



LOOKOUT
MOUNTAIN
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

PRAYER RESOURCE



Advent

READINGS & REFLECTIONS
FOR PREPARATION

INTRODUCTION

As Christians, we celebrate the Advent season, but what does that really mean and when did these celebrations begin? Advent is Latin for “arrival.” It is a season when we look back to and celebrate the first coming of Christ our Lord, and we look forward to his second coming. No one knows for sure when Advent celebrations began, but there are mentions of the season as early as the fourth century after Christ’s death. After Martin Luther took his stand and led the Reformation, the Lutheran church continued to observe and celebrate Advent, and so it has come down to us in the Protestant tradition.

Advent consists of the four Sundays that precede Christmas day. In traditional observances, Advent is considered a time of repentance and contemplation, looking with honest eyes at our sins that required a sacrifice and a looking forward, even yearning for Christ’s return. People are encouraged to fast and spend time in prayer and repentance. Also, in more traditional churches, Advent is not a part of Christmas. Christmas begins on December 25 and lasts until January 6. In the strictest of traditional churches, Christmas carols are not sung during Advent because of Advent’s association with penance and the fact that the carols express the joy of the Lord’s salvation.

Looking at the various ways that Advent is celebrated around the world, it is important for each person and family to choose the way that brings the most worshipful and expressive attitude to your home. This guide is designed to help you consider and use the ideas that will best lead you and your family to the true meaning of our Savior’s birth.

ADVENT SYMBOLISM

Advent wreaths are a relatively easy way to bring a representation of this season into your home. The wreath is a circle, reminding us of the fact that Christ is eternal and that we too are eternal beings. It reminds us that God’s love for his people is everlasting. The wreath is usually made of evergreens, which also represent eternity. Advent wreaths can be made out of other materials, depending on your creativity and the availability of that material. Make it a chance to tell the story of Jesus’ birth.

Around the outside of the wreath, you are going to place four candles. The light of the candles is to remind us that Christ is the Light of the World. Only he can push back the

darkness that surrounds us. The traditional colors of the candles are three purple and one pink. In the center you will place a white candle, called the Christ candle; you will light this one on Christmas Day. Purple is the color used in church decorations and vestments during Lent and Advent because it speaks to us of penance and sorrow. Because of our sins we must have a way to approach our God, and Jesus came to be The Way. Purple is also the traditional color of royalty. Purple was once a very scarce and expensive dye, available only to the elite and the wealthy. Therefore, it became the color associated with kings. Jesus is the King of Kings and we use purple to indicate that position.

The first Sunday you will light a purple candle. This candle is often called the Prophets' candle and represents the men God sent to his people over and over to proclaim his Word and to call the people to return to him. The first Sunday shows us that God wants us to seek him and to know him. We have hope and, as Romans tells us, that hope does not disappoint. (Romans 5:5)

The second Sunday you will light another purple candle. This candle is often called the Bethlehem candle and represents to us that we must be prepared for the coming of the Lord. The prophet Micah foretold the birth of Christ and in Micah 5:2 named Bethlehem as the place of his birth; but Bethlehem wasn't ready for the Redeemer. The little city totally missed the earth-changing event that took place in its streets. Let us not be found unprepared at his coming.

On the third Sunday you get to light the pink candle. This is called Gaudete Sunday—the Sunday of Joy. The time of Jesus' birth is coming closer and our hearts are filled with joy at his sacrifice and our redemption. This is sometimes called the Shepherds' candle because the angels announced the Savior's birth to the shepherds and their hearts were filled with joy. Rejoice with us.

The fourth Sunday you will light the last purple candle. This candle is called the Angels' candle because they were God's messengers to the world, proclaiming the birth of his son. Now we are to be God's messengers, proclaiming the Lord's birth through our words and our actions. The Peace candle is another name for this candle, and that name is also appropriate because only through the sacrifice made by the Son of God can we have peace with God. (John 16:33) Let the peace of God reign in your hearts.

Finally, having arrived at the birth of Jesus, you will light the white candle along with all of the others. White is the color of purity. In the Old Testament, the Lord directed that the priests' garments were to be white. In Daniel the Ancient of Days is clothed in white and his hair is white; the angel at the empty tomb is described as being clothed in dazzling white; John in his Revelation sees the risen Jesus with shining white hair. White also represents light and Jesus is the Light of the World. So we light the Christ candle and go forth with shouts of joy, for our Savior has put on human flesh and has come to save us because we cannot save ourselves. Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Receive him!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

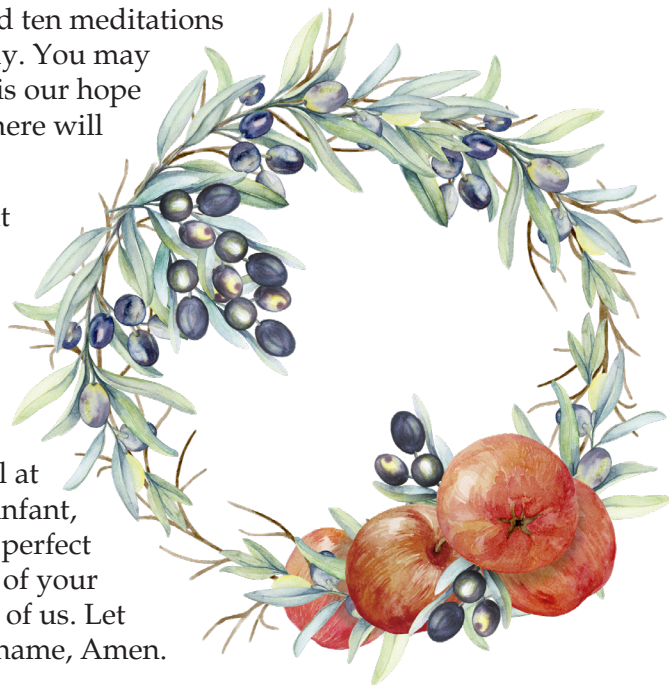
As you look through the book, you will see that each Sunday you are given a suggested reading and an activity. You are encouraged to enjoy each Sunday's reading and activity as a family. This can be a time for even the youngest to ask questions and to begin to appreciate the true meaning of the Lord's birth.

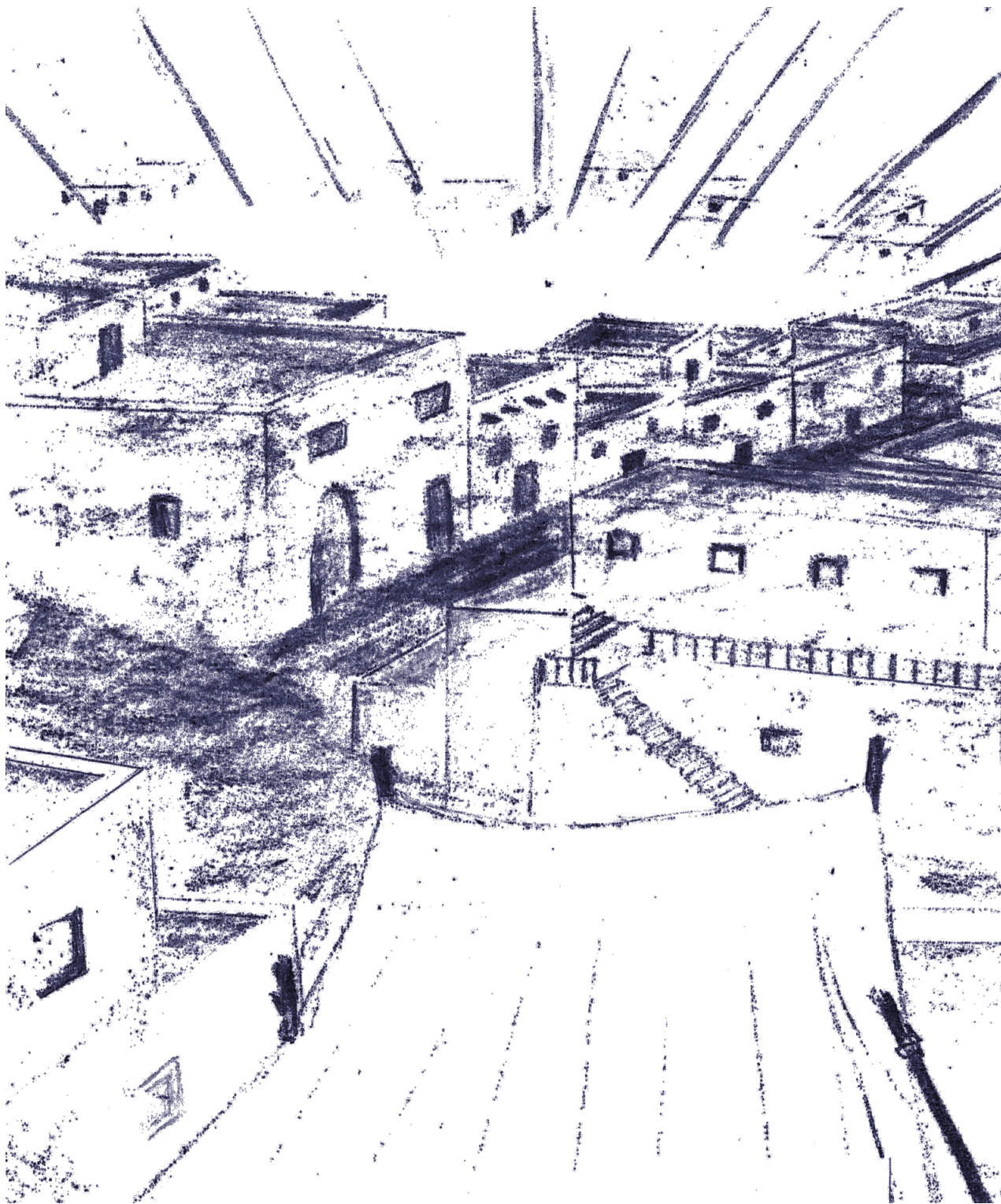
Following the Sunday readings, you will find ten meditations contributed by members of our church family. You may read these as a group or individually, but it is our hope that the thoughts expressed and illustrated here will lead to some good discussions.

This book is our contribution to your Advent season and it is our prayer that it will be a blessing to you.

Prayer:

Most Holy and Glorious Lord, as we enter this season help us to put aside our worldly cares and bow before you. Help us to marvel at the God who became flesh, who became an infant, who lived among us so that he could be our perfect High Priest. Teach us to focus on the beauty of your plan of salvation and your grace to each one of us. Let us praise you with grateful hearts. In Jesus' name, Amen.





FIRST SUNDAY

Today choose a place for your Advent wreath. Place it where the whole family can enjoy it. Choose the person to light the first purple candle. You can pass this honor around in the family or have the head of the family light the candle each week.

This first Sunday choose an Old Testament prophecy to read and discuss. You might read God's first assurance of coming deliverance in Genesis 3:15, or read Isaiah 9:1-7. Talk about the ways that God delivered his people through the years, always assuring them that his perfect plan was being worked out on their behalf. Think of ways in your own life that he has delivered you.

Sing an Advent hymn, for instance "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus," or "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." If you can't sing, maybe you can play an instrument, or simply read the words and think about what they mean. How can we apply these ideas to our lives?

Pray together, thanking God for our deliverance. Thank him that we live after the first coming of Christ and we can look back to his life, his death, and his resurrection for our assurance. Pray that as we go through this Advent season we will be more aware of his love and amazing sacrifice for us.

WHERE IS THE LAMB?

Genesis 22:1-14 • John 1:19-34

From the time of Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden, the world has been broken. Loved ones die; relationships disappoint; vehicles crash; things break; bugs bite. We long for restoration. Throughout the Old Testament, God's people yearned for the deliverance that had been promised. Yes, God delivered them from Egypt and he delivered them from many enemies through the centuries. But they wanted the Messiah, the Promised One, the Savior; they wanted permanent deliverance, not just temporary relief. When we read the account in Genesis, we hear Isaac asking the question that is the question the Israelites asked over and over in the Old Testament: **"Where is the Lamb?"**

Year after year the nation celebrated Passover; they knew the Lamb had been promised. Just as Abraham had assured Isaac that God would provide the Lamb, so God sent Israel prophet after prophet who assured them that the Lamb was coming. But the Messiah didn't come, and they suffered through hard times and subjection and captivity with the promise of God ringing in their ears. They heard but didn't listen to the prophets, to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, Hosea, Joel. Finally, Malachi again brought assurances and then 400 years of silence descended. **Where is the Lamb?**

Quietly, in an obscure town, under Roman rule and authority, a baby was born. He was born of a virgin, a girl betrothed but not married to a quiet man. Not many people paid any attention to this event. Some of the attention was certainly negative; after all, this couple wasn't married. When they returned home to Nazareth, they lived an ordinary life, raising their family, working at the everyday things of life, listening to the cries of their people living in a nation occupied by Rome. **Where is the Lamb?**

Then a young man burst onto the scene. Excitement rippled through Israel. Granted he was strange, wearing animal skins, living apart, eating an unappealing diet. John the Baptist held forth by the Jordan River. He baptized people and preached repentance for sin. People with hungry hearts flocked to see him, to listen to what he had to say, to be baptized by him. They asked themselves and each other, "Is this the Lamb?" Finally they asked him, **"Are you the Lamb?"**

He disappointed them by denying it. A group of followers gathered around him to listen to his teaching. The Jewish leaders came out to investigate what all the fuss was about but they weren't impressed. They could see that the people were; they didn't interfere even though John offended them with his talk of repentance. They left secure in the thought that John was nothing to be concerned about—**Where is the Lamb?**

Finally, one otherwise ordinary day, John had a special visitor. Jesus came to be baptized but John was reluctant. John knew who stood before him and he complied only because Jesus insisted. But John then was chosen to answer the question that Israel had been asking for centuries. John fulfilled his life's work when he pointed to Jesus and finally called out to the people, **"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!"**

SECOND SUNDAY

This Sunday, in addition to the first candle, light the second purple candle as you read the first chapter of Luke. Here we have the story recorded for us of the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist and the announcement of the birth of Jesus. Elizabeth and Mary were cousins and both found themselves expecting a most unexpected baby. God sent Mary to visit Elizabeth. Imagine the comfort and delight they found in each other's company. They could talk openly about the miraculous circumstances of the coming births of their sons and about what the Lord was doing for them, the task that each one of them had been chosen to accomplish for the Lord. They could speculate on what the Lord would accomplish through their sons.

Luke was a physician. He wrote a clear and orderly account of the events surrounding Jesus' birth. Being a man of science, he would have wanted to be as accurate as possible about these events. He mentions "eyewitnesses" to the events. Talk about who might have told him their stories. Whom do you think he knew—Mary, John the Baptist, Jesus' family?

Zechariah was unable to speak after his visit from the angel. Why? How do you think he communicated through his months of silence? Compare Zechariah's answer to the angel and Mary's answer to the angel. What do you see as a basic difference in the two answers? How do we answer his call in our lives?

Spend some time thanking the Lord for giving us the facts that surround his birth. Ask him to help us not to miss the work he has for you to do for him.

JOSEPH

Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph is the forgotten man of Scripture. We are inclined to focus quite naturally on Mary and, of course, on the baby Jesus. We talk about the shepherds and the wise men; we even mention the animals that were present, and yet we don't highlight the role Joseph played. But Joseph was chosen by God to fulfill a very important role in the life of Jesus. As his earthly father, Joseph would be in charge of Jesus—completely. The father in a Jewish family was totally in charge of the lives of his children. He named them, provided for them,

and led them in the choice of their careers and their mates. He was in charge of educating them in the Law and the Prophets; he would teach his sons about observing the Law and the Festivals; he would take Jesus to the synagogue and, on those most important festival days, to the temple. Just let that sink in for a minute—this man, Joseph, was chosen by God to teach everything he knew of the Word to God’s Living Word.

Joseph and Mary were betrothed. That was as binding as a marriage; to end a betrothal required a divorce. Joseph and Mary had not yet married and he had not taken her into his home. Mary had been away in the hill country visiting her cousin Elizabeth. (Luke 1) Mary already knew she was to bear the Messiah, and when she returned from her visit to Elizabeth she broke the news to Joseph. He was deeply troubled, Matthew tells us. He knew this child was not his, but if he repudiated Mary she was not only shamed and disgraced but liable to face the penalty for adultery—stoning.

The gospel of Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man; as a Jew, that indicates that he was a strong believer and a strict observer of the Law. He decided he must put Mary aside, but he would do so privately for her sake. Joseph, with his decision made, went to bed; but God had other plans. God sent an angel to Joseph, just as he had done for Mary. The angel told him that this would be the child of the Holy Spirit and that he should take Mary as his wife and name the baby Jesus. This baby would save his people from their sins.

Notice that Joseph immediately did what God had said. That was an indication of his faith. God said it and Joseph did it. When Joseph took Mary to his home, he was legally recognizing the child as his in the eyes of his culture. Jesus was his first born, the heir to all that he had. This was a staggering thing for a man of his time and culture. He opened himself to the gossip and scandal that accompanied this pregnancy. He acknowledged Mary’s child as his own. He took on all of the earthly responsibility for this babe. The child that Joseph called “son” would be his Lord.

The couple had to travel to Bethlehem to register for a Roman census. It is important to see how God worked it out so that Scripture would be fulfilled in every detail. The Messiah had to be born in Bethlehem; God had Rome call for a census. The Messiah had to be of the line of David; both Mary and Joseph were descendants of David. However Joseph, the legal earthly father of Jesus, was of the royal line of David. Jesus was therefore legally entitled to be recognized as an earthly king. But years before, God had set aside the legal line of descendants because of King Jeconiah’s wickedness. Jesus was not Joseph’s physical son, but just in case anyone has a question, Mary’s lineage provides the answer because she was also descended from David, but not from Jeconiah.

We don’t know how old Jesus was when Joseph died, but I am sure that our Lord grieved for this gentle father who raised him and taught him all that he possibly could. When Jesus stayed in Jerusalem at the temple when he was 12, we can imagine that he was hungering for deeper teaching than Joseph and the Rabbi in Nazareth were able to provide. Joseph was called by God to an incredibly important task and we should thank God for his faithfulness and let him be an example to us.

THIRD SUNDAY

This Sunday, in addition to the first two candles, we light the pink candle. We are reminding ourselves of the hope that we have in Christ and the joy that he has brought to our lives by setting us free from sins. However, in order to fully appreciate our having been set free, we have to face the fact of our sin. God came because we cannot save ourselves; he came because the blood of every bull or lamb or goat ever born cannot atone for our sin.

Talk about what it means “to sin.” 1 John tells us that “sin is lawlessness.” So does that mean that as long as I follow the rules, I will be OK? Does it mean just the actual commission of the sin or does it involve the attitude of our heart that leads us to commit the sin? If it means our heart attitude, how do we change that? Is it enough to want to change? Read what Paul says in Romans 9:16: “So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy.” Thanks be to God! He has mercy on us.

We can look at the fact that we are sinners and agree with God that we have all sinned and gone astray, but he has had mercy on us and came in the flesh to deliver us from the grip of sin and death. It is joy abounding! Sing “Joy to the World” and reflect on what the words mean to us today.

Thank the Lord that we have been delivered and that we need no longer serve sin.

THE SHEPHERDS

In Luke 2:8-18 we are given the story of the shepherds and their testimony concerning the birth of Jesus. This group of men is an early indication of the people who often were the first to accept and believe in the Lord's ministry here on earth. Shepherds were outcasts in Jewish society. They lived in the countryside in the midst of their flocks. They handled the sheep, eating with them and sleeping in the open with them. The shepherds were a dirty and smelly bunch of men. Not only did they offend polite society with their habits and their lack of cleanliness, they were considered ritually unclean. They were not allowed to enter the temple. They occupied a place that the Old Testament referred to as "outside the camp."

Alfred Edersheim, a 19th century scholar, thought that these particular shepherds tended the flock from which the lambs for the ritual sacrifice were chosen. Here they were in the field with their flocks as usual, just an ordinary night. That is until an angel appeared before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. They quite naturally were terribly afraid. What a sight this must have been on that dark, chilly night! The angel had come with a message for them. After all of these years of waiting, the Christ had been born! The angel told them everything they needed to know to go and see this miracle for themselves. Then, as if one angel hadn't been enough for these men, a heavenly host appeared and invited them to rejoice over the great news they had been given.

When the angels had gone and the darkness descended again, the men decided to go and see this miracle birth. I imagine that it was a few minutes before they could shake off the shock of what had just happened to them, but Luke tells us that they hurried to the manger. They found the family there. I am sure they told Mary and Joseph all that had happened to them in the field, repeating the angel's actions and the words sung by the heavenly choir. And then they looked their fill at this tiny baby who was their Savior. When they left the manger, they went and made the news widely known. Edersheim, continuing the idea of their being shepherds of this special flock, has them journeying to Jerusalem, spreading the word far and wide to anyone who would listen as they herded their flock to the temple.

We are told that the people who heard the story marveled. I am sure they marveled not just at the happenings, but at the fact that it was the shepherds who were the recipients of this visit and the news. Why would angels come and tell shepherds about Messiah's birth? What about the priests, the political leaders? God reminds us in 1 Corinthians 1:25-29 that he chooses the weak and the outcast to hear his good news so that we can't boast in our own worthiness. All of us are much more likely to believe and walk in faith when we know how very much we need the Lord's help. The shepherds went and spread the word about what had taken place. Let us spread the word as well.

FOURTH SUNDAY

Today, in addition to the first three candles, we will light our last purple candle. The wreath, by this time, is giving a noticeable light to the room. That light reminds us that next we light our Christ candle and welcome the holy babe into our world. Read Philippians 2:5-11. Let us remind ourselves of all that Jesus willingly gave up to come and take on flesh and live as a man in this world.

He didn't choose to come to the wealthy or the influential. In fact Isaiah tells us that there was nothing about his looks that would have attracted admiration. But when he taught, people understood that there was something about this man that was new and different. He taught "as one having authority." (Matthew 7:29) He came to save the lost and dying in this world. Jesus didn't shun or withdraw from society's rejects. He embraced them and invited them into his Kingdom.

Though he came as a helpless infant and submitted himself to fallen parents, he knew who he was and what his purpose was in the world and he made that clear to his disciples. Here are the words to a haunting carol written by John Jacob Niles in 1933 and based on a folk song he heard. Read through the verses and marvel at this God we serve. He came for one purpose; he never wavered; he accomplished what he came to do.

**I wonder as I wander out under the sky
How Jesus our Savior did come for to die
For poor on'ry sinners, like you and like I.
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.**

**When Mary birthed Jesus t'was in a cow's stall,
With wise men, and shepherds, and farmers and all.
But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall
And the promise of ages it then did recall.**

**If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing,
A star from the heavens or a bird on the wing,
Or all of God's angels in heaven to sing,
he surely could have it, for he was the king.**

THE FALL AND RISING OF MANY

Luke 2:34, 35

Several years ago I was caught by the parade taking Santa Claus to Northgate Mall. The parade was made up of marching bands, majorettes, pickup trucks full of Cub Scouts, softball teams, dance school participants, and a fire truck. The crowd roared their approval as the various groups threw candy to the line of spectators and Santa shouted, “Ho, Ho, Ho!” through his megaphone. The pickup drivers blew their horns and the fire truck siren wailed. There were lots of smiles and happy cheers from all the folks watching the big event. But behind me I could hear the howling of dogs in the neighborhood. Their mournful cries rose and fell, blending with the sounds of the celebration.

It suddenly struck me that this was truly what Christmas was all about. It is joy and celebration that our Savior is born and has come to set us free from our sins. But in order to save us, he had to die. He came for that very purpose. This baby whom we celebrate grew up perfect in every way and died a cruel, torturous death—for me. Mary and Joseph knew that their baby’s life was in danger. They heard it from Simeon in the temple when they took Jesus to present their first born to the Lord. Simeon told them that Jesus had come to bring about “the fall and rising of many” and that a sword would pierce through Mary’s soul too. (Luke 2:25-35)

Joseph was told in a dream to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt for safety because Herod wanted to eliminate any possible rival. They escaped in time to avoid the horror that came to Bethlehem. Jesus’ birth brought death to many innocents in Bethlehem because King Herod had all baby boys aged two and under murdered. We read about that tragic event in Matthew 2:16-18. Mary and Joseph stayed in Egypt until King Herod died and it was safe for them to return to Nazareth.

There are two aspects to the Christmas season; there is the great joy and the celebration but sadness runs like a minor note through the song of joy. Jesus was born for the fall and rising of many. It was true in the time of Mary and Joseph and it is true today. Pray that the Lord will not let you fall but will hold you up. This season is full of celebration, but don’t forget the songs in a minor chord.

A REFINING FIRE

C. S. Lewis once wrote, “It seems to me that one can hardly say anything either bad or good enough about life.” Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever feel like there aren’t really words to adequately describe the simple joys in life? And yet at the same time, it’s hard to express how painful life can be? Despite the window dressing, the posts on social media, the seemingly endless stream of perfect-looking families sending out charming cards at Christmas, the heartaches of life are never put on hold. Even if you find yourself sailing on relatively peaceful waters, surely you have family and friends who are battling dark days.

Faith may be easy in a sunny meadow, but it can’t compare to the battle-scarred faith of a saint who has endured. We need to regularly lift up the hurting, praying that their faith, as well as our own faith, will be like refined silver—more beautiful and reflective of Christ *because* of the fire. (Malachi 3)

I don’t understand how secular people endure the nagging questions, the inexplicable pain. How can the sorrow of cancer, of death, of evil be faced through the prism that this is *all* there is?

Which brings me back to Jesus in the stable. His humble birth is the promise that this *isn’t* all there is. As the angels announced to the shepherds, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.” (Luke 2:11) We celebrate Christmas because it marks the birth of our Savior.

But what does Christ our Savior save us from? Meaninglessness, condemnation, and separation from God for starters. But Jesus is never going to force himself on us. We need to accept him.

In what areas are you refusing his help? There must be some part of your life where all is not well, where you just don’t have the answers. May we start with those things—handing over to God our burdens, and as we grow in faith we can give him our doubts, our deepest questions, and at some point in time, our everything. May Jesus be Lord over all of it, the too wonderful for words and the too painful to comprehend. And then may we recommit ourselves to him again and again saying, “Jesus, you are Lord.”

The Bible says that God’s mercies are new every morning. (Lamentations 3:22, 23) I am in awe of and grateful for this truth. I believe we are destined to either live in denial of the brokenness around us, or we are going to sometimes feel almost crushed by its reality. Sometimes even in a single day there are dramatic highs and lows—the joys of life in stark contrast to its brutal pain. The discipline is to remind ourselves of the truth every single day, to turn to him every single day.

May we embrace his mercies and give ourselves to him today and every day.

Kristie Jackson

HOW CAN I BE SURE?

One of the wonderful things about getting older is that you can finally get to a place where it is okay to admit that you don't know everything. In fact, it can be freeing as you finally begin to let go of some of the temporal things and grab hold of something which is far more precious and valuable. There are aches and pains in our physical bodies. And more than that, we have aches and pains of the heart—we have experienced, along with the blessings, the losses associated with unfulfilled dreams, shattered expectations, and painful trials. At times, some of this pain has been due to our own bad decisions.

In Luke 1, the angel Gabriel announced to Zechariah that even though he and Elizabeth were “both well along in years” (v. 7), Elizabeth would have a son who would be called John (v. 13) who would prepare the way for Jesus. Zechariah had a question for this angel: “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

How can I be sure? As we start out in life, we think we are sure of almost everything. We have it mapped out—career, marriage, kids, and on and on. But now we, like Zechariah, want to know. And here we see the ever present hand of God preparing the way for the coming of Jesus—Mary & Joseph are chosen to be the earthly parents of Jesus, shepherds hear the good news, and those advanced in years are chosen to share in the story in a way they would least expect it.

How can I be sure? Psalm 71 speaks to those who are looking for a sure thing. We do not want to be cast off and forsaken (v. 9). As we draw nearer to eternity, we are confident that, “Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again” (v. 20). Like Zechariah, we don't fully understand the “full measure of this salvation” (v. 15).

How can I be sure? In Luke 2:30, Simeon took Jesus in his arms and declared, “For my eyes have seen your salvation.”

How can I be sure? One day we will see him. We will be sure. He has promised that to us. The joy we experience at celebrating the birth of Jesus will not compare to being in his presence.

“And I—in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.” Psalm 17:15

Leon Sulser

THE BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENT



*With my own eyes I have seen your salvation; it's now out in the open for everyone to see:
A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations, and of glory for your people Israel.*

Luke 2: 30-32 MSG

In him was life, and that life was the light of men.

John 1:4 NIV

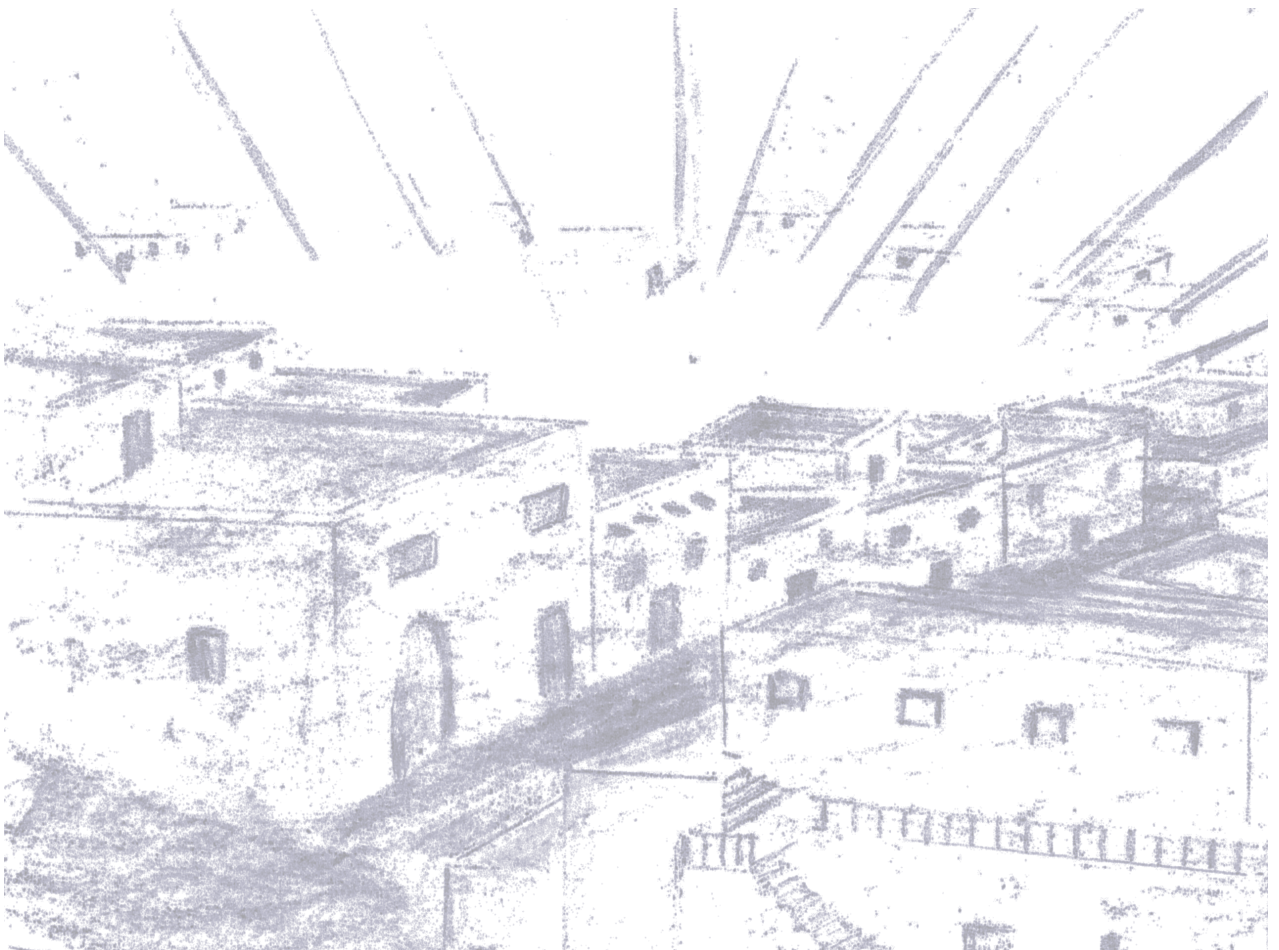
It's so exciting when babies and children come into families. Parents delight in sending birth announcements through email or the post office to let family and friends know the good news of their child's arrival. God wanted to send a birth announcement too! Can you guess how God sent his birth announcement over 2,000 years ago (before there were email and post offices, of course) to let people know, far and near, Jesus had arrived?

God sent a star! It wasn't just any ordinary star, mind you, but it was one with a particularly brilliant light. In fact, you couldn't miss it in the evening sky as it shone directly over Bethlehem where Jesus had been born. The star directed its light *downward* from heaven to earth, announcing the birth of Jesus to those who were far and near.

The curious thing is that very night there was another light...yes, another light that was beginning to shine, oh, so brilliantly. This light, unlike the star, began to shine *upward* from earth to heaven. What kind of light can show us heaven? It was the light that would help people far and near see God. No one had ever seen God before. The light was Jesus. His light is a God-revealing light.

Reflections: This Christmas, how far or near are you from the God-revealing light? What do you most need to see about God? Ask Jesus to give you light to see.

Pauline McLemore



AND THOU BETHLEHEM

Bethlehem is located south of Jerusalem in the fertile limestone hill country of the holy land. The word Bethlehem means “House (Place) of Bread,” and its significance lies in the fact that it is located in a fertile region characterized by an abundance of corn (for making bread), as well as figs, vines, almonds, and olives. Bethlehem was originally called Ephrath or Ephratah, which means “fruitful”. Bethlehem, of course, is where Jesus Christ (Immanuel) was born. His birth was foretold in 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.”

Isaiah 9:6

“He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.”

Isaiah 53:3-7

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

Isaiah 7:14

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.”

Isaiah 11:1

Bethlehem has been and will be a very important place in history.

Isaac Kvale, age 16

CHRISTMAS REMEMBERING

As we contemplate the wonder of our God, the Son, taking on human flesh and entering time and space, we must remember why he came. We remember our hopeless estate, our overwhelming need. Without a redeemer, we are lost—eternally.

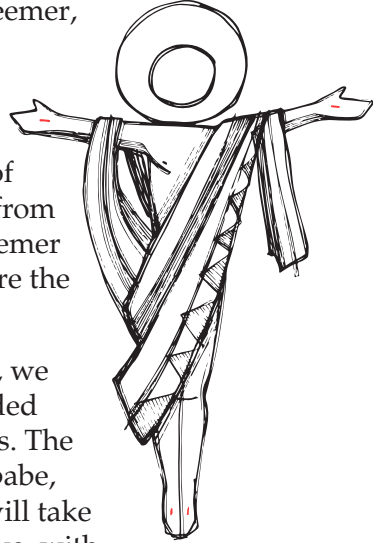
Furthermore, we need more than a friend or relative, more than a kinsman to pay our ransom. More than the shadow we are given in Leviticus 25 or in the book of Ruth, we need the sinless Redeemer who can rescue us from the terrible end which we have earned. We need a Redeemer who will bring us safely before the throne of grace, before the Father.

As we anticipate the celebration of the birth of our Lord, we remember our need, and we remember that Jesus regarded our hopeless estate and shed his own blood for our souls. The Father sent his own son to rescue us. As we look at the babe, born without sin, who will live a life without sin, who will take the terrible punishment for our sin, we are filled with awe, with wonder, and with gratitude.

As we exchange gifts, let us remember the gift, the Giver. The one who is just and Justifier.

“And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior’s blood? Died he for me, who caused his pain? For me, who him to death pursued? Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”

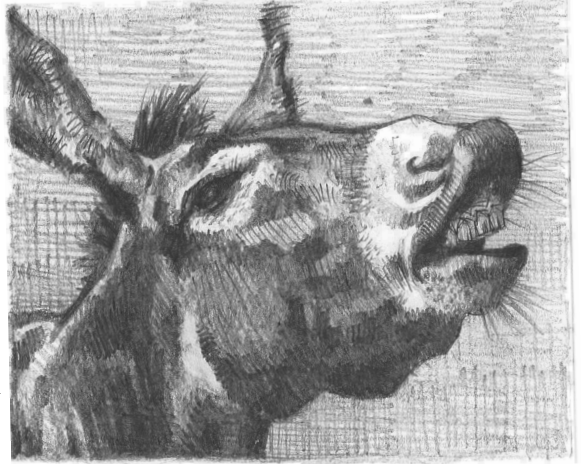
Barby Gifford



PREPARE HIM ROOM

In early December of 2013, I had occasion to reconnect with one of my former babysitters. This lovely 20-something, Lauren, had given up caring for my sons and gotten married. In fact, two of my three sons had served as ring bearers at Lauren's wedding, and now just a handful of years later she had two children of her own.

It was an unseasonably warm day and we had lunch outside on Lauren's deck. Her daughter, Kate, was also home, and I believe an inquisitive, easily-delighted two-year-old is about the best companion there is. Kate was a lovely lunch date, and her eyes danced with excitement over every little thing.



She was all smiles until I was given a tour of the house and we came to the mantel over the fireplace. Upon the mantel was a nativity scene. She pointed with her usual enthusiasm at "lamby" and a goat. But when we came to Mary and Joseph, she shook her darling little head, the wispy curls around her ears bobbing with emphasis. "No room," she said, with a sort of stunned wonder, "No room."

Somehow this little one knew this was very profound. Mary and Joseph were turned away because there was no room for them at the inn.

Pondering those two simple words, "no room," made me realize that Mary and Joseph's Christmas crisis is ours as well. We have no room for welcoming and celebrating the birth of our Savior. No room. We get caught up in the perfunctory festivities, trying to meet or exceed grandiose expectations fueled mostly by savvy marketing. Our calendars may be jammed with parties and events, but peace and joy are often fleeting. We are left with no room emotionally, physically, or spiritually to unwrap and celebrate the best gift that was ever given.

Mary and Joseph welcomed the King of Kings in the quiet of a stable. They rejoiced



in that modest setting over the birth of Jesus, the Light of the World. We too can retreat to a quieter space, a slower pace, a more modest display. We can choose to be less hurried and more peace-filled, but it definitely will not happen by default. We will need to be intentional.

Can you make a commitment this Advent season to make room for the Light of the World daily? To slowly and deliberately unpack the gift of Jesus' birth? Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can all live out the familiar words from this beautiful song:

*Joy to the world! The Lord is come: let earth receive her King;
let every heart prepare him room.*



May every heart "prepare him room" this Advent season.

Psalm 111

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, may this Christmas season be about celebrating your Son. May rejoicing over his birth be the focus of my heart more this year than ever. May all the festivities be outward manifestations of inner praise. Help me, Lord, to be intentional in the days ahead, to have a grateful and compassionate heart today and every day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Kristie Jackson

A CLASH OF KINGDOMS

When Christians think of Christmas, the first person we think of is, naturally, Jesus. We then consider Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, the angels and what we can glean from their response to Christ's advent. Few of us think about what we can learn from King Herod.

Herod the Great reigned in Judea from 37-4 BC. He was granted the title "King of Judea" by the Roman Senate after overthrowing Antigonus, the previous king. Herod was a fairly cruel despot and jealous of his kingdom, so when he heard from the wise men that the King of the Jews had been born, Matthew tells us Herod "was troubled." He quickly gathered the religious leaders to learn more information, and he then attempted to deceive the wise men by turning them into informants. The Lord intervened, warning the wise men of Herod's plan, but the king responded by slaughtering all males two years old or younger in the entire area in and around Bethlehem. Herod's goal of murdering Jesus was thwarted, again by divine intervention through Joseph's dream. A short time later, Herod died a reportedly agonizing death.

So what can we learn from his role in the advent of Christ?

Unfortunately, we too can often be "troubled" by God's plans when they differ from our own. We apply a veneer of religious language and practices, hoping to deceive those around us. We fight to maintain our kingdom against the one who would rule it. We refuse to give glory to God, hoarding it for ourselves, and we reject bending our knee to the King of kings.

This clash of kingdoms is really what Christmas is all about. Christ came as a king, though not in a way anyone expected, and he intends to claim his own and rule for eternity. Herod clearly rejected what he perceived as a challenge to his own authority. Indeed, he tried to snuff it out. The question for us then is will we submit to Christ? Will we celebrate his coming and rule, as the shepherds and wise men did, or will we rebel, fight, and jealously guard our own kingdom, as Herod did?

John wrote in Revelation 19:16, "On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords." Christ has called his followers to leave our own kingdoms and follow him.

Nate Oster

THE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY AND TANGIBILITY OF THE INCARNATION

Christianity exists in a delicate balance of incomprehensibility and tangibility. Surface considerations of the dual nature of the incarnate Christ often reveal that, yes, there lies a seeming contradiction between the infinite nature of God and our understanding of him. During Advent, perhaps more often than at any point in the year, Christians stress the duality of Jesus' nature as both fully man and fully God. God the Father dictates that we both accept the incomprehensible aspects and embrace the tangible aspects of Christ's incarnation.

As I have gotten older, I have begun to understand more and more that Christianity necessitates some acceptance of incomprehensibility. Difficult questions do not always have ready answers; doubts do not always have easy reassurances; and suffering does not always have a viable cause. Years ago, I read an Advent meditation that detailed the mystery of Christ's incarnation, and I now find that realization mingling with the concept of incomprehensibility in my mind. The infinite God—the Creator, the YHWH who appeared to Israelites in smoke and fire and judgment—becoming man is almost painfully unfathomable. To say we understand it can mean only that we have reduced the notion of the infinite nature of God. Thus, we must struggle with incomprehensibility of the infinite God as a human, which must breed mystery and, ultimately, awe-filled acceptance.

Despite this overarching incomprehensibility of the incarnation, the Lord does not leave us to deal in abstractions about his birth; rather, he furnishes us with the tangible, marvelously mundane details that accompany the birth of a child. We have genealogies, censuses, poor field workers, overcrowding, local power struggles, and foreign visitors. Though we cannot decipher the duality of Christ's nature, Scripture gives us details on which to seize and meditate. In a necessarily abstract event, Scripture furnishes us with tangible facts, a narrative that we can comprehend.

During the Advent time, then, I pray that the church both considers the beauty of the incomprehensibility of the incarnation of Christ, as well as the beauty of the tangible features of our Savior's birth. We ought to praise God that he "was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Christ), and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." (Colossians 1:19,20) Ultimately, the beginning of that reconciliation rests in this beautiful, unfathomable incarnation.

Henri Lowe, age 19

THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE

Luke 2:21-38

Simeon was a faithful believer who awaited the coming of God's anointed Savior—the Messiah. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die before actually seeing the long-awaited Messiah. What a privilege! Simeon trusted God in spite of the mystery; for he did not know how or when he would see Messiah. In faith, he listened for God's voice.

Then one day a couple came to the temple in Jerusalem with their baby boy, only six weeks old. Simeon, because he was waiting and trusting, heard that beloved voice and took the infant into his arms as his Messiah. Just as multitudes of believers through thousands of years waited to see him, so Simeon had waited to hear his Savior's voice. Imagine the faith to recognize God's voice in the cry of a tiny baby! What joy Simeon must have felt in the fulfillment of God's mysterious promise!

God has made a way of salvation, and God has promised that we will hear his voice. Yes, God's ways can sometimes be mysterious, but we have seen him and heard him through his word. Though we have not yet held him in our arms as Simeon did, it pleases God that we trust him, who has been faithful through all generations, who has in the last days spoken to us in his Son, "This is my Beloved Son—listen to him."

*Bob Wooten*



MEMBER REFLECTIONS ON THE SEASON

THE SACRIFICE OF ADVENT

We focus on Christ's death, burial and resurrection during the Easter season, and regard his passion as the ultimate sacrifice. But during the Advent season we may underestimate the extent of his sacrifice at incarnation, his coming to live among us. John's gospel cryptically summarizes, almost in shorthand, "the Word became flesh." What did that entail? The God who used spoken words to create the universe has provided some clues about the Son's sacrifice at Advent in the names ascribed to Jesus in his Word.

His sacrifice at Advent is incomprehensible.

After an eternity of perfect communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, reveling in activities such as creating the universe (Genesis 1), the I AM who was before Abraham (John 8:58) took on flesh as a few cells in Mary's womb.

Leaving an existence unbounded by time or space, the Alpha and Omega (Revelation 1:8) camped patiently as fetal flesh in Mary's womb for nine months or so.

The Light of the World (John 8:12), our Dayspring (Luke 1:78), Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2), True Light (John 1:9) and Bright Morning Star (Revelation 22:16) obediently stayed confined in darkness.

After an eternity unbounded by time, he burst into our time at just the right time. (Ephesians 1:9-10)

The Door of the Sheep (John 10:7), the Way (John 14:6) squeezed through a tiny birth canal, and the Bread of Life (John 6:32) plopped into leftover feed in a cattle trough.

The owner of the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10), the Good Shepherd (John 10:11), the Lamb of God (John 1:29; Revelation 13:8), the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5) initially shared quarters with the cattle he helped create.

The Rose of Sharon (Song of Solomon 2:1) and the Lily of the Valley (Song of Solomon 2:1) emerged to the aroma of cattle stench.

The Spotless One (1 Peter 1:19) wallowed in swaddling cloths.



The Almighty (Revelation 1:8), the Lord of Glory (1 Corinthians 2:8), Mighty God (Isaiah 9:6), who could command legions of angels (Matthew 26: 52-53) began his dwelling among us as a helpless infant.

The true milk of the Word (1 Peter 2:2) became a suckling babe. The Consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25) had to be consoled.

The Word (John 1:1), the Word of God (Revelation 19:13), the Witness (Isaiah 55:4), our Prophet (Luke 24:19), Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14), Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5), Advocate (1 John 2:1), Author and Finisher of our Faith (Hebrews 12:2), and Author of Eternal Salvation (Hebrews 5:9), whose powerful and majestic voice broke cedars (Psalm 29:3-5), flashed with lightning (Psalm 29:7), shook the desert (Psalm 29:8) and twisted oaks (Psalm 29:9) could not speak, limiting himself to baby gurgles, babbles, and wails.

The only begotten Son of the Father (John 3:16), Beloved Son (Matthew 12:18), Son of the Blessed (Mark 14:61), Son of David (Matthew 1:1), Son of the Highest (Luke 1:32) became the obedient son of Mary and Joseph.

The Sinless One (Hebrews 4:15) entered the creation that was stained by sin.

The one in whom all the fullness of Deity dwelled (Colossians 2:9), who fills everything in every way (Ephesians 1:23), surrendered equality with God (Philippians 3:6), emptied himself and made himself nothing (Philippians 3:7).

Perhaps Advent really is his ultimate sacrifice.

Tim Gibbons

