

CHRISTMAS CAROL

Crosswalk Daily Study

INTRODUCTION

It's that time of year again, a time of gathering together as families and friends and communities to celebrate Christmas. To us, in our Crosswalk communities of faith, that means taking time to reflect on the incredible story of a God who loved us so much that He didn't abandon us to suffer the consequences of our own choices; rather, He came down to rescue us and offer a better end to our story than the one we chose.

This year, I invite you to begin this holiday season with some child-like wonder. I'm not sure if you grew up in a home where Christmas was celebrated or not, but I did and it was magical. I grew up with both the Jesus story, and the story of St Nick, and my mind was full of all the wide-eyed wonder you'd expect from a child. From the first snowfall, to decorating the Christmas tree, to listening to stories around the fire, to my favorite cookies that were made only once a year, to watching the night-sky as I imagined the star the wise men followed or what the shepherds must have seen when the angel chorus arrived, to Mary and Joseph holding the Son of God in their own hands. It's all so wonderful.

As part of all those wonderful Christmas stories, this year we're going to look not just at the birth accounts of the Savior, but at the whole of our story; from even before Genesis through to Revelation. And we will do so spring boarding off the famous story written in 1843 by Charles Dickens called, A Christmas Carol.

If you don't know the story, A Christmas Carol begins with a death and forces the main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, to evaluate his life. As a part of this journey, Scrooge is given an odd gift; he's able to explore his past, present, and future. He's able to remember what happened to him as a child and how it shaped him. Then he gets to see his present with a view of who he has become; a crotchety old man who cares about little else than making a profit. Along the way, however, it seems that this crotchety old man wants to be something more, do something more, but what? How? Finally, Scrooge gets the opportunity to see what his future will be should he continue down his current life path. When he wakes up from this dream, he is convinced; he must change. He chooses to be different. You might even say, he repents and becomes a new creation, one who celebrates the joy of Christmas by taking care of others.

In a similar fashion, we will look at the thread of the Christ story, and our story, by looking all the way back to Christmas past, before the foundations of the world. Then, we will look to Christmas Present, exploring where the choices of His creation led the God of creation. Then, should we choose to believe in this magical and wonder-filled story of Christmas, we can then peak into our Christmas future, a future secured by what God has done for us. There, we will see what this God of love and grace has in store for us all.

My hope and prayer is that together we will come to see more clearly the God who has been pursuing us since before we were born; the God who came down to rescue us and return us unto Himself, and the God who has secured a future with us, where we will live at home. The knowledge of this incredible story has the power to make us into new creations who share this Christmas story with all God sends us to meet.

May the telling and reimagining of this story, the Christmas story, bring much needed light into every corner of our world today. I look forward to the journey, and to spending Christmas...together!

Pastor Paddy McCoy
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SERMON SERIES TITLE - WEEK 1

Christmas Past

WEEK 1 - MONDAY

A Plan Before the Foundations of the World Ephesians 1: 3 *All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. 4 Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. 5 God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. (NLT)*

1 Peter 1: 18 *For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And it was not paid with mere gold or silver, which lose their value. 19 It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. 20 God chose him as your ransom long before the world began, but now in these last days he has been revealed for your sake. (NLT)*

Today, we venture back to Christmas Past, but our beginning lands long before the time we often think it does. We often believe that our story starts with those famous words, “In the beginning, God created...” (Genesis 1:1, NLT) But if that were true, what was Paul and Peter talking about in the passages shared above?

Paul says, “even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us...”

Peter reflects, “God chose [Jesus] as [our] ransom long before the world began...”

So if I understand correctly, we were thought of by God long before He spoke our world into existence. Maybe this is what God was getting at when he called the prophet Jeremiah and said, “I knew you before I formed you...” (Jeremiah 1:5a, NLT)

Long before God knit us together in our mother’s womb (Psalm 139), he knew us, thought of us, even loved us. Maybe like a child sitting in front of a wrapped Christmas present, he couldn’t wait to create us and share us with the world.

But our passages for today don’t just speak to God knowing us before he made us, they speak to a plan; a plan of rescue. A plan to adopt us; from what? To offer a ransom for us; to whom? What did God have to be ready to have happen even before the foundations of the world?

It all comes down to true love. You see, true love always has a choice and is never forced. If God wanted us to love him, truly, He’d have to give us the choice to not love him. It was the only way to guarantee that our love for him would be genuine, pure, and true. But should we choose to not love him, not trust him, not believe he was good and who he said he was, well, that’s why he had a plan. And as we’ll see, knowing the risk, he would still create us. Why? Cause that’s what love does.

1. What does it mean to you to know that God loved you even before He created you?
2. If God created our world with a plan to save it should we reject Him, what does it say about Him that He still chose to create us?
3. What do you love and would be willing to do anything for?

WEEK 1 - TUESDAY

Even though He knew the risk Genesis 1:1 *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. 3 Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light...26 Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground."*

27 So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.28 Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground."

Genesis 2:9 *The Lord God made all sorts of trees grow up from the ground—trees that were beautiful and that produced delicious fruit. In the middle of the garden he placed the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil... 15 The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it. 16 But the Lord God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden— 17 except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die."*

Genesis 1:31 *Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good! And evening passed and morning came, marking the sixth day.*

One of my favorite storied versions of Creation comes from C.S. Lewis' series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In that version, Aslan the lion creates the world through song. The song begins in darkness, but as he sings, the world and universe come to life all around him. This is how I've imagined the creation story, as if I'm in the middle of darkness, when all of a sudden I hear His voice and I watch creation unfold around me.

I can't imagine how beautiful it all was; the stars in the sky, the lakes and streams and waterfalls, the songs of the new birds, the thumping of the new animals as they raced to and fro, and then God's ultimate masterpiece, humanity. Oh how he had waited for this day and here it is.

As we talked about yesterday, God loved us so much that he gave us what we call, freewill. This means we could either choose to love and follow God, or, choose not too love and follow Him. It was the only way to guarantee that our love was genuine, because true love always gives a choice.

In all the abundance of this beautiful creation, God only had one rule. He gave us dominion, invite us to participate with him in the joy of creating, and blessed us with more blessings than we could ever count. In this place of beauty and perfect, the only ask was that we not eat from one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There were countless other trees to choose from, so all we had to do was stay away from one. He even told us what would happen if we do to help us make the right choice, should we ever be tempted.

We know what happens, but let's deal with that tomorrow. For now, let's linger in what it must have been like to walk with God in the garden in the cool of the day, explore all that he had made for us, enjoy the relationship between man and woman and God. Before we knew God by any other name, we knew him as Creator, and for a time, we simply got to enjoy all that he had made.

He enjoyed it too; so much so that he would look over all that he had made, us included, and exclaim, "It was very good!"

- 1. What do you think you would have enjoyed most in God's new creation?**
- 2. Can you see God smiling upon you as he exclaims that what he has made is very good? How does that make you feel?**
- 3. You can always linger with God among his creation. If you have a moment, close your eyes, take some time, and linger now.**

WEEK 1 - WEDNESDAY

"What have you done?" Genesis 3:8 *When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man[a] and his wife heard the Lord God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the Lord God among the trees. 9 Then the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"*

10 He replied, "I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked."

11 "Who told you that you were naked?" the Lord God asked. "Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?"

12 The man replied, "It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it."

13 Then the Lord God asked the woman, "What have you done?"

"The serpent deceived me," she replied. "That's why I ate it."

14 Then the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all animals, domestic and wild. You will crawl on your belly, groveling in the dust as long as you live. 15 And I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."

It is perhaps the most difficult line that has ever been spoken, and for most of my life I breezed right by it. But when God goes in search of Adam and Eve, he knows where they are hiding.

His question isn't one of geography, it's a question of proximity. He's no longer close with them, connected, everything has changed.

And God knows not only what has changed, but what it will cost him. For you see, only God knew the answer to his own question, "What have you done?"

Yes, they broke trust and did the one thing they were asked not to do. Yes, they doubted in God who had done nothing but shower them with love and affection. And yes, their decision would banish them from the garden and from the access to the tree of life. But their decision would also put a wall up between him and them, him and us, a wall God never wanted. God simply wanted us to trust him, to obey believing that he was good.

Ahh, but the devil, God's enemy, was out to try and destroy God and anything created in his image. You see, we remind the devil of his enemy, and if he can't take God down, then he'll hurt God by taking down that which God loves; us.

Thankfully, God planned for this possibility. He even gives a nod to his plan when he tells the serpent, "I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." What is God talking about? It's the plan of salvation.

You see, when God asks, "What have you done?" He has already set in motion the plan to save us, and only He knows that the very plan means that God the Son will end up laying down his life to save us from ours. He will make the choices we didn't. He will lay His life down in a way we couldn't. And only with His blood, will we be healed.

But to go through with the plan means that a relationship that has endured since before there was time, the Trinity, will eventually be severed. It will happen for three days, but even afterwards, their makeup will be forever changed. God will do this, however, because He loves us and does not want to live without us.

He may have had to banish us from the garden, but he doesn't leave us to fend for ourselves. God leaves the garden too and goes in pursuit...of us.

- 1. Why do you think we are so quick to hide from God when we mess up?**
- 2. God knew the risk to himself should he create us and we choose to rebel, so why create us? Why take the risk?**
- 3. Do you believe that God has been pursuing you since before you were born? If so, what does this truth mean to you?**

WEEK 1 - THURSDAY

Shadows of things to come Hebrews 10:1 *The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come, not the good things themselves. The sacrifices under that system were repeated again and again, year after year, but they were never able to provide perfect cleansing for those who came to worship.*

Deuteronomy 18: 17 *“Then the Lord said to me, ‘What they have said is right. 18 I will raise up a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites.*

Up until I was about 21 years old, I had great vision. I could see for miles, crystal clear, and I used to struggle to imagine how people with glasses saw the world. I soon found out.

It happened one day when I was yelling at a friend who I saw walking across campus. The friend didn’t turn and wave, so I did what any reasonable extrovert would do, I began to chase them. I continued to shout their name and try to get their attention, but something very odd began to happen; my friend started running away from me. Long story short, it wasn’t my friend. What I thought I saw was a blurred image with a slight resemblance to my friend but definitely not my friend. Poor guy.

My vision has only gotten worse. Blurred images are my constant companion if I don’t have my reading glasses.

Why do I say this? Because I sometimes view the Old Testament as me learning to see and hear God and what He’s about. I love the phrase from the author of Hebrews, “a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come.”

You see, through the human story, God meets us where we are and continues to reveal Himself to us as we are ready to receive him, but he certainly can’t do it all at once. If he did, we’d be overwhelmed, maybe even destroyed because he is so perfect, holy, and righteous, and we are not. So God in his grace reveals as much as we can take, when we can take it. And here’s the crazy thing, he is always doing this.

We will come to see in tomorrows’ reflection that in Jesus, we are given the clearest image of God that we’ve ever received, but even in Jesus, we will always have more to learn. Even in eternity, we will always have more to learn. We will never be able to completely plumb the depths of our God.

Jesus gave an example of this when he told his disciples, “There is so much more I want to tell you, but you can’t bear it now.” (John 16:12, NLT) Jesus told them what he knew they could handle, nothing more, and nothing less. Then, he promised to send the Holy Spirit to continue to bring the image of God into focus.

“But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you.” (John 14:26, NLT)

For now, the gift of Jesus with the Holy Spirit allows us to see that throughout all of Scripture, God has been revealing Himself to us, meeting us where we are and taking us, one step at a time, closer to Him. Until that day comes when we get to see Him face to face, everything else is a shadow of the things to come. May we keep pursuing Him as He is pursuing us.

1. **What is something you used to believe about God, that you now think differently about?**
2. **Is there something you've learned about God and his creation, recently?**
3. **Humility is a cherished trait throughout Scripture. How does knowing that we don't know everything there is to know, keep us humble?**

WEEK 1 - FRIDAY

Prophecies and promises Isaiah 7:14 *All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us').*

Isaiah 9:2 *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...6 For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the Lord of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!*

Isaiah 53: 5 *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

I freely admit that I love a story of a hero, whether real or fictitious (Superman, Captain America, etc...), I'll take them all. There's just something about the picture of a hero swooping in, at just the right time, to save those that can't save themselves, that gives me chills every time.

God never leaves us in darkness, there is always a story of hope even if off on the horizon. And in the midst of our human story, when things seemed hopeless, God sends us a promise in the form of a prophecy.

As the story goes, God's chosen people, the Israelites, are in captivity. They are far away from their home, from the temple, and they are enslaved. It wasn't the first time it had happened to them as a people, and maybe that's what made it even worse. Their history kept repeating itself, so what's to say it wouldn't continue to do so from now till the end of time.

But in the midst of their darkness, their struggle, a hero is coming. That hero will come as a child, and is the fulfillment of the promise that God is with them. The government will rest on his shoulders and will bring a piece that will never end. He is everything they've ever dreamed of.

However, in the midst of these promises comes another one that is harder to process. Isaiah tells of God sending a servant who, among other things, would be pierced for our wrongs, crushed for our sins. The reason this didn't make sense is because in Isaiah 9, we're told that

our hero will be an everlasting father, that his kingdom will never end, that he will reign, forever. So how can that be if he is pierced and crushed?

Obviously, we'll see how the religious leaders and teachers of the day misinterpreted God's prophecies and promises. They only got part of the story right. There would be a coming kingdom, but it was not of this world. There would be a coming hero, but that hero had no throne on earth to sit on, for that hero would be God in the flesh. And that hero, in order to save us, would have to lay down His life for us.

Certainly, a hero was coming. The promise was made, and the promise would give them hope. They would hold onto that hope for 100's of years as they watched and waited. However, when the fullness of time had come they would be quick to realize that their hero? He wasn't the one they wanted, but he was definitely the one that we all needed.

- 1. Is there a promise of God's that you hold onto when life is particularly difficult?**
- 2. Of all the names for God, which one is one of your favorites and why?**
- 3. How do you and I stay open to what God is up to even when what He's up to isn't what we want, but it is definitely what we need?**

SERMON SERIES TITLE - WEEK 2

Christmas Present

WEEK 2 - MONDAY

The rescue begins Galatians 4: *4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. (ESV)*

Romans 5: *6 When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. 7 Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. 8 But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. (NLT)*

I love that line, “the fullness of time.” It is literally and figuratively pregnant with possibilities.

The Israelites had been waiting 100's of years for the fulfillment of God's promise of a coming Messiah, Savior, and King. Granted, they didn't fully understand what they needed. They were hoping for a political leader to come and save them from their oppressors. Their scope was limited to the things they could see. God's Messiah was coming to save us from the things we can't see, but that oppress us even more than political powers.

Regardless, the Israelites knew they were in need, and they knew God had made them a promise to send a child, a prophet. So they waited.

Then, at just the right time, a time only God could have chosen, a Savior was coming into the world. The plan had been set since before the creation of the world, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit had patiently waited until the time was right. The plan was now in motion and the Savior that was to come would both be named Jesus, for He would save us from our sins, and Immanuel, for He would be God with us.

I well remember when my wife was pregnant with our first child. I read some books, but no book could have prepared me for how life would change, how I would change, with the coming of this child. Each day passed and I watched Tricia's belly grow. As time went on, you could see movement. Then, you could even make out a foot or a hand pushing against her stomach.

Then, in the fullness of time, my son was born. When I first got to hold him, I was so overwhelmed with love that all I could do was cry. As was once said, tears are the words our hearts can't say.

I can't imagine what it was like for Mary and Joseph to hold the Savior of the world in their hands, but I'm guessing they both cried. Not only were they holding in their hands the fulfillment of God's promise, they were holding their precious baby boy. More on that part of the story in a couple days.

For now, may we come to know that God's timing is always best, and He is always faithful. He fulfills his promises. Paul says it best to the Corinthians, "For all of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding "Yes!" (2 Corinthians 1:20, NLT)

We must remember that it is us humans that are fickle and quick to forget, not God. This week, as we reflect on the presence of Christmas present, it is my prayer that we may be reminded to trust in God at all times, even when His timing doesn't align with ours.

1. **Have you ever had to wait a long time for a fulfillment of a promise, or to receive a gift? What was the waiting like and how did it feel to finally receive the gift?**
2. **Jesus may have come at just the right time, but his birth would go unnoticed to many. Why do you think so many missed it, and why did the angels appear to Mary, Joseph, shepherds and wise men, instead of the religious rulers, leaders, and politically elite?**

WEEK 2 - TUESDAY

The announcement made, no turning back now Luke 1:26 *In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, 27 to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. 28 Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"*

29 Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. 30 "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 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. 33 And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

34 Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin."

35 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. 36 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. 37 For the word of God will never fail."

38 Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

It's such a common formula in Scripture. God calls the most unlikely people, to do the most unlikely things, and their first response is to make sure God knows why they are the wrong choice, as if God didn't already know.

Gabriel comes to Mary with what comes across as an incredible greeting. I'd love to hear an angel says this to me. But Mary's response is "confused and disturbed." Why?

Well, likely, Mary has never gotten this kind of a peak into the world of the divine. This is new to hear. Beautiful, holy, new, and frightening. She's never seen anything like this before. And it's possible that she knew her stories enough to know that an appearance like this meant that something was coming; a call.

When Gabriel tells her what is to happen and what her role is, she immediately looks to her limitations and why she can't possibly do what God is calling her to do. She follows in the footsteps of the giants before her who did the same thing; Moses, Gideon, Jeremiah, and the many who would follow her example through the ages - the apostle Paul, Mother Theresa, Paddy McCoy, and even, I'm guessing, you.

It is unlikely that Mary understood everything that Gabriel says, and she likely had a mound of questions; how would the Holy Spirit come upon her, why is she the best choice for the most important event to ever occur, how can her cousin be pregnant at such an old age, who is Mary to raise the Messiah?

But instead of voicing all those questions and concerns, Mary simply says, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And in her response we get a glimpse as to why she was chosen. She is humble. She has faith. She will go forward even when she doesn't understand because her God has asked her to, and she knows he is good.

Our job today is the same as Mary's was then. We've been called to carry the Savior into our world; where we work, go to school, live, etc.... We may not feel worthy, or that we have the right skill set, but that doesn't change the call. I pray regularly for us all to have the courage of Mary, to simply, humbly, and obediently say, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true."

1. **What does it mean to you to be a person of faith? Is it having all the answers, or trusting in God even without any answers, or something in-between?**
2. **What are the ways that you and I bring Jesus into our world today?**

WEEK 2 - WEDNESDAY

The promise in the flesh Luke 2: 1 *At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. 2 (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. 4 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. 5 He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child.*

6 And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. 7 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.

8 That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. 9 Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory

surrounded them. They were terrified, 10 but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. 11 The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! 12 And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”

13 Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”

15 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.” 16 They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. 17 After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. 18 All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, 19 but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often.

The incarnation. The day when God took on human flesh.

And here in the first line of this birth account, we have a foretaste of the battle that will unfold before us. Mary was told the child would sit on the throne of his ancestor David, and that his kingdom would never end. However, he is born during a time when another kingdom reigns. That kingdom was a strong and mighty earthly power unlike any the world had ever seen; the Roman empire.

So likely, the story to unfold is not all rose pedals and butterfly kisses. There will be strife, turmoil, conflict, but interestingly, the worst of it won’t come from those outside the Israelite faith, like the Roman empire. No. The biggest conflict will come from inside the faith community. It will come from those who want to hoard power, not give it away. Those who want to be served, not serve others. Those who want to hold onto their lives, their wealth, their power, and their resources, instead of lay it all down to follow Jesus and him alone.

But that part of the story is the part many do not understand yet, or see. For now, in this present moment, it is simply a day of celebration. A day they had wanted 100’s of years to come to fruition. And while Mary and Joseph held the fragile baby in their hands, the angels did what they do in the presence of God; they worshipped and invited the shepherds to do the same.

I don’t know what my life will hold tomorrow. I don’t know what news I may receive, what things may change, what shoes may drop, but I have learned a valuable lesson in life that I need regular reminding of; when I don’t know what to do, I’m invited to worship. When my life appears to be falling down all around me, I’m invited to lift up my eyes to heaven.

I have a picture on my phone that reminds me of this. It is a picture I took during a memorial service for a student who had been killed while riding her bike one day at the school where I served as chaplain. It was a horrible accident that took the light of a beautiful girl far too soon.

But amidst the pain, amidst the heartache, amidst unspeakable grief, as I looked out over the congregation I saw that just a few feet away from the girl's casket, was her mom, holding her hands up in worship, as the girl's friends led the congregation in her favorite praise songs.

So friends, worship isn't just an invitation, it's a privilege and a reminder that in this world we will have trouble but we can take heart, because God has overcome this world.

- 1. What is some of the best news you've ever received?**
- 2. When is it hardest for you to worship?**
- 3. What has been one of your favorite and most memorable worship experiences and what was it about that moment that made it so?**

WEEK 2 - THURSDAY

A purpose, a battle, and a sacrifice A Purpose - Why did Jesus come into our world in the first place?

- Matthew 1: 20 *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. 21 And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*
- Luke 19: 10 *"For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost."*
- Mark 2: 17 *"I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners."*
- Mark 10: 45 *"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many."*
- John 3: 17 *God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.*

A Battle - He came knowing the journey wouldn't be easy.

- Luke 4:13 *When the devil had finished tempting Jesus, he left him until the next opportunity came.*
- John 14:30 *"I don't have much more time to talk to you, because the ruler of this world approaches. He has no power over me, 31 but I will do what the Father requires of me, so that the world will know that I love the Father. Come, let's be going."*
- Luke 22:52 *Then Jesus spoke to the leading priests, the captains of the Temple guard, and the elders who had come for him. "Am I some dangerous revolutionary," he asked, "that you come with swords and clubs to arrest me? 53 Why didn't you arrest me in the Temple? I was there every day. But this is your moment, the time when the power of darkness reigns.*

A Sacrifice - He took on our sins, so we could take on His rewards.

- Luke 23:46 *Then Jesus shouted, "Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!" And with those words he breathed his last.*
- 2 Corinthians 5:21: *For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.*

Jesus knew full well what he was getting into when he came to our world. He knew it wouldn't be a cake walk, and yes, he even knew what would have to happen and what he'd have to endure to save us. Yet still, he came.

He left the perfect world of heaven with full communion with God the Father and God the Spirit, to have his diaper changed, learn how to walk, and likely be made fun of at some point at school.

For almost 30 years, he lived among us in quiet; listening, observing, studying, working. Then, he came into the light, was baptized by his cousin, and began his public ministry through the act of baptism. When he came up out of the water, heaven announced his identity, "This is my son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased." Not everyone got it, but the enemy did, so he went on attack.

Sure, we have certain stories of Jesus encountering the devil and his demons, but rest assured, the devil was always looking for an opportunity to attack and stop Jesus from fulfilling his purpose. And he thought he had him in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus first felt the unspeakable horror of being separated from communion with the Father and the Spirit as he began to take on the sin of the world, but for our sake and for the joy set before him (Hebrews 12:2), Jesus resisted and ultimately fulfilled his purpose.

He died on that cross, taking on our sin, so that we could be made right with God. He earned the right to remove our filthy rags, and cover us in His robe of righteousness. Now, it's not our works that are looked at as to whether or not we shall be saved. When we choose Jesus and give Him our life, it's His works that are seen, not ours. Jesus saved us, every last one of us. The choice is ours. Will we receive the gift, the present that his presence brought?

- 1. Put Jesus' purpose for coming into this world into your own words and write them out somewhere.**
- 2. How do you think Jesus was able to continue to fight off the schemes of the evil one?**
- 3. What does it mean to you now, to know that when you accept Jesus as your Savior, He covers you completely?**

WEEK 2 - FRIDAY

Phase I ends, Phase II begins Matthew 28:5-6 *5 Then the angel spoke to the women. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He isn't here! He is risen from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come, see where his body was lying*

John 20: 21 *Again he said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." 22 Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit.*

Acts 2:1 On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. 2 Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. 3 Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. 4 And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability...47b... And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17 This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

PHILIPPIANS 3:8 Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ 9 and become one with him...

The story of Jesus didn't end with his death, nor did it end with his resurrection and ascension back to his Father's side. You see, the first incarnation of God happened in about B.C. 4 when Mary and Joseph gave birth to the baby Jesus. The second incarnation of God happened around A.D. 30, when the Holy Spirit came down and filled the hearts of those who professed to follow Jesus. And the world has never been the same.

Over the next 300 years, the followers of Jesus would go from that group gathered on the hilltop in Matthew 28, to over 9 million. And remember, there was no social media, no tweeting, no mass email pushes to spread the word. The word spread from person to person because it was truly, good news. It was news so good that the people couldn't keep it to themselves. God not only wants us back in relationship with Him, He's done everything to make it possible. All we have to do is say, YES!

At Crosswalk, you often hear us say that we don't like evangelistic programs. Not that there is anything wrong with them in and of themselves. The word evangelism comes from the Greek, euangelos, which means "good news." But the program with a program is that it has. beginning and an ending. We would rather challenge us all to live evaneglistically; day in and day out, encountering the risen Lord and sharing the good news of what He's done and how He loves with all we meet not because we have to, but because we can't imagine not doing it.

I have found that in order to live this way, it does take an encounter with the resurrected Lord. So have you met the resurrected Jesus? Have you had an encounter with Him? Have you looked into His eyes and seen how much He actually loves you? Read about all He actually did for you? You'll know if you have or not because once you have, you'll never be the same. Like Paul, you'll come to realize that everything else in this world pales in comparison to knowing and gaining Jesus as our Lord.

1. Do you believe in who Jesus is and what He's done for you?

2. If you do, have you marked that encounter by surrendering your life to him through baptism? If not, what is keeping you from reaching out to a friend or a pastor to make that decision now? If you have, then keep going, don't give up, for we surrender to him each and every day - his way over ours.
3. When was the last time you encountered the resurrected Lord? How might you go about seeking Him today?

SERMON SERIES TITLE - WEEK 3

Christmas Future

WEEK 3 - MONDAY

The promised future of new beginnings 1 Corinthians 15: 51 *But let me reveal to you a wonderful secret. We will not all die, but we will all be transformed! 52 It will happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed. 53 For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies.*

54 Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled: "Death is swallowed up in victory. 55 O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

56 For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. 57 But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 4: 13 *And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope... 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the believers who have died will rise from their graves. 17 Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. 18 So encourage each other with these words.*

I know we don't usually go this far with the Christmas story. We usually end with the birth of Jesus. However, the beauty of spending time focusing not just on the birth of Jesus, but also his life, death, and resurrection, is that because of these things we know what story the Christmas story leads us too...our forever story with Christ.

You see, when we believe in and accept the Christmas story as our own story, then we can know that the story we see with our eyes, the one full of death and mourning and crying and pain, we can know that that story isn't all there is. There is so much more to our stories, to our future, and knowing this Biblical truth allows us to live differently, now.

And we all need this reminder, right? Because our world seems like it's not only falling apart, it's full of ends. Relationships end, jobs end, health ends. But when you come to believe in the Christmas story and all that God did for us, then you realize that this earth's endings are really just our beginnings.

I love how the passage on our resurrection in 1 Thessalonians ends. Paul writes, "Then we will be with the Lord forever. So encourage each other with these words."

I have always taken that last line literally. I love to spend time thinking about what that future will be like. What it will be like to finally see Jesus face to face. What it will be like to see my grandmother, alive, healed, youthful, and reunited with my grandfather who I never met. What it will be like to talk to David, pal around with Peter, talk to Martha and tell her, “I get it, I was you.” And I even like to think about all the things that could happen, like flying, exploring the universe, having a home at the base of a mountain that has a river/waterfall flowing through it.

I like to think about these things, talk about these things with others, and find out from others what they are looking forward to when that future comes. I believe talking about those things now can remind us that even when life is difficult, it's not our whole story. There is so much more coming; more than we could ever imagine. And that not only encourages me, it gives me hope.

1. **When you think about the resurrection, how do you imagine it happening? Is Jesus in the clouds surrounded by angels? Are people popping up all around you? What and who do you see?**
2. **What are some things you look forward to about our new life with Jesus, both in heaven and on the new earth?**
3. **Aside from Jesus, who is someone you can't wait to talk to and why?**
4. **Is there someone in your life who you think could benefit now from the reminder that this story's end is just the beginning of our next story?**

WEEK 3 - TUESDAY

The enemies fate Revelation 20:1 *Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven with the key to the bottomless pit and a heavy chain in his hand. 2 He seized the dragon—that old serpent, who is the devil, Satan—and bound him in chains for a thousand years. 3 The angel threw him into the bottomless pit, which he then shut and locked so Satan could not deceive the nations anymore... 10 Then the devil, who had deceived them, was thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur...*

When I was a college chaplain, I had a season where I happened to have a lot of students sharing fears they had about the devil. They had each experienced attacks on themselves, or on their loved ones, and it seemed to them in this time like the devil was more real and more powerful than God.

In response to these conversations, I ended up giving a talk for a vespers that I entitled, “Devil Schmevil.” The idea was to name the devil and his role in this world, but to make sure we knew who held the power between him and Christ.

In the gospels, whenever Jesus encounters a demon, it's clear who is in charge. No question. Even in the instant where there's a conversation, the one between Jesus and the legion of demons who eventually get cast into pigs, there's no question as to who is in charge. The demons know they have to do whatever comes out of Jesus' mouth because he is, after all, the great I AM. All they do is ask to be thrown into the pigs instead of the abyss.

At one point in the sermon, I got to a dramatic place where I had said the devil's name for the first time, Lucifer, and for a split second you could hear a pin drop. After a split second, one of our beloved community members who loved talking back to the preacher, blurted out, "That dirty bird!" His comment broke the tension in the room, causing the crowd, and myself, to laugh.

Of course, I talked about Jesus conquering sin and death on the cross and winning the war over the devil. I talked about the powerful name of Jesus and how it is ours to use and stand firm underneath. And I remember ending that sermon with the above verse, asking the students to tell me how many angels are used to bind up the devil in the end. Do you catch it? Just one.

For all the harm and pain and horror the devil has caused since the garden, for all the times we may have cowered during an attack, it only takes ONE angel to bind him.

Because of the Christmas story and all that Jesus came and accomplished for us, the devil has no power over us any more. In fact, the only power he has is the power we give him. Whereas, when we live our lives surrendered to Jesus, we have the power of Jesus that covers us and try as he might, the devil is a defeated foe. Sure, he's going down swinging, but please remember that you belong to and are protected by God, and your future is secure in Him just like the devil's fate is secure. So hold onto that truth the next time you feel attacked, and cling to the mighty and powerful name of Jesus both now and forevermore.

1. **Was there ever a time in your life when you felt scared of the devil? If so, what was happening?**
2. **What are some of the ways the devil attacks us?**
3. **When you're feeling attacked, what are some things you can do to remind the devil and yourself who you belong to and how powerful He is?**

WEEK 3 - WEDNESDAY

The end of all ends Revelation 21:1 *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.*

3 I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

5 And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true." 6 And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. 7 All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children."

I'll admit, this is one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture, and I love that it comes at the end. You see, it's a reminder to me that no matter where I am in the story of Scripture, or in the story of my life, Revelation 21 is the end of the story, of my story. Whether I'm a slave in Egypt, or on the run from the Philistines, or facing a giant, or hiding in a cave. Whether I've fallen exhausted in the wilderness, or stuck in the belly of a whale. Whether I'm on a hill called Calvary, or standing outside of an empty tomb, Revelation 21 is the end of the story.

The same can be said for my life now. Whether I'm recovering from an illness, or just received a terminal diagnosis. Whether I've lost my dream job or my dream house or my dream life. Whether I've just been through a divorce, the loss of a child, or am lost in an addiction, Revelation 21 can be the end of my story should I choose to believe.

And what am I choosing to believe? I'm choosing to believe that God is actually good and loving, as He has said, as He has shown. I'm choosing to believe that on my own I'll never be good enough for the end of that story, and that I need Jesus' life to cover mine. When I do those things, Revelation 21 isn't just a story, it's my story. An end that is really just the beginning.

Scripture is the story of a homeless God whose relationship with His creation has been broken, and all this same God does to restore those relationships and be back home. Throughout Scripture, these same words from Revelation 21 are repeated. Words like "I will be their God and they will be my people." They are repeated because they are what God wants more than anything; to be at home with us as we were, "In the beginning."

And that scene? The one where the very hand that carved the canyons and mountains of this world, gently wipes every tear from our eyes? Oh how I long for that moment. To know that finally, all is well. Finally, we are home in the hands of the One who made us and saved us. That will be a really, really, good day.

- 1. What's one area in your life right now, one difficulty, where you need reminding about the end of the story?**
- 2. Do you believe that God is good and that He loves you more than life itself?**
- 3. What's one thing you look forward to about the moment described above?**

WEEK 3 - THURSDAY

Day Four - Living with a holy perspective

Romans 8:18 *Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.*

2 Corinthians 4:16 *That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. 17 For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! 18 So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.*

I Peter 1:6 So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while.

There is a beauty in knowing the end of your story, especially when it's a good ending. It means that whatever you're going through now, however tough and difficult and potentially weighing you down and stealing your hope; whatever it is, knowing the ending of your story can help you know that what you're going through now is not forever.

Oh, it may feel like forever. It may feel like things will never change. You'll never get your head above water financially; never get out of debt, never stop living paycheck to paycheck. But that's not the end of your story. That's not your forever.

It may feel like your body will never feel whole again, the pain will never subside. But it will. One day we'll all be made new.

It may feel like the hole in your heart from the loss of your loved one will never go away, and in a way you're right. You will journey with that loss on this side of heaven, but the day is coming when death will be no more. The day is coming when resurrection happens, restoration happens.

Because you know the end, then you have to remind yourself and others of these things when life is weighing down on you and your circumstances seem rotten. The life we experience now is temporary; here today and gone tomorrow. The life to come? Eternal. Our lives now do cause us pain, but that pain won't last. I know it doesn't feel that way when you're in the midst of it, but the writers of Scripture above wrote those things to help us remember; to remember our real story.

I call this way of living, living with a holy perspective where the story I see with my eyes isn't all there is. There is a bigger story, a better story, and I'm living into that story now. Holding onto that truth gives me hope even in the darkest of times.

You know that in a dark room, no matter how big and how dark, it only takes one little match to begin pushing back the darkness. So let the truth of today's Scripture be your light. May you be reminded of the temporary nature of the world we live in now. And may we know beyond a shadow of a doubt what our future holds thanks to that glorious day Jesus Christ came into our world.

- 1. What is one thing right now you look forward to being done with in the new world?**
- 2. What are some ways you can remind yourself of this holy perspective on a daily basis?**

WEEK 3 - FRIDAY

Turning towards our forever home Matthew 4:17 *From then on Jesus began to preach, "Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."*

Mark 1: 15 *"The time promised by God has come at last!" he announced. "The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!"*

Psalms 23: 6 *Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.*

Psalms 90: 1 *Lord, through all the generations you have been our home!*

Early on in my career, I had two different job opportunities presented to me and my family. One, would keep us where we were, but in a job that we definitely saw God at work in. The other, would have gotten us closer to family and allowed our kids to grow up closer to grandma's and grandpa's, aunts and uncles and cousins; something we also felt God wanted.

I struggled over this decision for some time. What did God want me to do most? Where would I most be in His presence, living in step with Him and what He wanted for my life? Where would we be most at home?

It was during this season that I read a familiar passage in a new light. The end of Psalm 23 says, "Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

When I read those words in this season of life I knew that being at home with God isn't about a job or a location, it's about a state of my heart. You see, heaven isn't our home. Our home is the heart of God. That is where we came from, and to where we can return today, right now, when we repent (or turn) to Him. We don't have to wait until Jesus comes in the clouds to be at home with Him, we can be there right now.

So if being at home with God is a state of mind rather than geography, then we can be at home with him right now no matter what we're going through in this life. We can be at home with him even when we've been away from our family home for some time. We can be at home with him even when we're in a job we don't love. We can be at home with him even as we wait to be held in his arms. You see, eternity isn't just the future, eternity begins now when we seek to make our home with God.

This Christmas story that we've been given isn't just a great "once upon a time" story. It is the greatest story ever told that leads to the greatest ending every imagined that will actually never end. Our job is to believe that it's true. Believe that our God came into this world, as one of us. Grew up and lived a life we never could. Then laid that life down to take upon himself the consequences for our sins. Thankfully, the story didn't end there. For that same God resurrected on day three and set a fire that continues to burn to this day. A fire that draws us all in to a love that is higher and wider and longer and deeper than anything we can possibly imagine. A fire that God hopes we'll help him spread so that all people everywhere may know He loves them, and that He wants so badly to spend eternity, with all of us...at home with Him.

So laugh, celebrate, worship, be joyful, and remember that because of Christmas we have the gift of a present and a future that we couldn't have dreamed up even if we tried. Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!

- 1. How would you describe the kingdom of God? What is it? Where is it?**
- 2. How do you and I make our home with God, now, not just in the future?**