treasures and ponders.

If you treasure something that you have, you keep it, value it, you are careful with it, because it gives you great pleasure and holds a special place in your heart and mind. Mary does not miss the magnificent miracle in her ordinary and humble setting. For me to treasure or ponder takes one of my most precious commodities, it takes time.

We are currently foster parents, as I write this there is cooing in the background. We are in our 50's and it has been over 20 years since we have had a baby in our home, so we treasure each grunt, and coo. We hold her until she falls to sleep. We are in no hurry to put her in bed.

This is not productive in the world's eyes, since few things are getting "done." However, scientists tell us that this bonding affects her brain for a lifetime. We ponder, linger, gaze and hold her, all of which could seem like mundane tasks, confident of the unseen benefits in her tiny brain. There is unseen value in this bonding and this is worth pondering and treasuring.

God is at work all around. Take time this season to treasure and meditate on all He has done and is doing. This is a gift to yourself and your loved ones. Remember that many things worth pondering are in the unseen spiritual realms of our lives.

What are you spending time treasuring and pondering this season?

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You Father God for Mary's response to all the things that happened to her, treasuring and pondering them in her heart.

SHANNON HILLIARD, MARVEL

Marvel is a ministry designed to love children with special needs and disabilities. We provide one-on-one support for each child to feel safe and secure as a marvellous child of God.

Life Is Worship

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.” Matthew 2:1-2

These wise men came from the east, though the Bible does not say exactly which part of the east. Some commentators say the east may mean Persia, and the word “Magi” comes from a Persian word meaning experts on the stars. They may have even come from Arabia instead of Persia, or perhaps from Babylon, which has been a centre of star studies.

Whatever the opinion, this verse emphasises that people came from faraway lands to seek the King!

If the vehicle used was a camel, this trip could have taken weeks or even months. Moreover, they walked led by star, meaning the journey was done at night. Perhaps during the day both the Magi and camels rested, which would have made the journey even longer.

This journey was certainly not easy due to the hot sun, rain, exhaustion, the need to spend money, and perhaps even periods of feeling unwell or sick.

These intelligent, skilled, wise, and well-positioned people came from afar. Imagine, they traveled hundreds of miles and months just seeking the King. What a commitment!

The journey was led only by the star but this was not just any star. It must have been a very special one because it was their guide and a compass given by God to seek out the King. Believing in this compass required a firm faith, faith at least as big as a mustard seed, and courage to trust in God.

The only goal of their sacrificial journey was to worship the King of the Jews. It was this motivation that supported their beliefs, attitudes and actions despite a long journey.

Christmas is coming soon! How deep does your heart long to welcome Him? Will the pandemic discourage you from celebrating? Friends, life is worship. Whatever your situation or activity, may you always be motivated to live a life of worship to King Jesus!

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You our Triune God for choosing the wise men from the east to go to Jerusalem to worship baby Jesus.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

RIANI PARDEDE, INDONESIAN

Our Indonesian Ministry exists to make Christ known to unbelieving domestic helpers by sharing the Gospel, gathering “unconnected” Christian, and equipping believers to mature and serve.

Yet Another Threat!

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd My people Israel."

Matthew 2:3-6

How could the birth of a baby be such a threat that would disturb Herod the king and "all Jerusalem with him"? But this was no ordinary birth!

These wearied travellers from the east were not just visitors, they were Magi, steeped in knowledge of the stars and ancient lore: their predictions were well known and here they were asking about a new born "king of the Jews" – not something a despotic king wanted to hear. King Herod was disturbed. But this was no ordinary king!

This was a royal birth predicted by the Prophets, this was a birth many of the Jews were waiting for, a Messiah, the One who would lead the people of Israel from darkness to light, the One who would expel Israel's enemies and establish the kingdom rule of God.

King Herod and the religious authorities were disturbed!

And they were right to be disturbed. Despite all attempts to get rid of the baby, the Man, His mission and His followers, the Gospel message of salvation and new life in Christ changed everything.

We generally do not associate Christmas with "being disturbed". Christians and non-Christians alike have settled into that familiar picturesque Christmas card nativity that is unlikely to disturb anyone. But that is not the reality of the birth of our Saviour, a birth fraught with suspicion, rejection, hardship, danger and death threats.

For many Christians around the world that suspicion, rejection, hardship, danger and death threats still exist because the message of Christianity will always be a threat to those who lust for power, wealth and control. We do not have an ordinary message at Christmas; not simply "Peace and good will to all mankind" but "Salvation for all mankind" bought at an enormous cost. When we proclaim and live this message – it's bound to cost us and disturb those who fear it.

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You everlasting God for personally giving us a sign where the virgin shall conceive, bear a Son and name Him, Immanuel.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

MARTIN RADFORD, EQUIPPING/CLASSES

Equipping Ministry provides high quality and varied learning opportunities to equip church members to grow in their faith, and to understand and apply the Bible in their daily lives.

Don't Misread Jesus

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him." Matthew 2:7-8

On the surface, it seems like King Herod had a pure heart. Upon hearing the news of the birth of a new King and Saviour, he asked the Magi to search for Jesus. If you keep reading, however, you'll know his true intention.

Deep down in Herod's heart, he didn't see Jesus as a Saviour who brings joy and blessings. Instead, Jesus represented a threat to who he was (a king) and what he had (a kingdom).

Consider this: Herod was not as unreasonable as we may think. If Jesus was truly the King and Saviour, it implies that all that Herod had must give way to Jesus. What's left of him then?

Don't we all think like Herod from time to time? We don't mind believing in Jesus, but we also want to keep Jesus at bay so that He won't "mess up" our lives? There are two fundamental problems with this thinking: (1) my current life is the best possible life, and (2) I know better than God.

I grew up with "cha chaan teng" (in local restaurants) and I love it. Don't even get me started with French toast with lots of syrup on it. Then you have HK style milk tea with Eagle condensed milk. Try it if you want to know what heaven may taste like. So, if you try to take me to a Michelin 3-star restaurant for a fine dining experience, I may consider this a threat to my perfect life and become hostile to you.

A lesson can be learned here: stop pretending that we know more than God. Stop being hostile to God when things don't go our way. Perhaps we should see Jesus as who He truly is – our Saviour. Deep down in your heart, who is Jesus to you?

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You Jesus for being the Child and the King that we worship.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

ALBERT NG, CARE GROUPS

Our Care Groups are spiritual communities that value spiritual growth in the context of authentic friendship. We walk alongside one another as we seek to become better followers of Jesus.

Where You Lead, I Will Follow

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. Matthew 2:9-10

We now journey with the wise men from the capital city of Jerusalem, after King Herod instructs them to find the Christ within the town of Bethlehem, where the scriptures had foretold that the Messiah would be born (Micah 5:2).

While the wise men, who were Gentiles, had limited knowledge of scriptures, they were most likely well versed in astronomy and astrology. As they traveled by day and night to Bethlehem, perhaps they wondered if the scriptures were indeed true. Was the King of the Jews really in Bethlehem?

As they grasped in the dark, behold, the same star that proclaimed the birth of Jesus now shines once again on the road to Bethlehem! God, in His missional heart to reach all who seek Him earnestly, sent the wise men a confirmation. He graciously used His creation in the form of celestial movements, to lead them to Jesus. With the star's confirmation, they "rejoiced exceedingly" (v. 10). The wise men followed the star and continued with confidence as their seeking hearts anticipated meeting King Jesus.

Similar to the wise men's journey, it often takes creative communication on the part of God, together with the scriptures, to bring us to kneel before Jesus. We may begin our spiritual journey by following an inkling of the divine in His creation. Step by step, He leads us to meet Himself.

Pause and recall a time in your life when you searched for God and He led you to greater knowledge of Him. Recount and relish together with Him in that joyful experience of knowing Him. Ask God to reveal Himself to you in both your inner journey of the soul and the journey of life as you seek His will. May God reveal Himself to you as you follow His leading.

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You for using the star You created that went before them until it came to rest over the place of the child, Jesus.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

LIAN TSANG, NEWCOMERS

Newcomers Ministry, in collaboration with Volunteer Ministry, endeavors to be a warm initial point of contact for guests who desire to grow in their understanding of faith and our church.

Gifts of Adoration and True Worship

And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshipped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. Matthew 2:11

The Magi humbled themselves and bowed to Jesus. Contrary to the earthly kings who earned their worth through human appointment, Jesus was born as a King! They bowed low to the ground deliberately as an act of submission, royalty and worship to an infant King who had not even done or said anything of significance. Expressing submission is a good act of worship for His children to emulate. Today, how will we honour and worship Jesus intentionally in our daily lives?

The Magi opened their treasures which showed acknowledgement of a future King and prophesied His earthly mission. Gold, a precious metal, affirmed Jesus's royal Kingship; frankincense, an incense for grain offering, affirmed Jesus' Priesthood deity; and myrrh, an antiseptic, embalming, burial ingredient affirmed Jesus' death.

They understood the essence of true worship was not merely showing outward humble acts of respect to the King but also to adore and honour Him with their most worthy best sacrifice from the heart with full trust. The Magi have faithfully entrusted Mary and Joseph with these valuable gifts for Jesus to carry out God's mission.

Do we give to the Lord from the leftovers, or as a re-wrap of some of our excessive gifts? How will we follow the Magi's wisdom to give what is precious to us as an expression of our worship, investing in eternity?

2 Corinthians 8:7 tells us: "See that you also excel in this grace of giving". The Magi model excelling in meaningful giving of earthly treasures as a genuine act of worship. Christmas is an occasion to give in meaningful ways.

May we all be encouraged to open up from what treasures we have, large or small, to worship the living Christ.

RESPONSE PRAYER

We praise You that when the wise men saw the child, Jesus, they fell down and worshipped Him.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

KAREN KWOK, SENIOR ADULT

The Senior Adult Ministry assists those above 55 to connect with each other, dialogue on matters most pertinent to this age group, and be encouraged and enabled to reinvest in the next generation.

Old Paths and New Paths

And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Matthew 2:12

We give a lot of attention to the journey of the wise men as they went toward Jesus, but we rarely give any attention to their journey after meeting Jesus. While it only occupies one verse, there is a lot for us to ponder. Like, who gave them the dream? What was the content of the dream? Was the dream explicit or was it vague? How did they know to trust the dream or not?

Frankly, we don't have any answers to these questions, but what we do know is that the wise men obeyed immediately. What we also know is that the road that they previously walked was no longer safe for them.

Therein lies the application for us. When you meet Jesus, as the wise men did, your life is forever changed. The path that you used to walk is no longer a path that you can continue to walk. What used to be safe roads are now hazardous. What used to be familiar roads are now foreign to you.

The only way to navigate these new roads is to be obedient to the leading of God. Now, if you're anything like me, sometimes it's confusing to know what is of God and what isn't. Fortunately for us, God has revealed His will for us in His Word. Through the Word of God, we're taught how to live, how to worship, and how to love one another.

So if you've ever wondered how you can hear more from God, start by reading the Bible. Once you meet Jesus, your life is no longer the same; and the Word of God, wholly inspired by the Holy Spirit, will be your guide on this new path that you take.

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You God for Your protection by warning the wise men in a dream not to return to Herod.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

KEVIN KUSUNOKI, YOUNG ADULT

This ministry exists to equip young adults to make an impact in their spheres of influence and to provide a space to engage issues that pertain to faith and culture.

Rising and Remaining

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy Him." And he rose and took the child and His mother by night and departed to Egypt. Matthew 2:13-14

Not long after the wise men received a dream to direct their departure, another dream of divine direction came to the house of Joseph and Mary. It detailed yet one more chapter that would be added to the adventure story of Jesus' early days. Acting in faith on the message received, the young family of three packed up and snuck away in the cover of night to Egypt about 150km away.

In this dream, there were two messages passed along that Joseph was called to follow: to rise, and to remain. One was a calling to get up and leave everything while uncertain of what lay ahead, and the other was to wait patiently in the in-between without zero certainty of when the season would end. Neither could have been easy.

Which one of these callings seems more difficult to you? Do you typically find it more difficult to take action upon God's prompting, or more difficult to wait patiently to act until God gives the cue? For me, it's definitely the latter. Some people pray and wait for God to open doors, I tend to see doors as already open and tell God to close them if He doesn't want me to walk through.

Our personalities usually sway us to be good at either action or patience, and I'm sure for Joseph and Mary that either rising or remaining came more naturally than the other. Yet, they listened and were faithful in both. They were open to trusting beyond the comfort levels of what came naturally, and leaned into listening for God's Word. In fact, seeing openness and change beyond what is natural for us is a great barometer of God's presence in our lives. It is the definition of supernatural, and it's what we need most.

RESPONSE PRAYER

Thank You Father God for revealing Herod's plan to destroy the child, Jesus, to Joseph.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

ERIC FARMER, SUNDAY OPERATIONS

Sunday Operations exists to make Sundays a welcoming and meaningful experience for each person.

Our Mighty God of Humble Birth

For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6

Spending time with the poor gives us the opportunity to identify with Christ in the way He came to earth. Jesus was born into poverty as a helpless baby. Henri Nouwen describes this as “that great moment when God Himself entered into history and shared the human condition”.

And yet, the prophecies gave Him some truly amazing and powerful names: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Long before His humble birth, these names were ascribed to Jesus in the knowledge that God had a great plan for His future.

As we work among those in need, we must see each person as one created by God, as a precious and important individual, as a much-loved child of the God who sent His Son, Jesus, to us in an equally humble condition, yet with a glorious future ahead of Him.

Each day, the lowliest of our neighbours can call on this Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace because He readily identifies with everyday people, people who are poor and people who are helpless. He knows what it is like to be in their position, and He has called us to bring them the Good News of His great love for them.

It is so important that we know who the God we are serving really is, and carry this knowledge into our service for Him. The God who is always with us and living in us is no stranger to suffering. In Jesus, God Himself has shared in the common experience of those on the edges of society. Let us always remember that the poor and the helpless among us have a promising and glorious future because our Mighty God is their Wonderful Counsellor, an Everlasting Father who knows them by name and has come to bring them peace.

RESPONSE PRAYER

We praise You Jesus, Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

NELSON YAU, HOPE OF THE CITY

Hope of the City is committed to serving the underprivileged and sharing the love of Christ through building caring relationships and providing access to opportunities and resources.

Hope

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. 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.
John 1:1-2, 14

When the apostle John writes, “In the beginning of the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” he is preparing to tell the amazing story of Jesus. Jesus, the omnipotent and omnipresent God, is the One who “became flesh and dwelt among us”.

John speaks of how the word of God became human flesh, through Christ Jesus. Christmas is a joyful time, a time when we celebrate that word being made flesh with the birth of a child so small and humble. It’s that sense of humility that makes me think of our neighbours who come to church as well as those living and working in the local community.

Jesus never stopped being an all-powerful God. However, He humbled Himself and the Word became flesh! And we have seen His glory. We are meant to share what we have seen. We are to give testimony to the Gospel and thereby build community. The Gospel asserts that we give witness to the most crucial confession of the Christian church – namely, that God entered humanity in His Son.

God was incarnate, present, in the physical form of Christ. Christmas is a reminder of Christ’s presence and that we should allow God to be present in us as we relate to others. One of the things I look forward to at Christmas is to be together with my family. I hope that you can experience the presence with God, especially in the next few days, with whomever you are with.

In His farewell speech before returning to His Father in heaven, Jesus made one of the most comforting promises of all: “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20). Jesus desires to dwell with us even today. May you be filled with hope for Christ to make his presence known to you this Christmas.

RESPONSE PRAYER

We praise You Father God for showing us the glory of Your only Son, full of grace and truth.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES

PHIL CHIN, BOLD FAITH

The church prayerfully and confidently believes God is leading us to establish a permanent location in Hong Kong so that greater things can be done in the name of Christ.

Merry Christmas!

Today, we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Let's recount the scriptures that proclaimed this day.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son, and will call His name Immanuel, which means God with us. Matthew 1:23 (quoting Isaiah 7:14)

I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. Luke 2:10-11

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased. Luke 2:14

We celebrate that long ago at the right moment, the Christ child was born, establishing in magnificent ways that God is with us.

We experience great joy in the fact that our lives have changed and in the assurance that there is Good News for all people.

We're thankful we know the wonderful presence of Christ as our mighty and loving God in everlasting ways.

We treasure that, in Jesus Christ, we have been given peace that passes all understanding.

We lift our voices with heavenly choirs giving glory to God in the highest.

On this special day, our hearts are grateful for the gift of Christ to the world and to each of us personally.

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD,
THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON,
THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM
SHOULD NOT PERISH BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.
JOHN 3:16

Heavenly Father,
there is no one like You.
You provided the amazing miracle
of salvation through your Son,
in whom we have redemption and forgiveness.
You saved us
even when we were undeserving of such grace.
Thank you for the amazing gift
of Jesus Christ,
who provides us
with hope to live by.
Amen.

