



ADVENTURE



Adventure



PREMIUM

ADVENTURE

JESUS' JOURNEY FROM
HEAVEN TO EARTH



ADVENTURE



A SERIES BY
CROSSWALK



+ **Adventure** +

WRITTEN BY
PADDY MCCOY



A SERIES GUIDE

ADVENTURE

CHRISTMAS 2023

©LOVEWELL CREATIVE, 2023

LOVEWELL CREATIVE
in Partnership with
Crosswalk Church
10421 Corporate Drive
Redlands CA 92374
United States
www.crosswalkvillage.com

*To all those looking for the next great Adventure who realize
that the most danger, and life-changing Adventure begins when
we choose to believe in and follow Christ.*

INTRODUCTION

It's the end of October and I've just started writing this series guide. It's a Christmas series, so naturally, to get myself in the mood, I listened to my first Christmas album. For some of you, you just rolled your eyes in disgust at the very thought of introducing Christmas to our lives before Thanksgiving. Others of you, one person in particular, just told me they started listening to Christmas music in September (they may need counseling). Whatever camp you're in, one thing is undeniable, whether you celebrate it early or not, Christmas comes for us all.

This year at Crosswalk, we've chosen to reflect on the Christmas story as an Adventure. The word Adventure can describe a significant undertaking, a remarkable experience, and exciting activity, a time of exploring unknown territory, but inherit with any use of the word Adventure is the idea of risk. No risk, no adventure.

I live in the beautiful, Pacific Northwest, where Adventure is our middle name. We've got mountains to ski down and climb up; rivers to raft, kayak, and parasail; trails to hike; oceans to explore; and some of the most bizarre and unique cities in the world to enjoy.

But you don't have to live in the Pacific Northwest to go on an adventure. Every day offers us some kind of adventure or another. Navigating the freeway can often be a risky adventure. Sitting down to do bills can

be an adventure, whether it's good or bad probably depends on your bank account. Reconnecting with an old friend, caring for your grandkids, moving to a new state, prepping for finals, trying that new Thai place in town, all of these are adventures, though assuredly some are more risky than others.

As we look back on the Christmas story unfolding in the gospels as foretold in the prophecies, we can easily see how jam packed the story is with adventure, risk. The characters include angels and shepherds, heroes like Joseph and villains like Herod, wise men from the east following a star, a very pregnant and young Mary trying to survive atop a donkey for four days (can not imagine the discomfort), and even an order to find a way to kill the Christ child that led to a last minute trip to Egypt.

The story of the Advent, or the coming of Christ into the world, is an incredible story of Adventure, but how does the Adventure continue for us today?

The late pastor/theologian, Timothy Keller, once said, "*Christmas, like God himself, is both more wondrous and more threatening than we imagine.*" It's wondrous because it tells the tale of a God who took on flesh to prove His love for us, and save His people from their sins. And it's threatening because it challenges us to love and serve others the way He loves and serves us. You see, Jesus was God in the flesh (the incarnation), and as His body, we are now Jesus in the flesh to the world around us (a new incarnation, or new

humanity). We desire to live with Christ in us, the hope of glory. (Colossians 1: 27)

So Crosswalk, are you ready for what promises to be a great Adventure, where every moment matters and all we can do is hang onto Jesus for dear life?

I hope so. So get ready for the life-giving, risk-taking, world-changing Adventure found in the story of a God who became human, so that humans could be filled with His Spirit, share His love to the world, and ultimately be reunited with our God.

Thanks so much for joining in the fun!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Paddy McGee". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'P' and a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Pastor Paddy and the Series Guide Writing team.

DAY 1

THE BETHLEHEM ADVENTURE



“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel, whose origins are in the distant past, will come from you on my behalf.”

Micah 5:2 NLT

There are prophecies, and then there are prophecies. This one from Micah was given 700 years before it would be fulfilled, during a time of religious revival. Sadly, that revival didn't last long. Within a few years, the Israelites would once again be thrown into darkness represented by captivity, persecution, assimilation, and even the desecration of their sacred land.

No doubt that during dark times, the Israelites would have clung to the stories and promises of old. Maybe they even sat around the campfire at night, after another grueling day of work at the hand of their oppressors, and they'd say, *“It won't always be like this friends. Remember the prophet Micah? Remember what he said? He said a ruler was coming. It's hard to*

imagine now, but we have to remember that God is faithful even when it doesn't feel like it? Remember how long our ancestors prayed for rescue from Egypt? 400 years, but it happened. Let us pray our wait is not as long, and let us never lose hope."

But why would God choose Bethlehem for the place to birth this new divine Adventure, this new rescue?

Bethlehem, at the time of the birth of Jesus, was a fairly small village full of sheep and shepherds. It's only claim to fame was that it was the hometown of King David. Sure, there were prophecies that suggested a king from the line of David would rule forever, but those prophecies are 100's of years old, and Bethlehem? Well, it's not much to look at now.

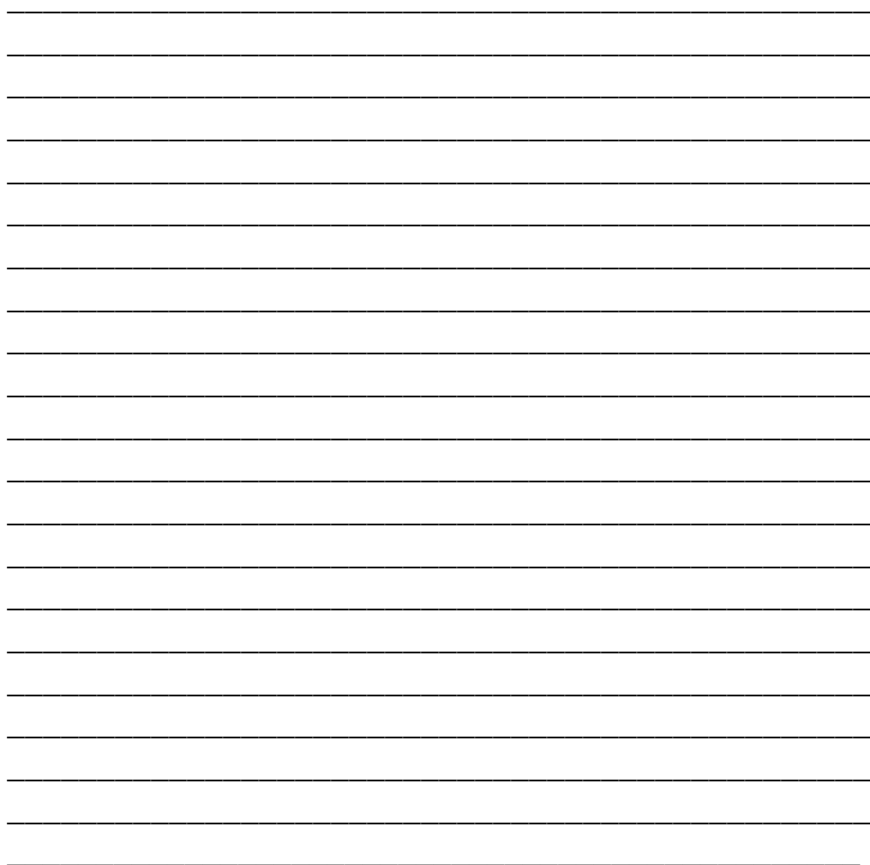
Why not Jerusalem? Why not the city of God where the temple is and the presence of God dwells? Or why not in the heart of the enemy, Rome. If God showed up there it would for sure strike fear into their hearts from day one.

But there's something important to note about the God we serve; He loves an underdog. He loves to use the least likely people to do the most amazing things. A stuttering shepherd is chosen to rescue His children from a super power. A boy is chosen to slough a giant with a sling and a stone. A young woman and her husband the carpenter are chosen to help bring the Savior to the world.

With this unlikely couple, in this unlikely town, in an unlikely time, God would herald in a new age, a new reign, and a new hope that no one could have ever dreamed up if they tried.

So we have to believe in God's words even when we don't always see what He's up to at the time. Remember the apostles words, "*For all the promises of God find their Yes in [JESUS].*" (2 Corinthians 1: 19, NLT) You see, with God, there is always a light at the end of the tunnel of darkness, often in places we'd least expect it. Maybe even in you, and maybe even in me. So let's see where this surprising Adventure of the Christmas story takes us, and what we can learn about God and ourselves along the way.

1. What is one adventure you have taken that was full of some risk, but also some unforgettable experiences?
2. Are you in a time of waiting for God to fulfill a promise or show up in your life? What longing on your heart are you hoping He'll fulfill?
3. Have you ever felt small and insignificant? Knowing God used a small and insignificant town like Bethlehem to herald the most important event in history, what do you think the God of the universe could do with you?
4. How can you prepare your heart today, for reliving the Adventure of the Christmas story?



DAY 2

LIGHT VS DARK



“In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. God sent a man, John the Baptist, to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He

came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him."

John 1:1-10 NLT

I am one of those people who loves Christmas decorations. At 48 years old, I still climb on top of my house to outline my roof in white lights, and I take great care to place the lights on the Christmas tree just right so they illuminate the tree and all the ornaments perfectly.

Some nights, I sit in front of the tree and I just get lost in the glow of the lights, which are usually white. At times, I'll blur my eyes and think of those lights as angels. Other nights, I sit on the curb across the street from my house and just drink in the contrast of the lights against the background of the dark.

Light and dark are a common theme in Scripture. In fact, in the Scriptures, darkness is often used as a metaphor that stands for one of two things; evil or ignorance.

In one of the most famous Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, found in the book of Isaiah, we learn, *"The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine."* Isaiah 9:2 NLT

Though the darkness they felt was assuredly the evil of their enemies, in Jesus' time there was also a darkness that made many unable to recognize who Jesus was. John speaks to this in the last line of our opening

pericope, “[Jesus] came into the world he created, but the world didn’t recognize him.”

How could they not recognize the Messiah they had waited for for so long? Because they were walking in darkness, ignorance. They were looking for a military Messiah King who would arrive in a palace with an army at the ready, not a Servant Messiah King born to peasants, in a tiny village, surrounded by unclean animals and unclean people.

But the light this new king brought, it wasn’t a light from this world. It was a light from another place.

We live in a world that is trying to find the light within ourselves. We think that if we try hard enough, look deep within ourselves, we can solve all of our problems. If we were just humanitarian enough, wise enough, innovative enough, we could finally make this world a better place.

But no matter how hard we try, over the years, history has proven that our light is not enough. Our world is too dark, too broken, to be healed by us.

No, what we need is a light from another source, a light that is other worldly. A light that can illuminate the world but isn’t from our world. A light that when it shines in the darkness, “*the darkness can never extinguish it.*” Other translations say that the darkness cannot understand it. Why? Because it’s not from this world.

DAY 3

THE WISE MEN SEE THE LIGHT



“Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.”...After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened

their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11 NLT

Even though Herod plays a prominent role in the text we're exploring today, we're going to save talking about him until next week. For now, let's talk about the other main characters in this part of the story, the wise men, or magi.

First, the facts. We don't know how many wise men there were, even though three are often depicted in songs and drawings. They are also at times portrayed as kings, but we're not sure that was the case either. Magi were often priestly type figures from ancient Persia who employed scientific (astrology), diplomatic (wisdom), and religious (magical incantations) methods to try and understand present and future life.

Whatever the case, they likely hailed from the region of the Babylonians, where the Israelites had spent much time in captivity. So likely, some of the Jewish texts and teachings had been left for the Magi to peruse.

Many scholars believe that it was a widespread belief in the ancient world that one day, men from Judea would seize power and rule the world. So when the Magi saw a star, connected that to some prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures, they set out on a 900 mile journey to worship and give gifts to this new king.

So for months, they followed the light, called the star of Bethlehem. We don't know if it was an actual star, a supernatural phenomenon of some kind, or an angel (*angels were occasionally referred to as stars*), but for

months, the Magi and their entourage followed the light.

What has always struck me with the Magi is their persistence, their confidence in what they would find when they got to where the light was leading them. All of this came from those outside the Israelite story, even though it should have been the Israelites who connected the dots first.

These outsiders would, in many ways, mark the kind of example Jesus would set for us during His life on this earth; a life committed to helping all those created in the image of God come to see Him more clearly, Jews AND Gentiles.

It makes me wonder, if God could use the Magi from a far away land to help others see Jesus, who else might Jesus be using today that I wouldn't expect and may even miss because I'm not looking? Maybe my neighbor who spends 4-5 hours a day sitting in his car, smoking cigars? My atheist friend who gave up on God because he couldn't reconcile the difference between a God of love and those who professed to follow Him? The houseless couple who come to our food pantry every month and just want to share what they've learned about Jesus since last we met?

I believe God's shining light is available for all of us to pursue, and that God can use the most unlikely sources to help us learn more about him. But if we're closed off to the many ways God speaks, we may just miss him altogether.

DAY 4

THE JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM



“At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David’s ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child.”

Luke 2:1-5 NLT

If you’re married, and a man, it’s likely that you don’t really understand the significance of this story. Here, you have a very pregnant Mary, who is going to have to travel for four days, averaging eight hours a day, ON A DONKEY! All this just to get to your husbands ancestral home because the government said it had to be done. I can NOT imagine that any of that trip was comfortable for Mary (she may have even had a few choice words for her beloved Joseph who would have

had no idea what it was like to be pregnant, let alone ride a donkey at 9 months pregnant).

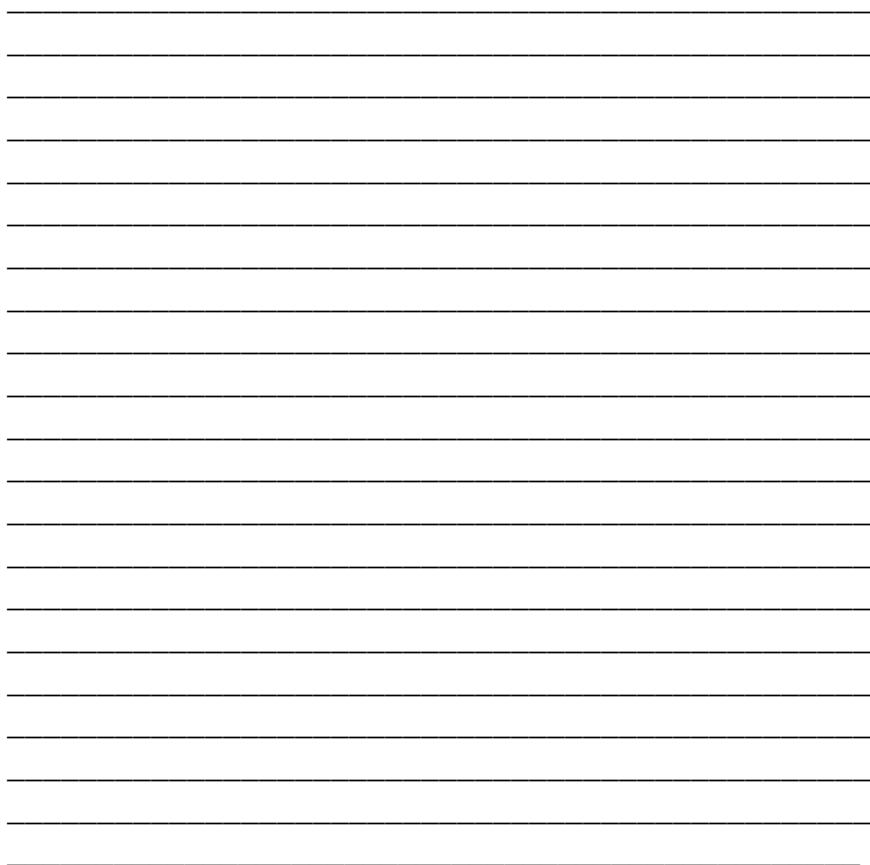
The risk involved in this trip was great. Mary was obviously close to giving birth and it could have happened anywhere along the way. Joseph likely chose to bring Mary, because it wouldn't have been required for him to as the head of his household, in order to protect her from the people of Nazareth who likely still wanted to stone her for the perceived act of adultery..

But I can imagine some of the conversations that might have taken place on that trip. Mary and Joseph had to know the time was getting close. They both had accepted the divine nature of this child and his conception. And as if parenting isn't scary enough, they must have asked themselves questions along this trip like...

“How do we raise and teach the Son of God?”

“What if we mess Him up in some way?”

Talk about a scary adventure. We'll dig into their parenting adventure more in our last week of this series, but for now, just know that Mary and Joseph were ordinary people like you and I. Ordinary, but courageous. They chose to follow God through this experience even though it likely cost them family, friendships, business, and possibly even participation in the religious life of their community, all because Joseph chose to stay by Mary's side and raise her baby as his own.



DAY 5

THE ARRIVAL



“And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.”

Luke 2:6-7 NLT

“Some have argued that the supreme miracle of Christianity is not the resurrection of Christ from the dead, but the incarnation.” (Timothy Keller)

What is unique to the Christian faith, is the belief in a God who continued to love His rebellious creation so much that He became one of them, to save them. It's the concept of grace, He took on what we deserve in

order to give us access to what He deserves. It truly describes a love that is higher and wider and longer and deeper than anything we can possibly imagine (Ephesians 3), and yet, the Christmas story is our yearly reminder that it happened.

Mary and Joseph, just like Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, didn't have an option as to what to name this new baby boy. He wouldn't have a family name, no grandparents would be honored, no family traditions carried on. For the angel had told Joseph what to name the baby.

“And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Matthew 1:21 NLT

““Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’”

Matthew 1:23 NLT

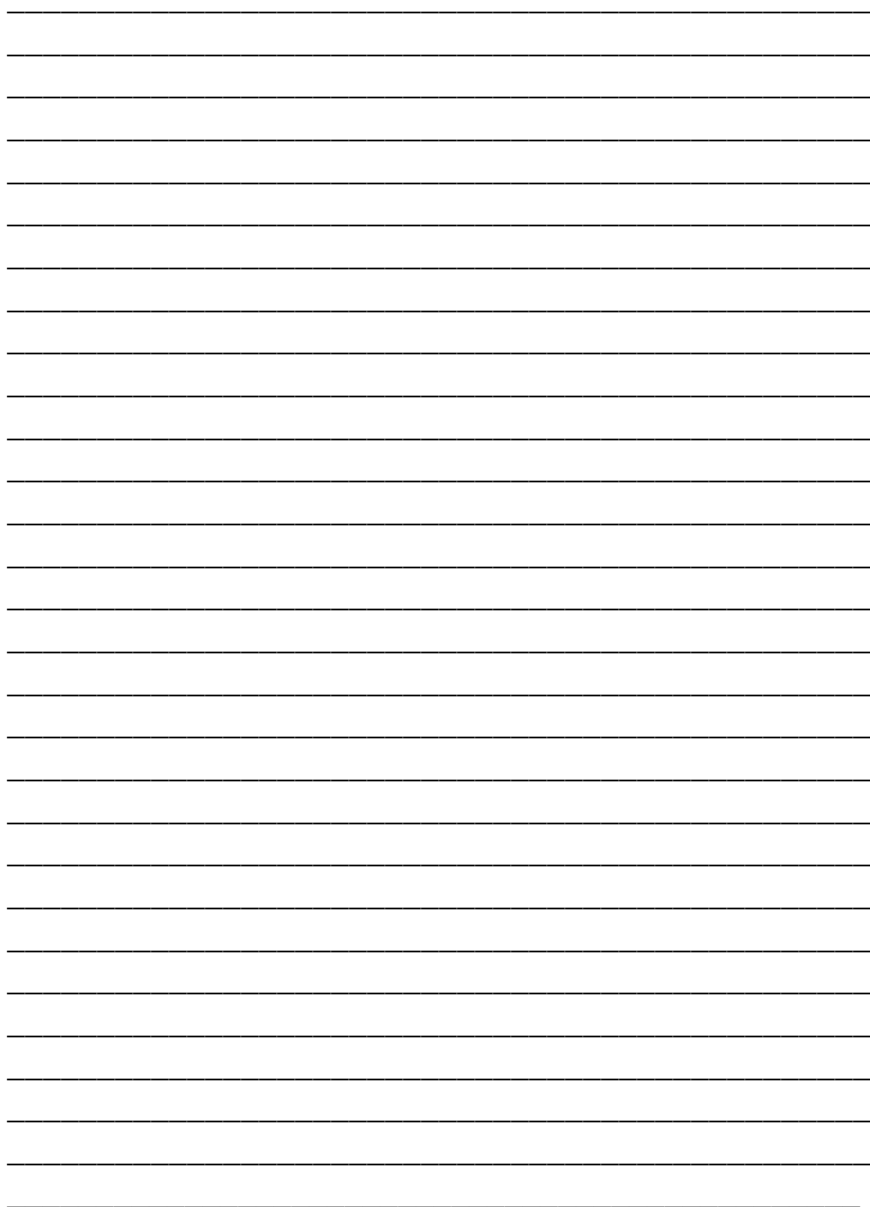
The name Jesus simply means, Yahweh (*the God of Israel*), saves. The people were longing for their Messiah to come and rescue them. But notice what Matthew adds to the name Jesus from his story of the angel. It's not Yahweh saves, it's that Yahweh is *going* to save his people from their sins. This was our first hint that Jesus wasn't a warrior Messiah come to liberate Israel from Rome, but a Heavenly Messiah come to save us from ourselves.

But there's another name given for this baby boy. Matthew quotes Isaiah's prophecy that said, *“they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God with us.’”*

We have no record of Jesus ever being called Immanuel, but it seems Matthew's including this detail in the birth story is intentional. You see, Jesus was what He came to do, save us from our sins; Immanuel was who He was, God with us.

So God takes on human flesh to save us from our sins, but also, to be as close to us as possible. He's not here to take care of a momentary problem, the Romans, but rather an eternal one, our separation from Him. The miracle of the incarnation of God who took on human flesh is one we may never fully understand, but for those who choose to believe, we can spend an eternity, trying.

1. What does it mean to you that God was willing to risk all of creation to become like us, to save us?
2. It's amazing to think of the God of the universe, "wrapped snugly in strips of cloth" and held by the very hands He created. What love! What sacrifice! What is something you'd be willing to sacrifice for Him in return? Time volunteering at church or with a cause that furthers the gospel? Finances to help a ministry you feel drawn to support? Or how about crossing the street to invite that neighbor of yours that you know could use a community to belong to and be a part of?



DAY 6

THE INCARNATIONAL ADVENTURE OF TODAY'S BETHLEHEM



“After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother,” the angel said. “Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, and they stayed there until Herod’s death. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: “I called my Son out of Egypt.” Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men’s report of the star’s first appearance.”

Matthew 2:13-16 NLT

The way the story reads in the Scriptures, it’s as if Jesus’ life was in danger from the second He was born. In reality, scholars believe that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were likely in Bethlehem for up to two years before the threat from Herod and the flight to Egypt. So they would have had some time to nurse him, care for him, and introduce him to Joseph’s relatives in Bethlehem.

But make no mistake, Mary and Joseph lived daily with the weight of how important Jesus was to them, and to the world. Parents worry about their children anyway, it's natural, but when your child is the Son of God who has come to rescue all of Creation, however, you better believe you live on heightened alert.

Jesus' incarnation then was one of the most amazing miracles of all time. 20th century theologian, J.I. Packer, writes, "*Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the Incarnation.*"

The word, "incarnation," can be simply defined as a person who embodies, in the flesh, a deity, a spirit, or an abstract quality. Sometimes we call it, "infleshment." But though Jesus' birth is The Incarnation of God taking on human flesh, incarnation still happens today as the Holy Spirit takes up residence in us. We, His body, continue to represent His presence in the world today.

So this week we ask, what can we learn about the Adventure in Bethlehem that speaks to our incarnation of Christ and our call today?

For Joseph, Bethlehem was his ancestral home. He likely had family there, and though some Christmas stories make you think that Joseph had door after door shut in his face because there was "no room," that wouldn't have been the case. He would have been known, loved, and Eastern hospitality was serious business, you wouldn't have turned a family member, especially one with a pregnant wife, away.

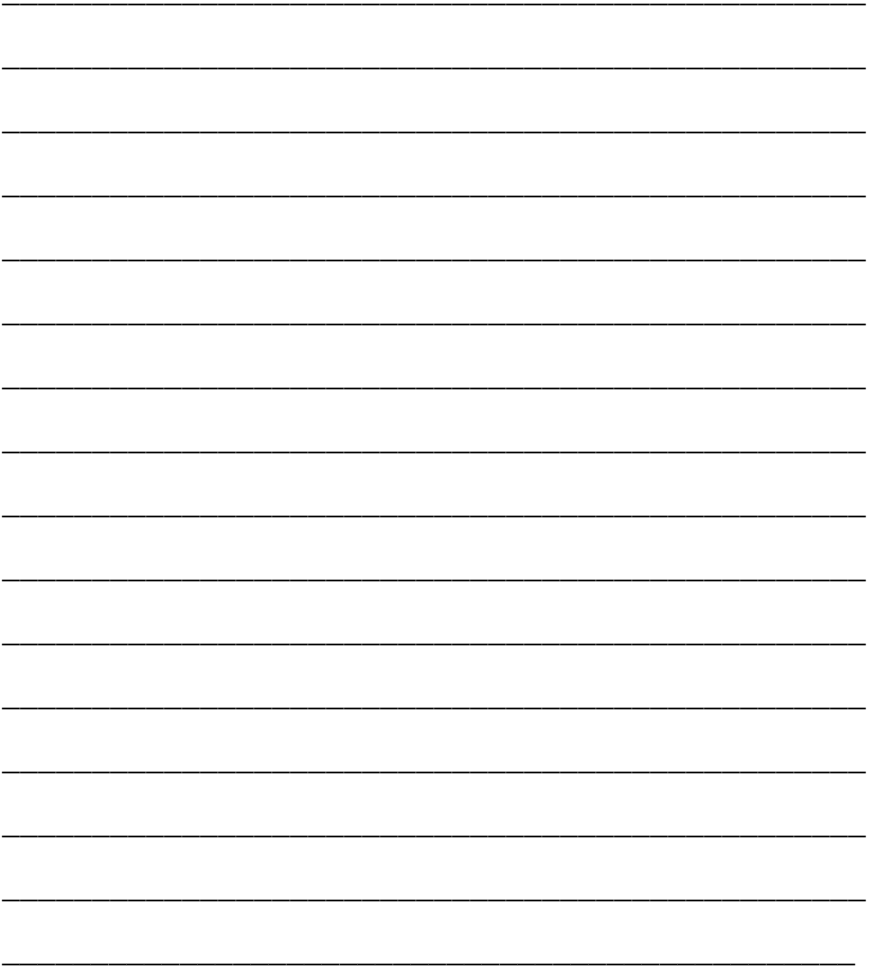
So what does the adventure of incarnation look like for us in our homes, in the places that, and with the people who, know us?

Sometimes we think the call to follow Jesus only leads us into the world, the marketplace, to those who don't believe. But our first and most important witness is in our homes, to our families and those God has put in our lives. Our call is to love them, as we go out and love others.

To do this we must start by accepting that Jesus was who He said He was, and giving our life to Him, This is the beginning of an incredibly risky, and incredibly transformative, adventure. The coming days, weeks, months, and years, can be some of the most challenging, and rewarding, times of your life as you continue to commit yourself to your love for the rest of your life.

Jesus couldn't imagine living through eternity without each and every one of us, so he was willing to leave the comforts of heaven to embark on the riskiest adventure of all time. His adventure would involve pain like few, if any, have ever known, separation from God, something He had never experienced, and certainly, death. And yet, he was willing to do it because He loved us so very much.

I guess the question we're left with today is; Did his risk pay off? Will you and I agree to join Him in the great Adventure of discipleship where every moment matters and all we can do is hang on to Him for dear life?



DAY 7

SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY GUIDE



INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN

Share a favorite Christmas tradition as it relates to the holiday story. It may be a favorite song and why, or an ornament on your tree, or a family tradition, or anything else that you look forward to that connects the season with the story of Christ.

HEAD

1. Read Isaiah 9: 1-7, Luke 2: 1-7 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts from the reading.
2. Describe what kind of darkness you think the Israelites were experiencing in captivity?

3. If all you had was Isaiah 9 to go off of, how would you have imagined the Messiah was to come? What would you have been looking for?
4. Those names, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, what about those names do you think the Israelites found hope in? What about us today?
5. If Joseph took Mary with him out of fear of what might happen to her if he left her in Nazareth, what do you think their daily lives were like there in their situation?
6. Can you think of one fear Mary and Joseph may have had or talked about concerning raising the Messiah?

HEART

1. Think of all the risks Mary and Joseph took from day one of agreeing with the angels to participate in this Adventure. What risks can you think of? Do you think Mary and Joseph were aware of all the risks, or just some?
2. Do you think they knew this Jesus was God? Explain.
3. Bethlehem was an underdog city, Mary and Joseph were an underdog couple. What are some of your favorite underdog stories from Scripture and how do they encourage you in your journey of faith?
4. How do you and I seek to live incarnationally? What practices help Jesus come to life in us?
5. How do we practice living incarnationally in our homes, and not just at church or when we're "on mission"?

HANDS



DAY 8

THE ROMAN ADVENTURE



“At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David’s ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child.”

Luke 2:1-5 NLT

For 100’s of years, the Israelite people had been in and out of slavery and oppression, under the rule of some power other than themselves. Whether it was the Midianites, the Cushites, the Assyrians or Medes or Persians, the Babylonians, Greece, or Rome, someone else always seemed to have the upper hand.

Sometimes Israel fought back, other times they went into captivity with the divine call to bless another people, and other times they seemingly gave up all hope and lived in darkness and despair.

By the time the Romans came to power, in roughly 67 BC, the Jews were scattered throughout the land. In fact, according to historians, by the time of Jesus' birth, there were more Jews living outside of Palestine than inside, and the most common language was Greek, not Hebrew.

In years past, the Israelites tried to revolt against their oppressors, like the revolt of Judas Maccabaeus from 167-160 BC. But as we approached the birth of Jesus, roughly 6-5 BC, the Israelite leaders tried a different approach. According to New Testament scholar, NT Wright, "No new Judas Maccabaeus arose to lead Israel's faithful heroes in another holy war. Instead, his heirs and successors compromised with the faithless, played the political game, rendered unto Caesar what Caesar thought was due to him, and gave to their God what was left." (*The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*). So the Jewish leaders turned to compromise and nationalism to survive this new oppressor and pad their pockets in the meantime.

After a decades of compromise, however, it can be difficult to remember what set you apart in the first place. The more the Israelites compromised with Rome, the more they lost their identity and calling. And even though they could still recite the prophecies of the promised Messiah, the more comfortable their lives got the harder it became to let go of those lives.

As for the political leaders at the time, there were those that believed Caesar had divine qualities. He adopted his nephew,

Octavius, who eventually became emperor and took on the title Caesar August, or son of god. Octavius instituted, through a series of alliances, political savviness, and blunt force, the Pax Romana (aka Roman Peace).

Into this world, a pronouncement was made that at the time, didn't seem like much of a threat to the mega-power at Rome, but it would certainly shake the local magistrate.

Make no mistake, there are no coincidences in the birth story of Jesus. During a time when Augustus, the son of god, was praised for bringing about the Pax Romana, the true Son of God came into this world as the Prince of Peace, to lead a kingdom not characterized by violence, compromise, or worldly power, but one of radical love, grace-filled forgiveness, inner-peace, and other worldly power. It was a conflict, but one Rome could not win and no power could extinguish, not even death.

1. Do you think you have ever made any compromises in your life that impact your faith, your call as a follower of Christ?
2. Rome was such a huge power. Have you ever felt up against something that you were sure you couldn't defeat?
3. In a time with so much war, tensions, and divisions, how do you live under the Prince of Peace as an agent of that peace?



DAY 9

THE POLITICAL CLIMATE OF ADVENT: ISRAEL PRIMED FOR REVOLUTION



Though many of the religious leaders had found a way to thrive under Roman rule, there were still many who longed for the coming of the promised Messiah. Undoubtedly, there were many prophecies recited and many hopes shared around camp fires and in small homes throughout the Hebrew countryside.

Remember, more Hebrews lived outside of the cities than in them. This meant the dominant culture was agrarian, small town, simple.

But as we continue to learn throughout the gospels, the Messiah the people hoped for was military in focus, one that would overthrow their oppressors and them on top once and for all. They were waiting for a military leader, and many of them would be ready to follow this leader to death if it meant the forever rescue of the nation of Israel. You can see this lived out in the disciples who were ready for a fight on the night of Jesus' arrest, or the people who wanted to force Jesus to be king after the feeding of the 5,000, or how it

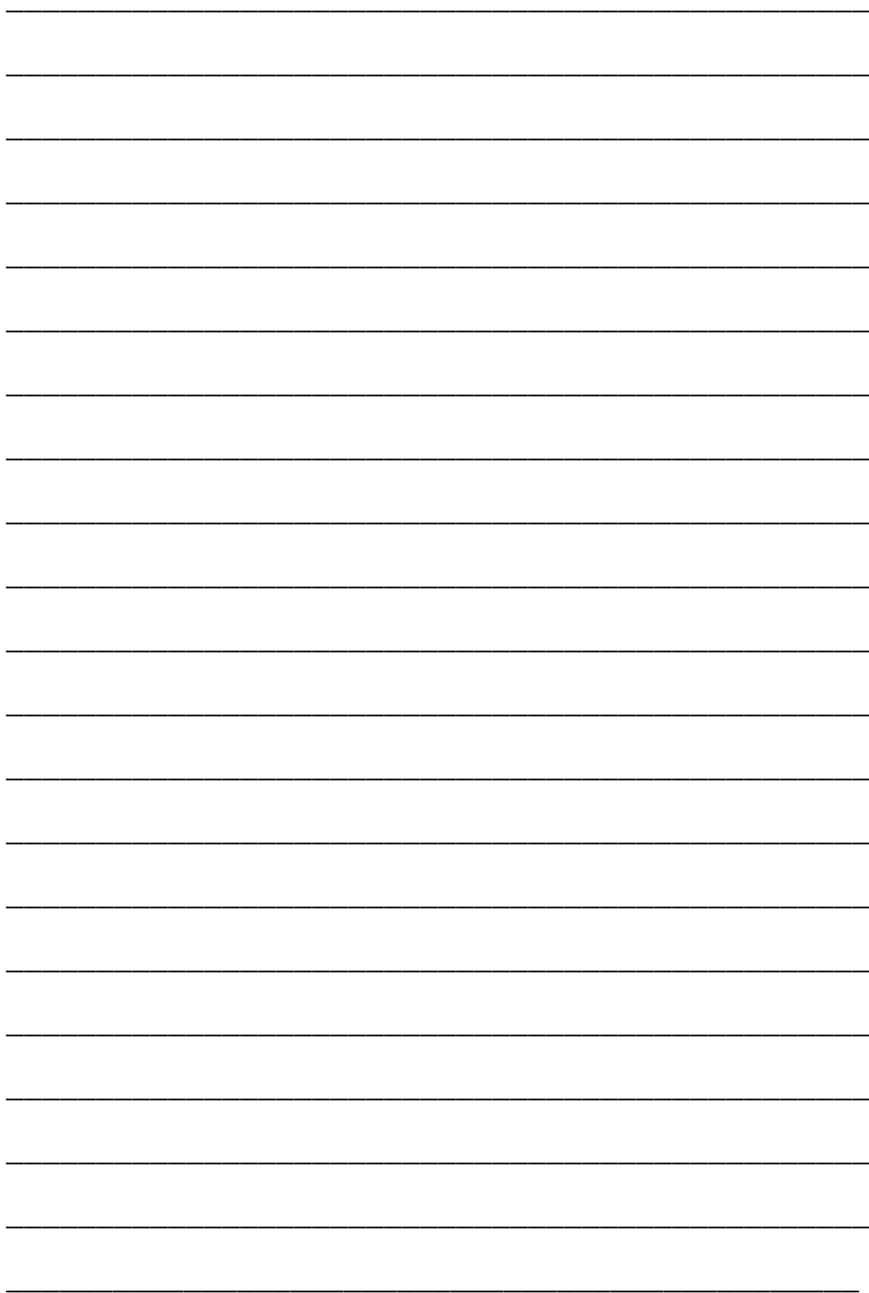
didn't matter that Jesus told the disciples several times what was going to happen to Him and they never could hear it or receive it. They wanted Rome defeated, not won over to the Kingdom of God.

So Israel was ready for a revolution. When Jesus marched into Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling a known Messianic prophecy, the people went crazy. They thought this was their time, finally, after all these years.

You can imagine why so many people missed the birth of Jesus. They were looking for Him in palaces, or in the midst of a mighty army led by mighty men, not a baby born to a simple young couple, in a small agrarian town, surrounded by animals.

But rest assured, a revolution was coming, just not the kind they were expecting. In this revolution, they'd be called to love their enemies and pray for those that persecute them. In this revolution, they'd be led to interact with the people they hate, like Samaritans, tax collectors, and other sinners. In this revolution, they'd be told to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. In this revolution, to become great you have to become least, and when you are weak, then you are strong.

Jesus almost always comes, not just in birth but in life, in ways and in times that we don't expect. All you and I can do is to be prayerfully and submissively open to the revolution He's calling us to in our hearts, our homes, our communities, and our world.



DAY 10

HEROD THE GREAT WANNA-BE KING



“Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.” King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?” “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote: ‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’” Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. Then he told them, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!”

...Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on

the wise men's report of the star's first appearance. Herod's brutal action fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A cry was heard in Ramah— weeping and great mourning. Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be comforted, for they are dead.""

Matthew 2:1-8, 16-18 NLT

Many of you know some of the history of the wanna-be king, Herod The Great. I say wanna-be, because it seems that at every corner, he wanted Rome to recognize his worth, and he wanted Israel to recognize his power. Likely, Herod knew of the prophecies of a Messiah, and he was power hungry enough to have probably envisioned himself as the fulfillment of those prophecies.

But Herod was no prince of peace. He was paranoid, constantly afraid of losing power and influence. He was willing to kill family, his own sons, to hold onto that power, and he willingly and all too easily compromised his values and his people to hold onto that power.

So imagine what it felt like for Herod to have foreigners from the east come to him and announce, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews?"

I don't know the manners the wise men were raised with, but they apparently didn't mind disrespecting the sitting king. Herod lived in a palace, wore a crown, and was currently serving as the King of the Jews, both as commissioned by Rome, and by his own blood-sweat, and tears (not to mention the blood of those he killed to get there).

So how dare the wise men come into his palace and ask about the new king. But Herod had always been concerned about a new ruler coming from the east. He tried to build fortresses and fortify cities on their east borders to keep that threat at bay. So when visitors came from the East, he anxiety went through the roof.

He must have hid his surprise well, however, because he was able to get the wise men to share important details about the location of this alleged new king. He also tricked them into thinking he too wanted to worship this new king, when in reality all Herod wanted to do was eradicate the threat to his throne.

Fast-forward just over 2,000 years, and something quite fascinating happened to the reputation and power of Herod the Great; it got up and left. His influence was passed on to his children, the ones he didn't kill, but little is known about his line after the second generation.

And just to put an exclamation mark on his life vs that of the newborn king he was so threatened by, here's a story:

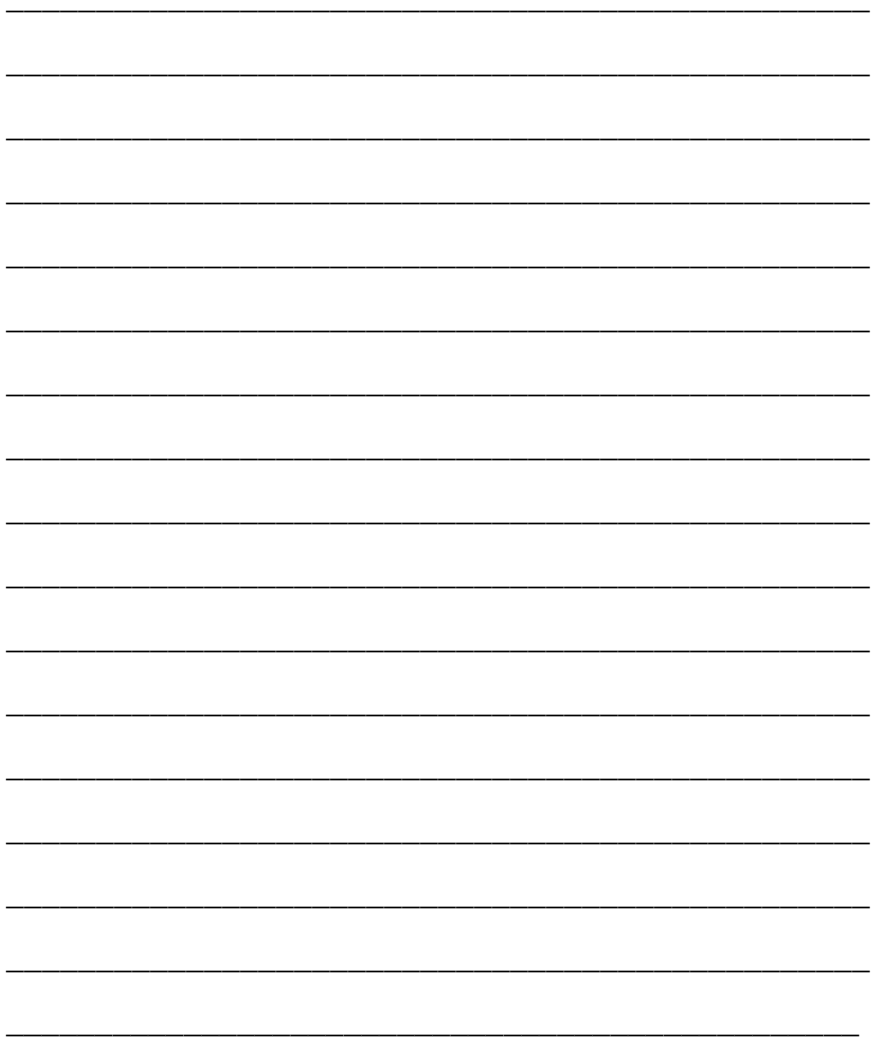
Before Herod died, he built an archaeological marvel called Herodium. It was a man-made mountain built to protect, but also built as a tomb for the once great king. To this day, over 200,000 people every year visit Herodium to see this unusual human accomplishment.

Just a few miles away, however, in the basement of what is known as the church of the Holy Sepulcher, is the tomb of that baby born during Herod's reign. A baby born in the

small village of Bethlehem to a carpenter and a teenage woman. That tomb, the one that Jesus' body laid in for three days, is visited each year by millions of people from around the world.

So you tell me, who made the biggest impact and held the most power? Who was the real king of the Jews?

1. What do you think drives us to want to be the rulers of our own little kingdoms?
2. Why do you think the influence and impact of Jesus was so much greater than that of Herod, beyond the obvious fact that He was God? What was it about His message that had a greater appeal?
3. Who is the king of your life? Is it you? Is it your job, your circumstances, your bank account? What would it take to surrender the reign of your life, today, to the king of all Kings?



DAY 11

MAYBE WE'RE ALL A LITTLE HEROD



What can we take away from Herod's role in the Christmas Adventure?

I like Tim Keller's reflections from his book, *Hidden Christmas*, he says, *"In every heart, then, there is a 'little King Herod' that wants to rule and that is threatened by anything that may compromise its omnipotence and sovereignty. Each of us wants to be the captain of our own soul, the master of our own fate. There is a natural enmity of the human heart against all claims of sovereignty over it. It rises up a little when minor claims are made over us. But Jesus' claims of authority are ultimate and infinite. No heart, unaided, can gladly surrender to them."*

I may not be a king, I certainly don't have any political influence, but I often forget who is the true king. You see, I often SAY that I'm doing my best to follow Jesus wherever He leads, but then I ACT as if what happens in my life is all up to

me. I often SAY *“All to Jesus, I surrender”* but I often live, *“Some to Jesus I surrender, the rest is up to me!”*

So I've learned how important it is to read the stories of Scripture through a lens that says, *“That could have been me.”* Herod just represents the selfish, power-hungry, sin-driven person in all of us. So though it's easy to point fingers at Herod, shake our heads, and think of how sad it is that there are people in the world who care more about themselves and their kingdoms, than anyone else, just remember the old adage that says, *“Whenever you point a finger at someone, there's three pointing back at you.”*

What we need, what we all need, is more Jesus and less Herod; more surrendering and less power grabbing; more peacemaking and less fear mongering. Imagine what would happen if our world leaders were willing to lay down their interest for money and power, and put the needs of their people first. Imagine what would happen in Israel and Palestine if Hamas released the hostages, and the two communities came together to seek each other's good above their own. Imagine what would happen if Christians stopped trying to be right all the time, and started to put love first.

For our Christmas Adventure, our life Adventure, may we learn to surrender our ways to His ways, our kingship to His kingship, and may we learn to repent of the little Herod inside us all.

1. What do you need to repent of today that has led you away from the person God has called you to be?

DAY 12

NO SUCH THING AS RISK VS NO RISK



For 14 years, I served as a campus chaplain at an Adventist University that was well known for sending student missionaries to serve around the world. These students would take a year out of their collegiate career to teach elementary children in PohnPei, serve at an orphanage in Honduras, work on radio towers in far away lands so more people could have access to the good news of Jesus Christ.

When the student missionaries returned, they almost always had two responses to give you when you asked them, “What was it like?”

First they’d often say, *“It was the hardest year of my life.”*

That always hit heavy and peaked curiosity of the listener to ask why. But before the listener could respond, the student would immediately follow that first line up with a second one, *“But it was also the best year of my life.”*

They grew so much in their time away, learned so much about themselves, about other cultures, about the needs around the world, and about Jesus.

But rest assured, no matter where they went or what they did, their year was full of risks. Some for safety, some for spiritual battles, some for health, and some involved just fighting the feeling of inadequacy - "*Who am I to serve?*"

Every year, the parents of these students who wanted to go out and serve would call into our office. Often, they were worried about the location their student wanted to go, and would ask us to find a place that had less risk, or really no risk would have been preferable.

Our response? There is no such thing as risk and no risk. Every choice we make involves risk. It involves risk to serve Jesus in Thailand, and it involves risk to serve Jesus in Portland. It involves risk to drive to work, or fly to vacation (*statistically, it's safe to fly than drive*).

Jesus' life was always at risk, from the moment He was conceived by the Holy Spirit into the womb of Mary. He was at risk from dying with high infant mortality rates at that time. He was at risk from the religious community being seen as a bastard son. He was at risk from the local authorities who wanted all the power. He would be at risk from Rome who didn't want anyone challenging their authority. Yet He chose that risk because of His great love for us, and we're told He would have done it all even if it only saved one person.

So I guess the question comes for us all, what will we risk for Jesus. What adventure will we go on for Him?

1. What are we willing to risk for the one who risked everything for you?



DAY 13

THE INCARNATIONAL ADVENTURE OF TODAY'S ROME



Rome represented earthly power run by greed, and all that those things represent; selfishness and self-preservation, lust, jealousy, etc.... But Rome also represents the world we live in, where at every turn we “look out for number one” and do our best to have and be a little more than our neighbor.

And yet, it is into this world that Jesus came, to show us a different way of living, a different kind of power. Sure, He calmed the wind and the waves. Sure, He raised people who were dead back to life. Sure, an entire regiment of soldiers fell facedown at the mere mention of His name. But the power He had wasn't about force, it was about love; it wasn't about keeping things to ourselves, it was about giving them away. It wasn't about being served, it was about serving and giving our life as a ransom. This was the Adventure of the Kingdom of God that was in such stark contrast to the backdrop of the Roman Empire.

Our call as followers of Christ is to live counter-culturally to the things of this world. To be in the world, but not of the world.

When the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon, they'd often look out to the east, in the direction of Jerusalem, and they'd long for home. They desperately wanted to get out of Babylon and be done with those people. But in light of those feelings, God told them...

“This is what the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: “Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.”

Jeremiah 29:4-7 NLT

God didn't want the Israelites to hide in Babylon, He wanted them to be a blessing in Babylon, to make a difference, or to use a more modern-day adage, *“Grow where you're planted.”*

I believe the same is true for us today. God doesn't want us running to the hills, escaping from the cities, counting down the days until we get off this God-forsaken planet. He wants us, He calls us, to be a blessing; in the marketplace, at our schools, in our civil communities and with their responsibilities, on the freeway, and in our homes. He has called us, and empowered us, to be His presence in the world. So may we answer that call and bring more of Jesus to the world.

1. Describe your Rome. What places do you have the opportunity to be a positive influence for the kingdom of God?

DAY 14

SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY GUIDE



INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN

Can you remember a risk that you have taken in your life that was scary, for whatever reason? Share about what it was and how taking that risk impacted you.

or...

In light of the holidays, share about a present you hope to give another person, or that you hope to receive.

HEAD

1. Read Jeremiah 29: 4-7 and Matthew 2:1-8, 16-18 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts from the reading.
2. Imagine being torn from your homes, your identity, and being forced to live, work, and practice another culture. What do you think would be difficult for you in that type of setting?
3. If you hated Babylon and it's people for stealing you from your home, what would it have been like for you to hear God's words in Jeremiah?
4. How might God's command here impacted the kingdom of God, not only in Babylon during their time, but later one - say, at the birth of Jesus? (remember, the wise men likely came from Babylon)
5. Do you think most Israelites were aware of the incredible enormity and power of Rome? And if they did, how discouraging would it have been to be oppressed, again!

HEART

1. God told the Israelites to be a blessing even in captivity. What are some ways that God calls you and I to be a blessing in our world today? What are some tangible ways we can positively impact the world we live in every day?
2. Why do you think some hide away from the world instead of seeking to bless it?
3. Herod ruled out of fear, Jesus out of love. Why is love so much better and more sustaining?

4. The story of Jesus began and ended with the shedding of blood. How does the cross of Christ help us work through the loss of innocent blood?

HANDS

This week we are struck with the challenge to “grow where we’re planted.” Think of your workplace, your school, the places you shop, the routes your drive to and from places. What is one, practical way, you could bless one of those areas this week?

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

“Jesus came and told his disciples, ‘I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you.

And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’”

Matthew 28:18-20 NLT

DAY 15

THE ANGEL ADVENTURE



“That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.” Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.” When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.””

This may seem like an inappropriate way to begin today's reflection, but I can't help it. When I read through this story, I have a picture in my head. The picture is from the 1989 movie, "National Lampoons Christmas Vacation" starring Chevy Chase as the clumsy and overly eager leader of the Griswold clan who will stop at nothing to make sure his family has an incredible Christmas.

He and his son decorate the house with what we're told is 25,000 twinkle lights. After some very unsafe use of extension cords, the house lights up, blinding the neighbors, and blackening out the entire city of Chicago so the Griswold family Christmas could commence.

I imagine that when the angels allowed themselves to be seen by the Shepherds, it was a similar sight. Blinding at first, after all, the Shepherds eyes had adjusted to seeing at night. But when their eyes adjusted and they could see angels in the sky, they were part scared, part excited, and probably a lot confused. What was going on? They'd never seen such a site before.

But what the angels knew, that the Shepherds didn't, was that the glorious, perfect, Son of God, had taken on human flesh and come into the world that He had created. The plan of salvation, set back in the Garden of Eden, had taken it's next gigantic step. The God of love risked everything, to become one of us, to be with us and to save us from our sins.

The angels had front row seats to this Divine Adventure the Holy Trinity were embarking on. Their first job was to do that which angels do, “herald” the news...

“I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”

Luke 2:10-12 NLT

And then, even more angels appear like children who don't want to miss out on something amazing. As they all come together they do what they were created to do, they offer their God praise:

“Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”

Luke 2:14 NLT

This celebration was just a taste of the one to come in heaven, when millions of angels will gather at the throne, as well as a vast crowd of people to great a number to count, all to sing, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!”

The angels were created to worship and be messengers of God's good news; a two-fold purpose also passed on to us.

1. Can you think of a time in your past that was full of a glorious worship experience? Maybe it was in church, in nature, or somewhere unexpected. What was it like and why do you think it impacted you so much?



DAY 16

WITNESSES TO THE INCARNATION



“And the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

John 1: 14, NLT

“She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God with us’).”

Isaiah 7: 14b, NLT

It may take us an eternity to wrap our brains around the idea of a God who would become one of His creation to save that creation from a rebellion of their own choosing. The idea of the Holy Uncreated One becoming Created is more than my mind can fully comprehend.

We quoted part of this next quote about the incarnation of Christ earlier, from twentieth century theologian, J. I. Packer, put here it is in it's entirety:

“God became man; the divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. . . . The babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the Incarnation.”

I think the angels knew just how much the Father loved all of His creation, long before the incarnation ever took place. They saw how He looked at us that first day He breathed life into the mound of dirt, they were witnesses to how much His heart broke at our rebellion, and know they had front row seats to the most amazing act of love ever enacted. God was willing to leave their realm of heaven to come to this broken, dark, and pain-riddled earth, taking the incredible risk to put it all on the line, all because of His love for us. The angels couldn't help but celebrate and sing to this King of all Kings.

But I also wonder how much of the plan they knew. Did they know what He ultimately came to do? Did they know in order to go through with said plan, He'd have to endure severing the relationship of the Holy Trinity? What would that do to Him? What would that do to them?



DAY 17

A PARTY TO REMEMBER



*Joy to the world, the Lord is come
Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing*

*Joy to the world, the Savior reigns
Let all their songs employ
While fields and floods
Rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy*

- Isaac Watts

If you were anything like me when I was a kid and teenager going to church, it seemed like we had to check our joy at the

door. As my friend Rick says, we exchanged our joy in worship for what we perceived as reverence. So we hushed the children to make them more reverent, we dressed in our Sabbath best so we could be reverent, we stood when we were told to stand, sat when we were told to sit, and spoke only when spoken to (*usually in what was called a responsive reading*), all in an effort to be what we thought was reverent.

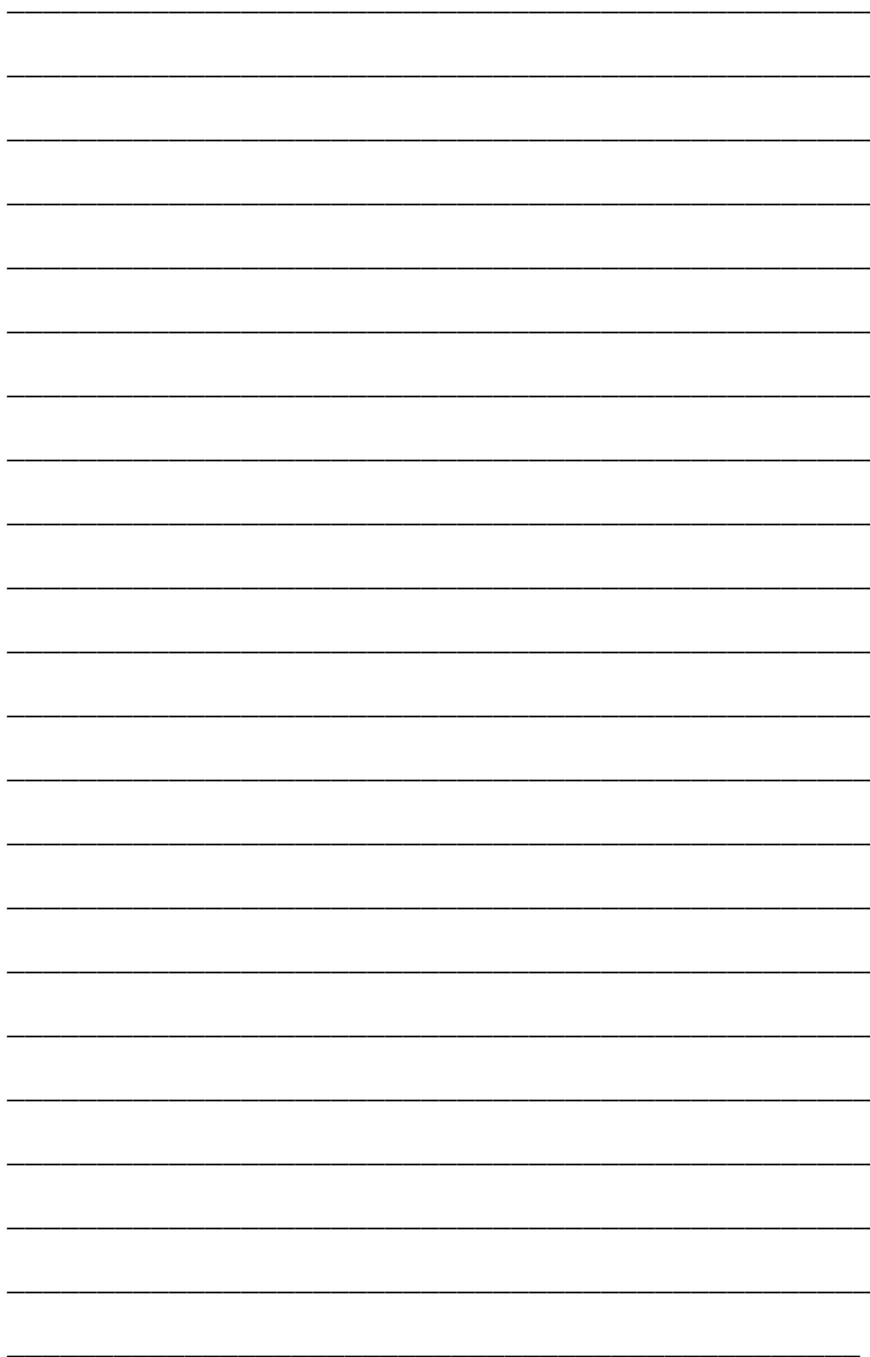
But the Scriptures, including this picture of the angels, tells another story. They tell of a joy that cannot be contained, like that time King David danced before the ark of the covenant and told his embarrassed wife that he was willing to become even more undignified than this if it brought glory to God. Or those times in the gospels when the children ran up to Jesus. Or the wedding in Cana that Jesus was invited too and then supplied the best of the wine so the party could continue. Rest assured friends, when it comes to Jesus and the kingdom of God, there is a party to be had and the guest of honor is the son of a carpenter from Nazareth.

“You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy...”

Psalm 16:11 , ESV

I am so thankful for our Crosswalk communities that seek to chase after that fullness of joy, and I think it’s something we can share not just on Saturday morning, but everyday of the week as we respond more freely to the Lord, our King, the Savior who reigns.

Maybe we should let the children run and dance from time to time; maybe we should join them.



DAY 18

LOWLY, UNCLEAN SHEPHERDS



“[The shepherds] hurried to the village and found mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished...the shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.”

Luke 2: 16-20, NLT

We often speak to the paradox of power as it relates to the coming of God to this earth. He wasn't born in a palace, but a manger. His coming wasn't seen by the emperor, or even the teachers of the law, but shepherds. This type of upside down kingdom values would characterize His entire life on earth; He came to seek and save those who were lost, the sick, the ones that knew they needed Him. He came to those who knew they couldn't live another day without Him near. He said if you want to save your life you have to lose it, and that if you want to be great, you must be a servant.

But focusing in on these shepherds, what a night this must have been. Their day to day lives were not very exciting.

They were simple people, sometimes seen as both literally unclean and ceremonially unclean because of their profession. They weren't highly educated, so though they were full of stories, not many outside of their immediate circle paid much attention to them.

But this night was a night that they'd never forget. This night they were chosen to help herald the news of the Messiah who had family come to save the people. This night, they saw the angels, they heard the message, and they couldn't help but share it with others. And I wonder how many listened to the shepherds, and if they did, how many believed them? Were they taken seriously, or did people write them off because after all, they were just shepherds who probably talked to their sheep at night for company.

The lowly were elevated to an incredible place of importance, but not because of anything they had done. They were elevated because of who God is, and because He chose them.

Sometimes, God speaks to me in strange and unusual ways. Sometimes through a song on the radio, or a quote in a book I'm reading, or the sounds of the birds outside my window, or the giggle of a child being playful, or in a dramatic scene from a play or movie. In fact, if I'm paying attention, He speaks in so many ways that I wonder how many of the ways I miss because I don't expect it or I'm not paying attention.

1. What ways do you hear God speak to you?
2. How do we practice being more open and receptive to God's voice in the day to day of our lives?

DAY 19

PEEKING BEHIND THE CURTAIN OF THE DIVINE



“Pray like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.’”

Matthew 6: 9-10, NLT

Have you ever imagined heaven? Where it is? What it will be like?

When I was little, someone told me that heaven was located beyond the middle star in the belt of the constellation we call Orion. Because I believed them, there were nights I used to sit outside and stare at that star for hours as if I stared long enough I could see it. Whether it was there or not, heaven was always a long ways away.

But what if heaven is much closer than you and I usually think?

I remember watching the moving *Interstellar*, starring Matthew McConaughey, Jessica Chastain, and Anne

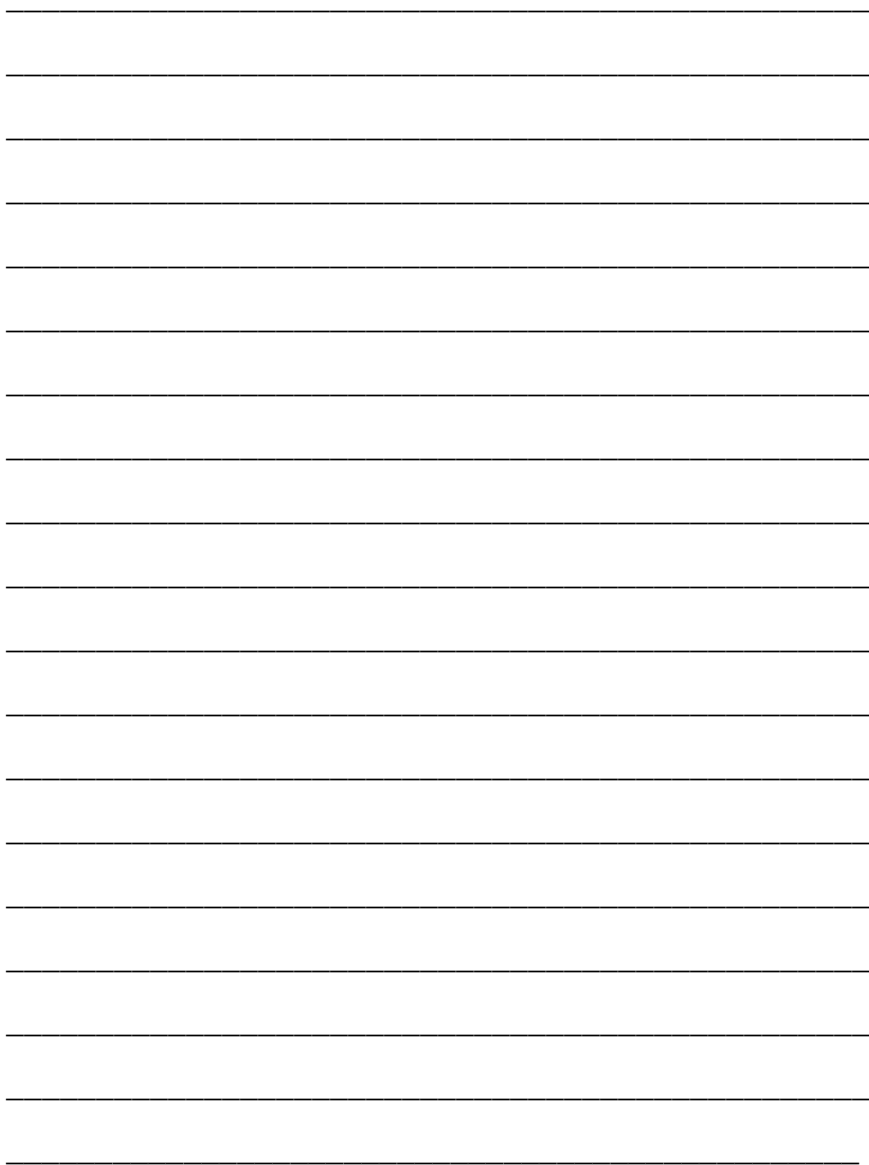
Hathaway. In the movie, astronauts are sent through a wormhole to find a planet humans could move to as Earth became less habitable. What struck me was how much the movie dealt with inter-dimensional travel and a whole slew of other concepts from the realm of physics that I couldn't possibly begin to explain. But it got me thinking, maybe heaven is closer than we think.

In the story with the angels, it certainly seems like the angels crossed over from one realm to the next. We often speak about the birth of Jesus as another touchpoint between heaven and earth. Jesus taught us to pray that God's will, His work, His purpose would be fulfilled here on earth as it is in heaven. So maybe the two aren't as geographically far apart as I always thought. Maybe heaven is ultimately the true meaning of Immanuel, God with us. Heaven is wherever the presence of God is.

If that's true, then you and I bring heaven to earth as we surrender our lives to God and invite His presence into our lives. We bring heaven to earth when we choose to love Him above all else, and our neighbors as ourselves. We bring heaven to earth when we live here with the values of the kingdom, which Paul told us were love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

So this Christmas, maybe the best gift we could give anyone is to let Jesus come to life in us, so more people can get a taste of heaven.

1. In your personal life, do you find yourself creating more unity or division?



DAY 20

THE INCARNATIONAL ADVENTURE OF GOD'S EARTHLY MESSENGERS



At the end of each week of this series, we've been asking ourselves the question of what it looks like for us to live incarnational today, in the context of the topic for that week. With this week's focus on the angels of the Christmas story, and since angels were God's messengers (*the word in the Greek for angels, angelos, literally means messengers*), how do you and I continue to herald the message of Jesus into our world today?

Well first and foremost our job is to continue to herald the good news to the rest of the world. The Greek word for good

news is the word *euangelos*, which is where we get the word evangelize from. But I have a bone to pick with our modern ways of evangelizing.

You see, we've mistaken evangelism with a program, a set of meetings, a series of pamphlets to share. When evangelism is reduced to a program, then it's just another checkbox to mark off on our report card so we can show others that we're holy.

But evangelism isn't a program, it's what happens when a heart is turned toward Jesus and has birthed in it the desire for family and friends to come to know Him too.

Notice how the shepherds didn't have to be told by the angels what to do once they saw the newborn baby. After the angels told them the good news, *euangelos*, they went to see for themselves. Then this happened...

“After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child.”

Luke 2: 17, NLT

I believe that when we share with people a clear image of the Jesus of the Scriptures, the good news that He not only told us but showed us in how He lived and gave His life for us, then we don't have to tell people to go and evangelize. If we paint a good enough picture, aided by the Holy Spirit, then people won't be able to help themselves. They will want to go and tell their family, and tell their friends, and tell their coworkers, and tell the person bagging their groceries, all because the good news is so good that it must be shared.

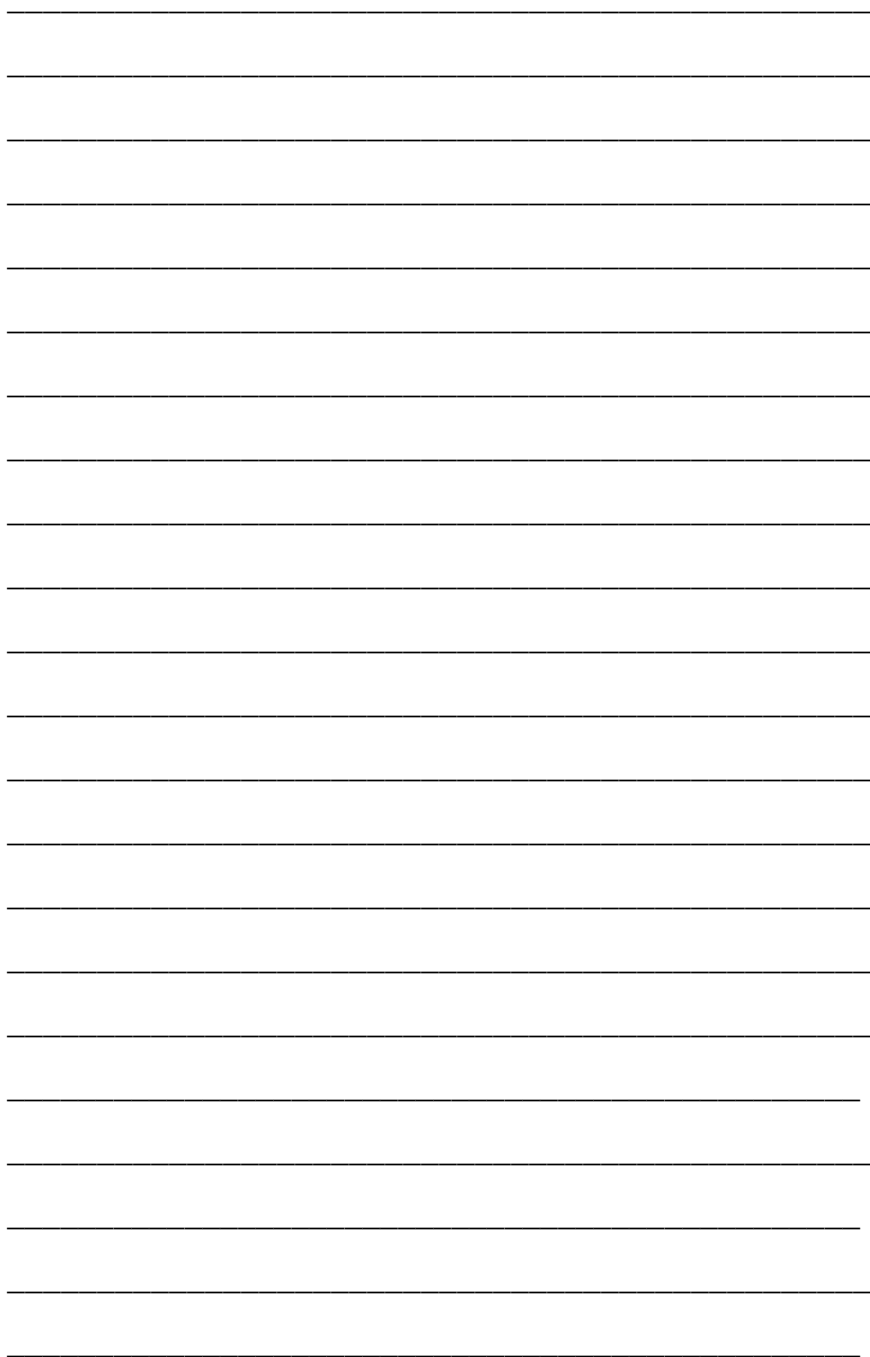
And it's not just good news for some. In fact, that's the litmus test for the gospel; it's got to be good news for everyone.

So each week as we gather for worship, each time we open the Scriptures to study or preach, every time we close our eyes to pray, we are hoping to have receive and give an even clearer picture of God.

A daily prayer I say for myself, for my family and friends, and for my church, comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians in which he prays and says, *"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better."*
Ephesians 1: 17, NIV

This is our call - to get clear on who Jesus is, as clear as possible with the help of the Holy Spirit - and then to share that with others. But when the picture is good, then we won't have to be told to share, we will share because we can't imagine doing anything else.

1. When you imagine Jesus, what does He look like to you?
No right or wrong, just share who you see.
2. Was there ever a time in your life when you learned something about Jesus that you simply couldn't keep to yourself, you had to share it with someone?
3. What are some ways that you and I go about getting an even clearer picture of Jesus, knowing that we still only see now as in a mirror dimly, but one day we'll see face to face?



DAY 21

SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY GUIDE



INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN

Think of a time when something happened to you that was so amazing that you couldn't wait to share that news with someone else. Share with the group what happened and how it made you feel.

HEAD

1. Read Luke 2: 8-20 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts from the reading.
2. Why do you think God sent the angels to the shepherds over the teachers of the law or some other more influential group?

3. If you imagine this scene in your head, what does it look like? Did the angel just appear? Was the angel there and turned on the light? Did the shepherds see it all at once or did it take time to adjust?
4. How do you think you would have responded to having the night sky suddenly full of angels praising God?
5. Do you think Mary and Joseph expected visitors? What do you think went through their heads when all these stinky shepherds showed up?

HEART

1. In this week's reflections, we talked about how true evangelism happens when a heart is turned toward God and one's heart is full with the desire to see their family and friends meet Jesus. Share your thoughts on evangelism, especially if they differ with the critique of what can happen when evangelism is reduced to a program.
2. What are some ways you and I can continually seek a more clear picture of Jesus so we can be inspired to help introduce others to Him?
3. What have you experienced more in the church, a joyful spirit or a somber one? How do you and I lean into practicing more joy at church and at home?

HANDS

Who are the people in your circle of influence right now who you know could be encouraged, helped, saved over the good news of Jesus Christ? Begin this week by specifically

DAY 22

THE PARENTING ADVENTURE



“In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!” Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!” Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.” The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What’s more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For the word of God will never fail.” Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” And then the angel left her.”

Luke 1:26-38 NLT

“This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.”

Matthew 1:18-21, 24-25 NLT

In these Scripture accounts of what is often referred to as the Annunciation of Christ, we can see how pregnancy is a completely different experience for men as it is for women.

First, there’s the obvious. Men don’t get the joy, or the curse, of actually being pregnant. Oh, we like to say things like, *“My wife and I are pregnant,”* but that’s just our way of including ourselves in the story. We men don’t get morning sickness, or the feeling of the baby pushing on our bladder, or the struggle to roll over at night, or all the challenges of our body being overtaken by an alien.

Men are pretty removed from the whole experience.

I remember when my wife was pregnant with our first child, she was, as they say, glowing. Just gorgeous. New life was growing inside of her and yes, there was discomfort, but there was also so much joy.

Meanwhile, my only real contact with the pregnancy was the news that she was pregnant, the testimony of what it was like for her, and a little ultrasound picture of a bean that was apparently my child. Sure, when the baby started to move, I could feel a kick here and a hiccup there, but my job was more to support than truly experience.

We see this same thing in the story of Mary and Joseph. Mary got the visit of Gabriel, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the new life inside her. Joseph got a dream. But rest assured, saying yes to this path, for both parents, was one of the biggest risks they would ever take in life.

Just like Mary and Joseph were a team, working together with God to bring Jesus into the world, you and I are also a team, called to work together to continue to help bring Jesus into the world. They did it with their physical bodies, we do it with the spiritual body of Christ. You and I were meant to grow to be more like Christ, together. The more we work together, pray for each other, lean on each other, encourage each other, the more room we give for the Spirit to bring Jesus to life in us.

I can't imagine how hard it is to be a single parent, and if you're one of those, you have my prayers. I couldn't imagine raising our kids alone. Tricia and I are, and always have been, a team. And it has been a joy watching the people our kids are becoming, together.

So church, let us also be a team that helps bring more of Jesus to our world.

1. How have other people helped you grow in your understanding of who Christ is?
2. How have other people helped in your journey to become more like Christ in your life?

DAY 23

DISCERNING THE FULLNESS OF TIME



“When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law...”

Galatians 4:4 ESV

For 100’s of years, Israel awaited the fulfillment of the prophecies of a coming Messiah. The most famous of these from the prophet Isaiah...

“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 Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.”

Isaiah 9:6-7 ESV

Likely, every year since this prophecy was given, children asked their parents, *“Is it now mamma? Is he here papa?”*. And every response would likely have been, *“Not yet, but he will come. Yahweh has promised.”* The children likely replied, *“But when? When will the Messiah come?”* Parents replied whispered back with a hint of a smile on their face and a twinkle of hope in their eyes, *“Soon, children. Some day soon.”*

Only God knows what He was waiting for so that the prophecy could be fulfilled, but I imagine it had to do with our openness to receive the message of a God of love, over a God of war or wrath; a God of forgiveness over a God of vengeance; a God of grace, over a God of harsh judgment. Whatever it was, the timing was right and the annunciation came.

That said, I'm sure with each passing generation, they got frustrated with how long God was taking to fulfill those prophecies. I'm sure many cried out to God, "*Why not now? Why not here?*" I know I've made those cries to God when I needed an answer and it seemed like He was quiet.

God's timing and our timing are often two very different things. If we had our way, God would move and answer our prayers the way we want, when we want. But what if that's not best for us? What if God, who exists above and beyond time but meets with us within time, what if He knows best. Can we trust Him to answer prayers in His time and in His way?

One of my all-time favorite stories involves my sister-in-law and her husband. They are ranchers, and when they got married, they had hopes and dreams of having a large family to raise and help work the ranch.

But after several years of trying, and praying, nothing happened. Long story short, they found out they couldn't have kids on their own, and the medical ways to assist were far too expensive for them.

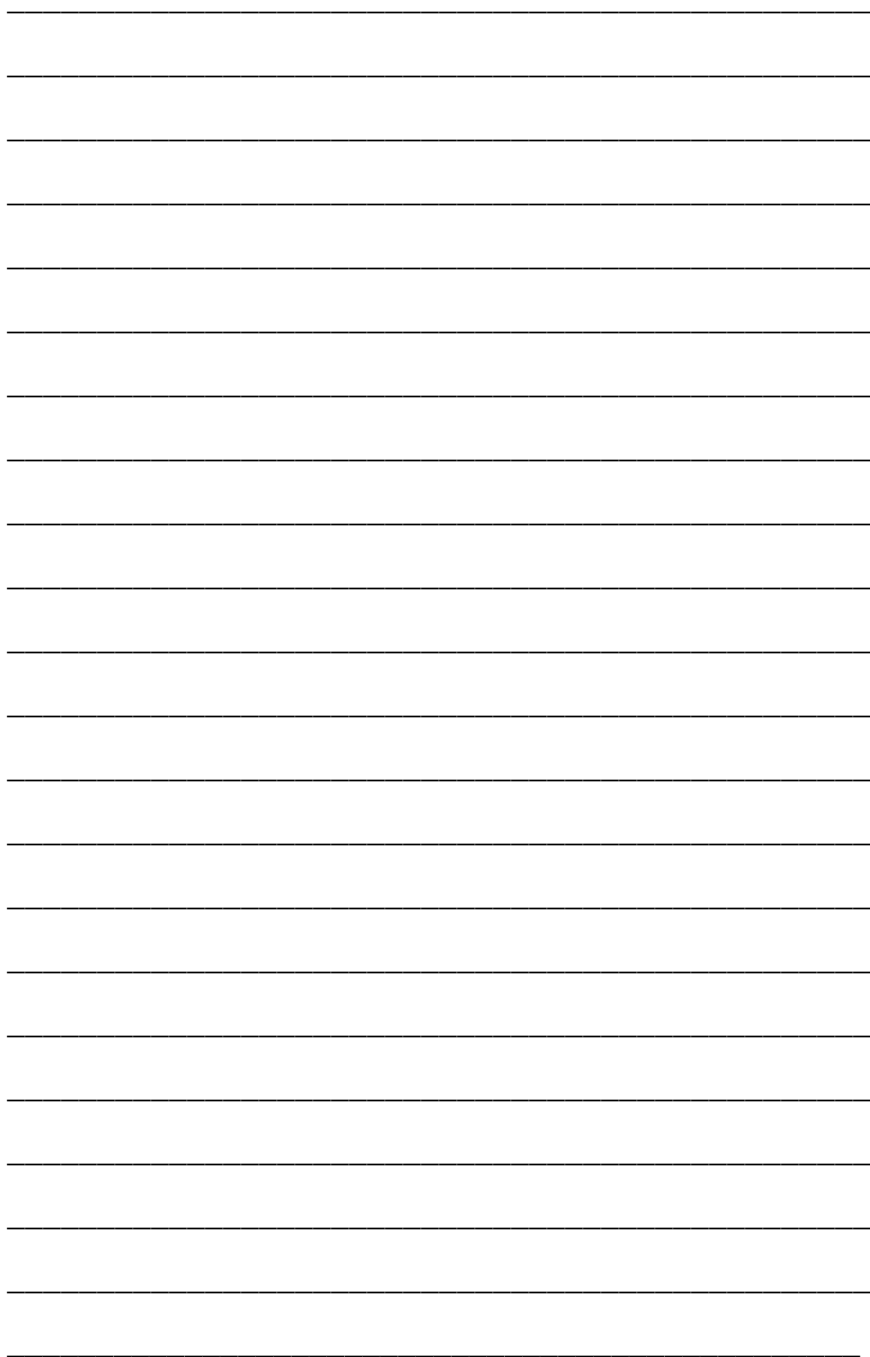
They thought about and looked into adoption, but that was expensive too. They kept praying, but year seven of their

journey was the hardest one yet, spiritually. They felt as if God had abandoned them.

At the end of that year, word came about a potential child, but the price tag was still too much. Then a friend of theirs, while out to lunch, told them that a year before they had been impressed to put money away for them in the event that an adoption possibility came to fruition. Then their friend, without knowing exactly what the finances were, handed them the exact amount needed. A few weeks later, my wife and her sister-in-law were in the hospital room adjacent to where the baby was born, and in moments, my sister-in-law was holding her new daughter.

In the darkest of times, it's hard to remember that God is still faithful, still at work. But we must help remind each other that it's true even when it doesn't feel like it. God's timing is always best, and He fulfills that from His perspective, not ours. Our job is to trust that He's good, always.

1. What prayers have you been waiting for God to answer that He hasn't yet?
2. Take a few moments to think back over the course of your life. What prayers have you seen God answer, either for you, or for someone close to you?
3. Are there verses like Proverbs 3: 5-6, that you cling to in dark times when you're not sure what God is up to or if He's listening?
4. Pray for God to help grow your trust in Him today.



DAY 24

NO CRYING HE MADE?



It's a favorite Christmas hymn whose lyrics include...

*Away in a manger
No crib for a bed
The little Lord Jesus
Lay down His sweet head - (SO CUTE)*

*The stars in the sky
Look down where He lay
The little Lord Jesus
Asleep on the hay - (ANGELIC)*

*The cattle are lowing
The poor baby wakes
But little Lord Jesus
No crying He makes - (YEAH RIGHT, NO WAY!)*

Though I truly love this song, I've always had issue with, "No crying he makes" even before I had children.

Now, that doesn't mean that Jesus couldn't have had a moment of peaceful rest, but I think it's the idea that he was somehow projected these divine qualities as early as infancy that I've had a problem with.

When we're talking about Jesus, I suppose one can fall into either side of the ditch of him either being too human, or too divine. Too human and he may have sinned and we just were never told about it. Too divine and it robs us of him ever understanding what we go through, as well as our ability to connect with him.

But then I found comfort in a wise verse written by the apostle John who said at the end of his gospel...

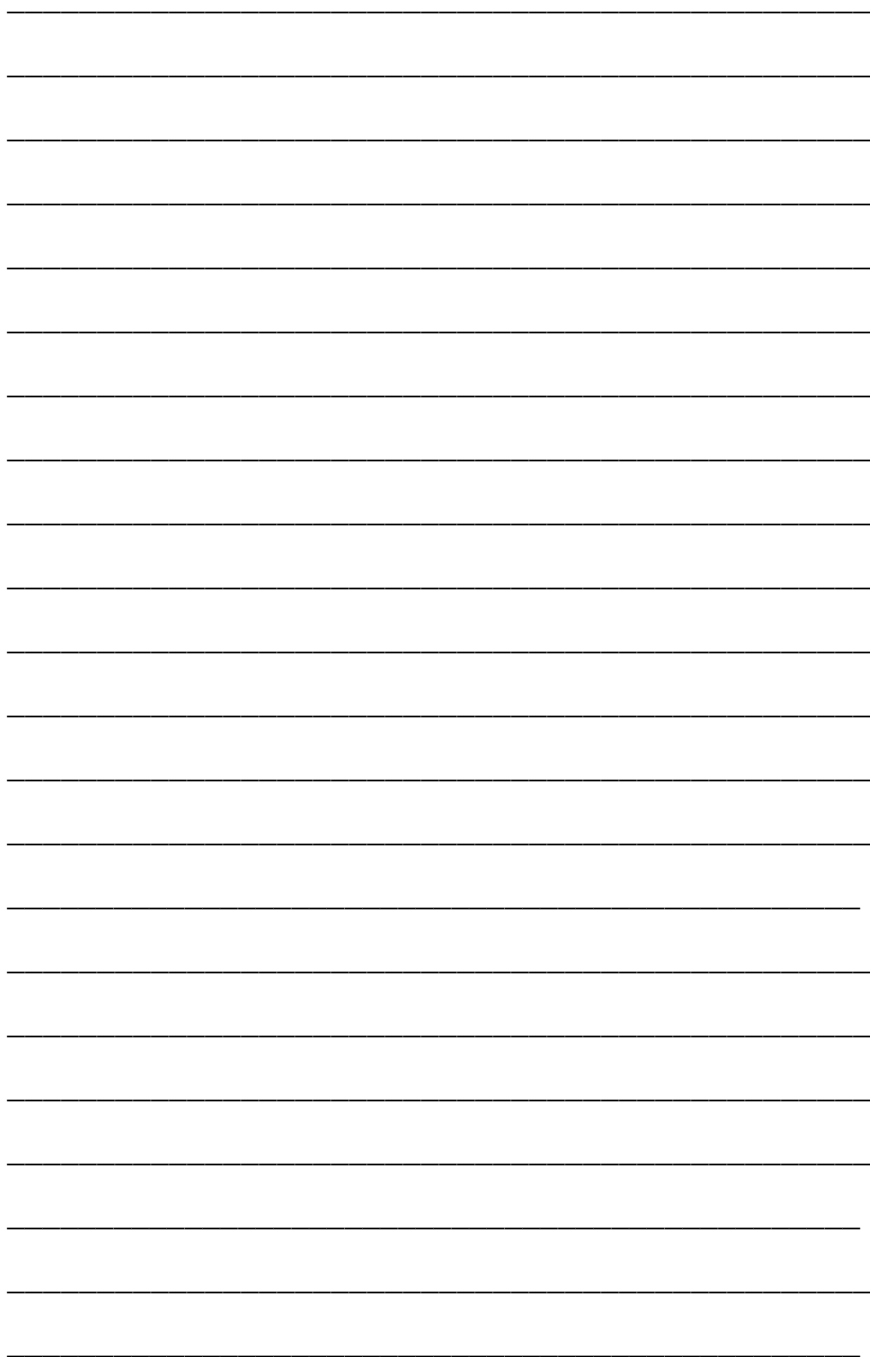
“Jesus also did many other things. If they were all written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written.”

John 21:25 NLT

This verse helps me to know that Jesus likely had the full human experience of a baby - crying fits, explosive diapers, spit-ups, and food flung across the room. He was a baby after all. And it continues to amaze me that the God of the universe would not only choose to become human, but that he would enter our world in the most fragile of human states, a baby. The God who hung the stars in the sky, had to have his diaper changed. The God who carved out the mountains and directed the water where to go, was completely dependent upon humans for his care and sustenance.

Knowing that God entered fully into our mess through Jesus, means that He also enters fully into my mess. He knows my anxieties and fears, my sinful struggles, what I wish I was and what I know I'm not. He knows because he chose to go through my same experience.

And yes, there are things about his experience I don't know that I'll ever fully understand on this side of heaven. I don't truly understand what it means to be fully human and fully divine. I don't know what it was like to experience humanity



DAY 25

NO REST FOR THE WEARY



When my first child was born, he was beautiful, healthy, and a crier. Man that kid could blow the windows out of a house. But he also had an issue; he was colicky and had acid reflux, which mainly meant that for 7 months, he rarely slept more than two hours at a time. This means, of course, that his parents rarely slept more than two hours at a time (and if you've seen me, you know I need my beauty sleep).

To this day, I still have a hard time when I ask new parents how they're doing with sleep and they respond with things like, "Great actually, he/she started sleeping through the night on day two." I smile and nod, but on the inside I'm thinking, "this world is too easy for you."

But regardless as to whether or not your child physically sleeps through the night, from the moment you become parents, sleep is just different for you. You sleep with one eye open, so to speak, ready in case your child needs anything. Maybe they wake up from a bad dream, or develop a fever, or hear a noise outside that frightens them. Of course, those are the kinds of things you lose sleep over when they're young. When they turn teenagers, you lose sleep over entirely different things (*as I'm writing this, my eyes are heavy from staying up until 1am this past morning to make sure my son got home safe from a light night drive home from college*).

Like all parents, I'm sure Mary and Joseph lost plenty of sleep over Jesus as well. From the normal aspects of being parents, dirty diapers (yes, Jesus had those), coughs, outside noises, and so on, to what must have often been an overwhelming feeling of the responsibility of raising the Savior of the world. Mary and Joseph are two of my favorite heroes of the Scriptures.

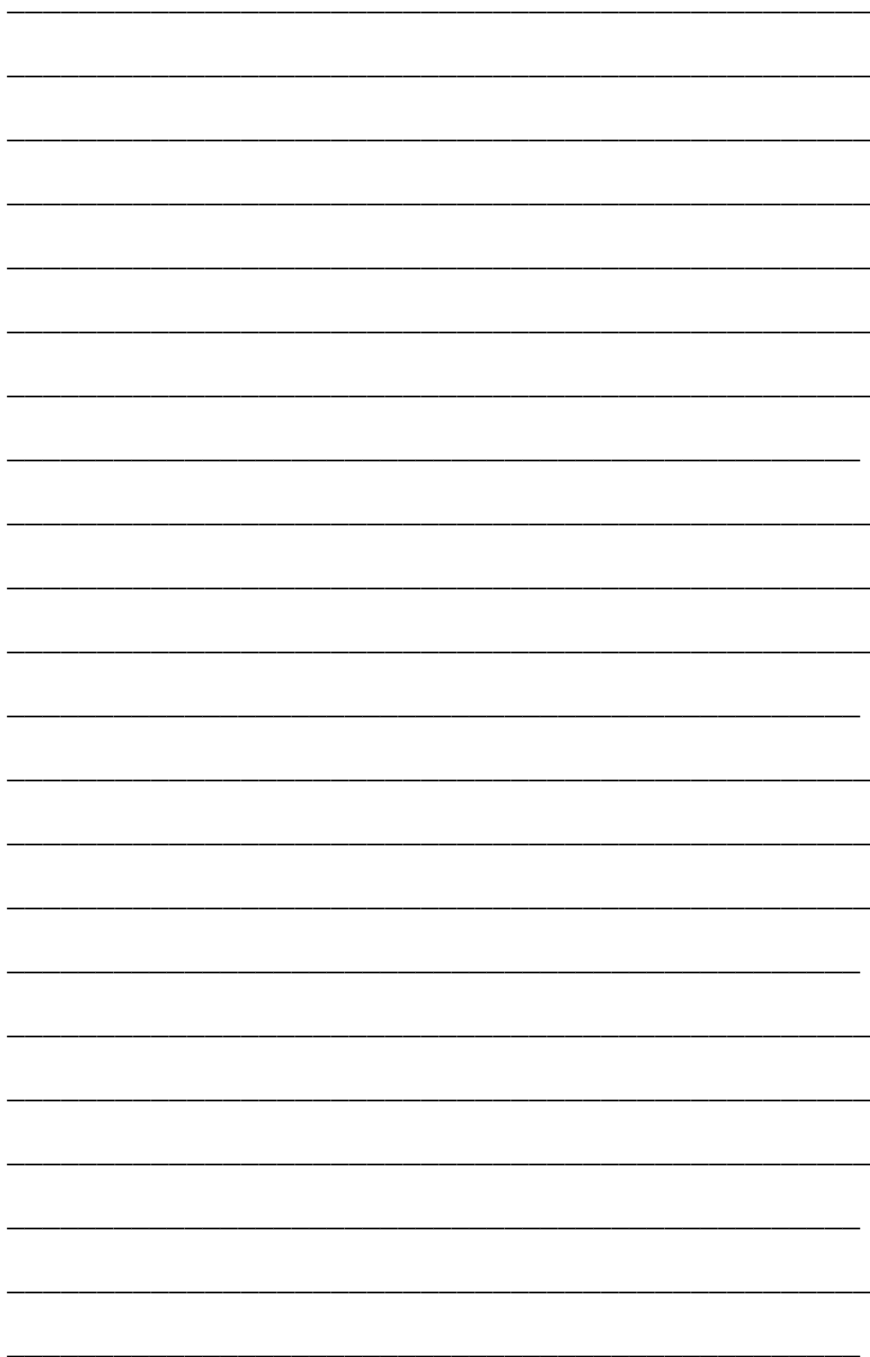
Then there was that night, when Jesus was nearly two years old, when we're told...

"After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother," the angel said. "Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, and they stayed there until Herod's death. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: "I called my Son out of Egypt."

Matthew 2:13-15 NLT

Think of all that Mary and Joseph endured to do their part in bringing the Savior to the world. First there was accepting the truth of what the angel told them. Then there was having to face family and friends who would not believe their story, and who likely ostracized them for their choices. Then they travel to Bethlehem, with Mary ready to burst. Then angels, shepherds, wise men...it was all a whirlwind. Then visions and fleeing the country in the middle of the night, only to live in a new land and try to make ends meet.

Mary and Joseph gave so much to bring Jesus into the world, and it makes me ask myself the question, what am I willing to do to continue that process? What will I give up? What will I sacrifice?



DAY 26

TREASURED MOMENTS



“All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often.”

Luke 2:18-19 NLT

I’ve always loved this picture of Mary. In my mind, I see her either holding Jesus, staring at him and getting lost in his eyes, or looking at him from a distance as others interact with him. There’s something sweet and intimate about her intentional holding on to certain moments in her heart.

Though I think that’s something all mothers do, there is something that God taught me on a plane trip once that I think ties into this same idea.

I don’t remember all the details of the trip, like where I was going or what I was going for, but I do know it was a cross-country flight, and it had been during a busy season of ministry. I was tired, a little burned out, but I’m sure another ministry opportunity was waiting for me when I got off the plane.

As the plane broke through the layer of clouds, I looked as the sun was coming up in the east. It was an early morning

flight, so the colors that danced across the sky as the sun got more into view were spectacular.

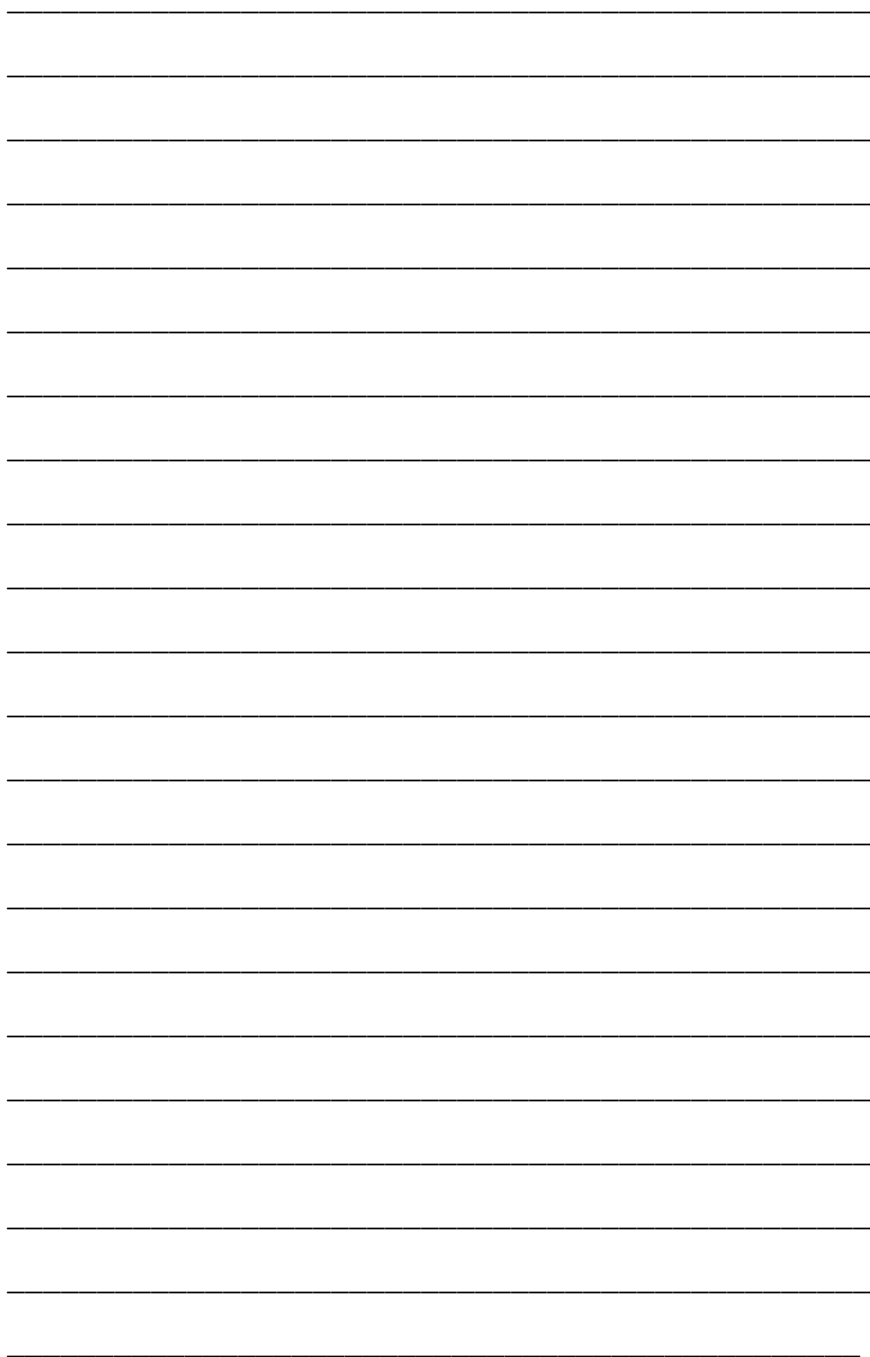
As I watched out that window, I heard God speak to me. Immediately, I went to grab my journal so I could write down His words and my reflections. As a pastor, I often share most of my spiritual life with those I've been called to help lead. I was about three words into writing when all of a sudden, I stopped. I put down my pen. I looked back out the window. Then I clearly heard God say to me, "*Paddy, this thought, this moment...this one is just between you and me. You don't need to share this one.*"

I can't tell you how much those words meant to me. I had definitely fallen into the trap of simply living my spiritual life for others. I read the Scriptures to find inspiration to give someone else. I read the latest books for ideas to grow our ministry and impact the lives of others. And I prayed for others to come to know Jesus more.

None of those things are bad, but I realized that day that I was doing far too many things for Jesus, and not enough of those things with Jesus. I needed some time with Jesus, just me and him, no other agenda, no one to share it with.

So if today's thought does nothing more than simply give you permission to keep some of the things between you and Jesus to yourself, then so be it. I don't think it's selfish, I think it's what happens in intimate relationships. Sometimes you share things that are only for you and the person you're in relationship with.

So I pray that today you would simply enjoy Jesus, and treasure those sweet moments with him in your heart.



DAY 27

THE INCARNATIONAL ADVENTURE OF NEW LIFE TODAY



“Jesus’ parents were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby’s mother, “This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul.”

Luke 2:33-35 NLT

Jesus never said following Him would be easy. In fact, He pretty clearly told us the opposite.

“But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few find it.”

Matthew 7: 14, NLT

“If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me.”

Luke 9: 23, NLT

“Everyone will hate you because you are my followers.”

Luke 21: 17, NLT

For Mary and Joseph, though they'd have the joy of bringing the Savior of the world into the world, they'd also suffer. Mary specifically would have to watch her beloved child not only face continuous opposition and be misunderstood, but then to be beaten beyond recognition, suffer one of the most torturous ways to die ever designed by humans, and then die a criminal's death. Indeed her sword would pierce her soul.

Bringing new life into the world is always with it's risks. I have talked to many a young couple that wrestle with the thought of whether it is ethical to bring another life into a world that is so messed up. For Mary and Joseph, the life they helped bring into the world was sent to offer an ultimate fix to that mess. But that fix came at a horrific cost.

When you and I first surrender our lives to Christ, it is often referred to as a rebirth or being born again. We die to our old selves in the waters of baptism, and are raised to new life in Christ. However, just like a wedding day, that's the celebration. The work comes next. Every day, we must seek to die to self so that the new life of Christ can continue to come anew. This process isn't easy, as stated above, the road is narrow, we must continually deny ourselves, but the outcome is transformation and redemption and renewal; not just for us, but for those around us as well.

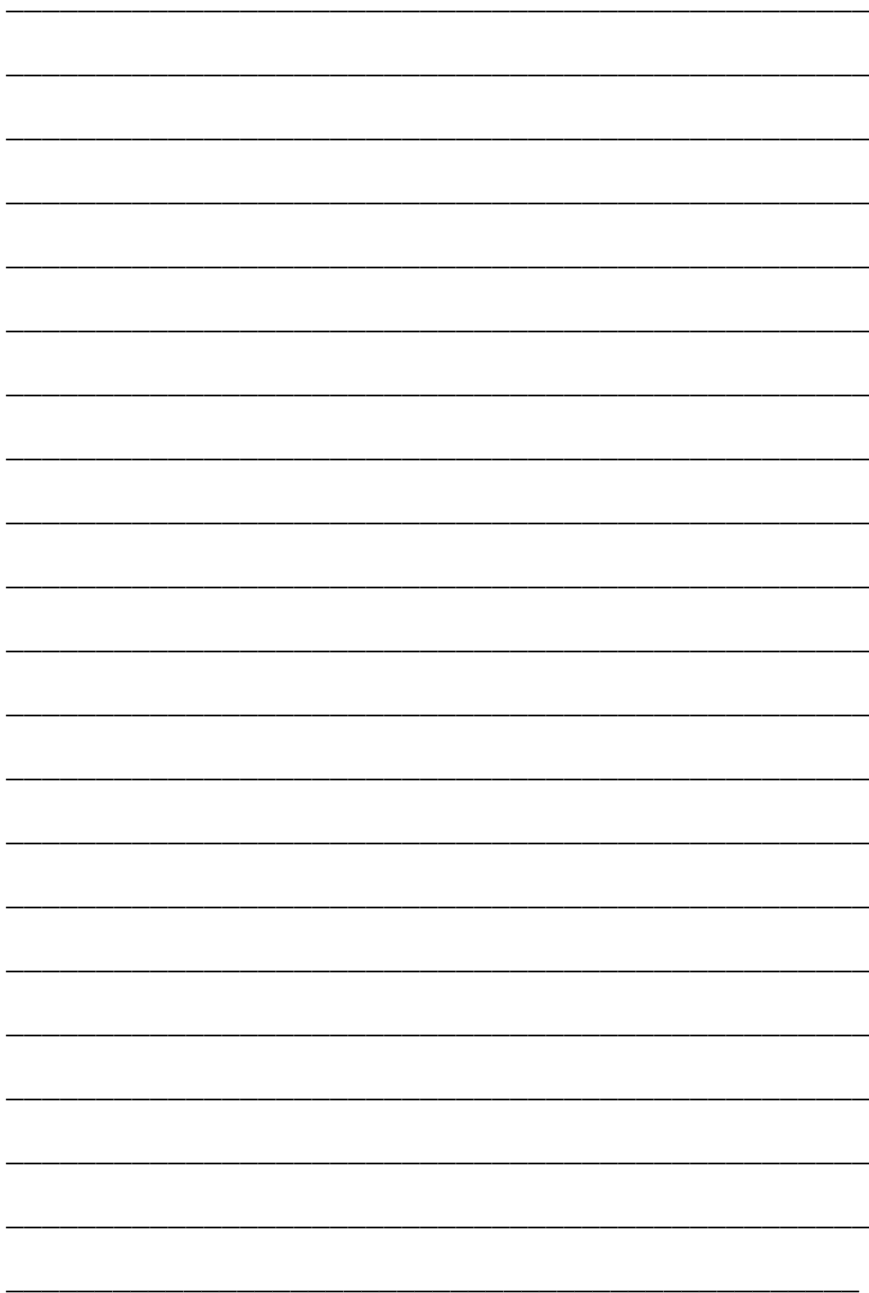
If you've ever been in a birthing room, let me tell you, bringing new life into the world is one of the hardest things a person can do (and by person, I mean a woman...I just sat their and held her hand). But when that new life comes into the world, it's also the most beautiful thing a person can ever witness.

May you and I encourage one another as we seek to let the life of Christ come alive in us each and every day. May we

come alongside one another in the tough times, celebrate with one another in the good times, and do what we can to keep each other on the narrow road that leads to life. Because the life that Jesus offers is the life that we were made for, and even though it can be difficult on this side of heaven, it's also amazing.

So Crosswalk let's go on this parenting adventure together as Jesus comes to life in each of us, and in our communities of faith.

1. What have you found to be hard or challenging about following Jesus?
2. Have you ever felt the "piercing of your soul" because of the cause of Christ?
3. What kind of encouragement from your community of faith is most helpful to you, in helping you stick to that narrow road that leads to life?
4. How could you encourage someone today in their walk?



DAY 28

SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY GUIDE



INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN

Share one of your favorite memories of this year's Christmas season that you will "treasure in your heart." And, if you make them, share one new year's resolution or one thing you're looking forward to about the new year.

HEAD

1. Read Luke 1:26-38 and Matthew 1:18-21, 24-25, together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts from the reading.
2. Why do you think Mary was "confused" at the greeting from Gabriel?
3. What's the first thing Mary says after Gabriel tells her what's going to happen? (verse 34)
4. Why are we so quick to look to our limitations instead of God's power and faithfulness when He calls us to a task?

5. Do you think Mary knew what she was saying when she said, “May everything you have said about me come true.”?

HEART

1. Joseph was no doubt a good man. He could have had Mary killed, but he chose to deal with her “situation” with integrity. Between Mary’s response and Joseph’s response, what was it about them that made them the perfect choice to be the parents to the Savior?
2. Jesus means, he will save his people from their sins, Immanuel means, God with us. Which aspect of God do you long for this Christmas and why?
3. How do you think Mary and Joseph were treated in their village, and among friends and family, after these events?

HANDS

Mary and Joseph may have been the earthly parents of Jesus, but Jesus comes to life in each of us (incarnation) through the power of the Holy Spirit. This Christmas, how might you renew your vow to Him and surrender your life again to His love, His power, His grace, and His forgiveness?

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

“This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!”

2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT

