

A background image featuring a mosaic of two figures, likely Mary and Joseph, rendered in a style reminiscent of stained glass or mosaic art. The figures are composed of various colored tiles (blue, red, yellow, green, white) and are set against a dark, textured background. The figure on the right is taller and appears to be holding a staff or scepter. The figure on the left is smaller and appears to be holding a child.

# Today

Nov/Dec 2025

refresh, refocus, renew

## THE GREATEST STORY

ALSO: JOY IN LEVITICUS

Dear Friends:

The Old Testament book of Leviticus is filled with regulations about foods, fluids, rules for priests, and the offering of sacrifices. But how does Leviticus speak to us today? In November, Pastor Rob Toornstra leads us through passages in Leviticus showing that, in the light of Jesus Christ, the entire book comes alive. As we explore Leviticus, we discover the joy revealed in the greatest priest and most important offering of all: Jesus Christ, our Savior.



Do you enjoy the Christmas season? For many of us, the highlight of the year comes in December when we celebrate Christmas. Colorful decorations, family traditions, cheerful songs and hymns, good food, and gift-sharing spark our memories and delight our senses as we enjoy this time of the year. Sometimes, though, the delights of the season overshadow the real meaning of Christmas: the coming of Jesus Christ to set us free from sin and the power of death. In December, Pastor Joel VandeWerken digs into the important details of the Christmas story given to us in the Bible. As we study this story and consider many of the people in it, we'll gain a renewed understanding and refreshed wonder of the Word becoming flesh in this greatest story of all time.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and stylized, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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**"Joy in Leviticus"**  
**Rob Toornstra**



**"The Greatest Story"**  
**Joel Vande Werken**

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**ReFrame**  
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# december

## **The Greatest Story**

**Joel Vande Werken**

Many of us have heard about the story of Christmas. Though we might not know all the details, we may well have heard about shepherds, angels, and of course Jesus, whose birth is the centerpiece of the story.

But in the hustle and bustle of the holiday season at this time of year, especially in North America, it can be easy to forget what the Christmas story is really about and what it means. We often focus on parties and decorations and various traditions built into this celebration. And in the process we can easily overlook the wonder of the fact that God has entered this world in human flesh—to deliver us from our sin and to restore us to fellowship with him.

This month let's remember or maybe learn for the first time the important details of the greatest story ever told.

Joel Vande Werken is the director of ecclesiastical governance for the Christian Reformed Church in North America in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He served for over seventeen years as a church pastor in Sussex, New Jersey, and in Whitinsville, Massachusetts, before moving to Michigan in 2024. He and his wife, Brandie, have five children.

## JUST THE RIGHT TIME

When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son. . . .  
—Galatians 4:4

Christmas can seem like a magical time for children. In our family we have several traditions that our children look forward to at this time of year. Especially when they were younger, it seemed to them like an awfully long time to wait for Christmas after putting up decorations in early December—particularly when presents under the tree caught their attention!

For many long years, God's people waited in hope for a Savior to come. God had given the people his law, filled with rules and guidelines about how to live as his people. But the law was not enough to bring the people closer to the Lord, and they longed for a deeper relationship. God also promised that he would raise up a leader from his people who would "do what is just and right" (see Jeremiah 23:5-6). And they learned that God

would fill their hearts and minds with his will so that they could live more closely with him (see Jeremiah 31:33).

It must have seemed like forever to wait for God to keep those promises. But the Bible tells us that this happened at just the right time. God sent his own Son, Jesus, into the world to fulfill the law so that all who would believe could be saved from sin and freed by his Spirit to live with him, sharing his love and grace with others.

This Christmas, look for ways in which God's Spirit is changing you because of Jesus' birth.

Holy God, sometimes it seems hard to wait for you. But your timing is always right, and your promises are always rich! Help us wait faithfully for you, and make us your people in Christ. Amen.

## WHAT WE'VE BEEN TAUGHT

I . . . decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. —Luke 1:3-4

The Christmas story is familiar to many people throughout the world, wherever the message of Christ has spread. In various parts of our world today, though, the Christmas season has become a time when focusing on Jesus competes with shopping, holiday parties, and a frenzied rush.

In the book of Luke, the story of Jesus begins with a reminder that can help us even today in our world of competing ideals. Luke writes to a reader called Theophilus (“friend of God”) so that this person may know deep-down that the story of Jesus is certain and true.

God wants the Christmas story to inspire a kind of certainty in us. This is not intended to promote pride or superiority, as if to suggest that *we* know God better than anyone else. Instead, this is to instill wonder at

the reality of the birth of Christ and what it means for the whole world (see John 3:16).

Do you feel overwhelmed by the busyness of the Christmas season? Do the holidays remind you of stresses and hurts from the past that have not healed? In this season, turn again to the story of what God has “fulfilled among us”—the promise to provide a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. See how Jesus changes the lives of all who come into contact with him, and let his birth renew in you the certainty of God’s love for us all.

Spirit of God, thank you for sharing the story of Jesus with us. May the wonder of this story sink into our hearts, giving us certainty and hope in you. Amen.

## BROKEN DREAMS

They were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. —Luke 1:7

The Christmas story begins with broken dreams. Elizabeth and Zechariah had prayed fervently to have a child (see Luke 1:13), but God had not answered in the way they had hoped or expected. And being childless was not only personally disappointing; it also carried a social stigma in their culture. Now that they had grown old, Zechariah and Elizabeth had likely given up on their dream of ever having a child.

Many of us come to Christmas with disappointments too. Our family life has turned out differently than we had hoped. We hold a job that provides little more than drudgery from day to day. We look around at our culture and lament the loss of important values and safety that we thought we could take for granted. We are confused and wonder if our prayers are even heard.

But trying to do everything right, as Zechariah and Elizabeth did, does not mean our dreams will be fulfilled. The longing we sense here reflects a deeper longing for a relationship with God that was lost because of human sin.

What's more, if we have waited a long time, that doesn't mean God is not at work. God knew Zechariah and Elizabeth's situation. He knows the human condition. God knows each of our situations and our disappointments as well. At Christmas we can see how God works to restore his people—and that includes me and you!

Father, you know our hopes and dreams. Help us to trust that you are at work even in our long seasons of disappointment and waiting. Amen.

## UNBELIEVABLE

Zechariah asked . . . “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”—Luke 1:18

Zechariah and Elizabeth had grown old waiting for a child. But then one day, when Zechariah had an opportunity to burn incense in a holy, inner room of the temple, an angel of God appeared and said that their prayers had been heard. They would soon have a child!

But it seemed too good to be true. Zechariah didn't believe the message at first, so the angel told him he would not be able to speak anymore until the child was born.

When we wait for a long time for something to happen, it's easy to let our doubts and fears overshadow God's promises. Sometimes we feel more secure in clinging to our sinful habits and our broken dreams. “You expect *me* to talk about what God is doing in my life? With people who know me all too well? No thanks,” we easily say, “not me.”

In some ways the story of Christmas seems too good to be true. Can sinful human beings really have a relationship with the holy God? Can people searching for purpose in life really discover the call of God on their hearts?

Yes! God promises that we too can be part of the story he is writing—about humanity being redeemed and restored to live in favor with the One who made heaven and earth.

Thankfully, not even our doubts can cancel God's plans. And, in Jesus, God comes into our world offering new life for us all! Can you believe it?

Lord, show us that your patience means salvation (2 Peter 3:9), and help us to believe your promises even when it seems to take a long time for them to be fulfilled. Amen.



## SURPRISE

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."  
—Luke 1:38

Surprise is a part of many stories people tell at Christmas-time. Lots of folk stories, novels, and movies with Christmas themes include fun twists and surprises. And often the most-loved tales are those with a surprising, happy ending.

The Christmas story itself includes surprises. But while the result—Jesus' birth—is certainly a joyful and happy one, some of the surprises along the way can bring mixed emotions.

Mary was not expecting to be at the center of this story. She was quite young, probably in her early teens, when an angel came to her with news that totally changed her life. It would be scandalous to be a pregnant, unmarried woman in a culture that prized sexual purity. Yet Mary embraced this news from God with humility, saying, "I am the Lord's servant."

What surprises has God placed in your life? Sometimes God delights us with good news we never saw coming—like a new job or an unexpected friendship. Other times God's surprises are hard to bear—like life-changing illnesses, mental-health issues, or financial struggles. Our surprises can also stem from sins we have committed, and we wish we had not done those things.

God's Christmas promise is that he is with us in all of our surprises: the good and the difficult. God invites us to watch for his power and to find his saving grace in Christ.

Will you humbly embrace him this Christmas?

God of surprises, help us to trust in you. We need you always. Fill us with your love and grace, we pray, in Jesus. Amen.

## SEEKING WISDOM

"Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"  
—Luke 1:45

In many ways Mary's surprise pregnancy was not welcome news. Though she had accepted God's will, it must have been puzzling. God's way of working in her life was rather shocking and scandalous in the society she lived in. Though she would be called "blessed," Mary probably did not enjoy much support from her local community at the time.

How do we find space to process what God is doing in the hard situations of life?

Mary wisely sought out the counsel of her relative Elizabeth, who was also pregnant through a miracle of God's grace. The journey there would not have been easy, taking Mary about a week during a time in her pregnancy when she might have been very tired. But Mary likely sensed in Elizabeth a kindred spirit who could help her think through

the surprising things God was doing in their lives.

Christmas can encourage us to seek out godly wisdom as well. Maybe we are in a difficult, unexpected situation. Maybe we feel abandoned or even shunned by a community we thought would support and encourage us.

Who are the people who can help us trust in God's promises even amid such puzzling, challenging times?

Alternatively, how can we be a friend who points out God's work to others?

Heavenly Father, it is a blessing to believe your Word to us. May we believe that you will fulfill what you have promised. Open our eyes to Jesus' coming into our lives. Amen.

## THE GOD WHO DOES MIGHTY THINGS

"The Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name."  
—Luke 1:49

One danger we can slip into at Christmastime is discontent. Maybe we long for "the perfect gift" from someone. Or we hope for the perfect family gathering with "just the right people" around the table. Or perhaps we want Christmas worship to go "just so." And then we grow ill-tempered or even cranky when things do not go as we dreamed.

We can also slip into complaining about what we do not get from God. Or maybe there are injustices we face, or our life hasn't worked out the way we planned, or there are some sins we can't quite shake—and we wish God would take those problems away.

Yet, as Mary's song celebrates, God's mercy shows up not only in answers that we expect from our prayers. Sometimes God's mercy shows up in our difficult situations. The angel's

surprising, even shocking, announcement to Mary upended her world. Yet she still recognized God's saving grace in the promised birth of Jesus.

Mary's song reveals something else too. She sees the power of God to lift up people who recognize their need for grace. In the world's eyes, the rich and powerful seem to have all they need in order to manage their lives. But people who recognize their own weaknesses will find that Jesus the Savior brings divine power to their struggles. May we join with Mary in humble gratitude for the gifts of God's mercy and strength.

Lord God, you are merciful and mighty beyond our wildest imagination. Open our eyes to the great things you have done—and to your mercy to us in Jesus. Amen.

## FAMILY HISTORY

... and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.  
—Matthew 1:16

Christmas often brings families together for celebrations. In many ways this can be a wonderful time of celebration and encouragement. But families can be complicated, so at times our holidays can come with baggage we can't escape.

The book of Matthew introduces the story of Jesus by sharing his family tree. Some names in this list can be found in the Old Testament; others are lost to history. The Christmas story bears the imprint of kings and commoners, some who wanted to live for God and some who did not.

Most notable are the people whose stories include pain or even great sins but who came to experience God's grace and healing. Jacob was a schemer who wrestled with God (Genesis 32:22-32). Tamar (Genesis 38) and Bathsheba (2 Samuel

11-12) were victims of abuse. Rahab (Joshua 2-6) and Ruth (Ruth 1-4) were foreigners who would have been looked down on in Israel. Manasseh was a wicked king who only repented late in life (2 Chronicles 33). Jesus' human lineage was anything but pure and holy. Yet the Son of God chose to enter the human race through this collection of imperfect ancestors.

If your Christmas celebrations include imperfect people, or you feel wounds from your own imperfect past, give thanks that Jesus the Messiah chose the same kind of family through which to bring salvation to the human race.

Jesus, thank you for coming into our imperfect lives to bring your perfect love to us. Amen.

**DIFFICULT FAITHFULNESS**

Joseph . . . had in mind to divorce her quietly.

—Matthew 1:19

Having looked at Luke 1 already this month, we know about the angel's announcement to Mary and the miraculous conception of her son, who would be named Jesus.

But Joseph did not know all of this at first. To him, Mary's story must have sounded ridiculous: Really? A virgin birth?

Joseph knew that the law was on his side and that he had every right to end his pledged relationship with Mary. But he was also righteous enough to understand grace.

Righteous people understand the need to protect others despite the apparent circumstances. Joseph intended to do the best he could with a bad situation. He felt he had to confront what he saw as Mary's sin while also living with as much integrity as one could muster when his world had turned upside down.

Have you been there? We all face difficult decisions at times. Even seeking to live righteously does not guarantee a life free from hard choices.

But God, in his grace, revealed to Joseph that Mary's child was part of a bigger plan. In fact, God invited Joseph to be part of that plan: to let the world know of forgiveness through Jesus' birth. Grace invited him into that story. It can do the same for you.

God of truth, in a sinful world our vision of righteousness is sometimes cloudy, and our obedience is imperfect. Give us the courage to follow you even when faithfulness is difficult. Amen.

## WATCH FOR GOD'S WORD TO BE FULFILLED

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

—Matthew 1:23

Joseph is sometimes an overlooked character in the Christmas story. He never speaks in the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth. Instead, he considers the events of his life carefully in order to try to do his best to obey God.

The circumstances of Mary's pregnancy brought a 700-year-old prophecy from Isaiah to the gospel writer's mind: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son . . ." (see Isaiah 7:14). At a time of national crisis in Isaiah's day, God had pointed his people to the birth of a child that would show God was present with them, despite the troubles they were facing. With a reminder of that assurance, Joseph gained the courage to keep his pledge with Mary.

In the coming of Jesus, God calls our attention to the larger

story of his work in the world, a story that assures us of his presence with us. Our human weakness and sin keep us from obeying God and experiencing his presence. But God's power breaks into our broken lives to rescue us from sin and inspire us to faithful living. God has transformed our stories by becoming a part of them himself.

Perhaps Joseph's greatest strength was his quiet willingness to watch for God's word to be fulfilled. This Christmas, may we also see the fulfillment of God's promise to us as we consider the birth of his Son.

Thank you, Lord God, for being with us. As we focus on Jesus' birth, may we see your word fulfilled in our lives, bringing salvation and peace to our troubled souls. Amen.

## NAMING GOD'S MERCIES

Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

—Luke 1:58

The story of Jesus' birth is intertwined with another miraculous birth—that of John, who was born to Elizabeth and Zechariah in their old age. Though Zechariah did not believe at first that this could happen, God fulfilled his promise. And when Zechariah named the child John, as the angel had instructed, he was able to speak again (see Luke 1:11-20; Dec. 4). The name *John* means "God is gracious."

While we might be used to thinking of God's grace in the birth and life of Jesus, we may also ask about other ways we see God's grace at work in this season. Maybe you have seen a strained relationship restored, or an illness healed. Maybe you have seen temptations lifted, or fears relieved. Can we name such gifts as illustrations of God's grace?

Not only did Zechariah and Elizabeth receive God's mercy; they invited their neighbors and relatives to share in their joy in what God had done for them. During the Christmas season, many of us have opportunities to gather with family and friends. Do we also take time with others to share with them our experiences of God's mercy to us?

Christmas is a season for reflecting on God's grace and mercy to his people. May you name, and celebrate, that mercy today.

Holy God, you surprise us again and again with your grace. Open our eyes to what you are doing, and loosen our tongues to speak of your faithfulness. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

## SAYING “THANK YOU”

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. . . .  
—Luke 1:67

Opening gifts is a big part of our family’s Christmas celebration. Each year, our kids are excited to see what they’ll receive. But one important part of all this is learning about gratitude. So when they receive a gift, our kids have learned to say, “Thank you!”

In response to the birth of John and filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah offered praise and thanks to God. He recalled how God had fulfilled his promises to deliver his people. God had graciously invited his wayward people to love and serve him, and through those people God was bringing forth a Savior (“Jesus”), the promised Messiah (“Christ”), who would bring salvation, forgiveness, and peace.

Zechariah and Elizabeth’s son, John, would play a unique role in preparing people for the coming of Jesus—and this

Savior, Jesus, who is also the Son of God, is the greatest gift we receive at Christmas.

When we see this gift, what do we say? Do we too respond with gratitude for God’s deliverance and his invitation to serve him? Do we encourage our neighbors and families to see their role in God’s plan?

May the gifts you give and receive this season remind you of the greatest gift of God’s presence in Jesus Christ. And may we all give thanks and grateful obedience in response.

Thank you, gracious Father! You have given us so many gifts. And, what’s more, your Son has come to bring us forgiveness and eternal life. We give ourselves to you in response. Amen.



## THE CHRISTMAS CENSUS

Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.  
—Luke 2:1

The Christmas story is shaped, in part, by a government decision: a census. People in Palestine likely griped about Caesar's decree—and, according to tradition, a Jewish citizen was expected to register in their own ancestral town. That made things inconvenient for Joseph and Mary, who was near the end of her pregnancy. They had to travel about 90 miles (145 km) from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a weeklong journey by donkey.

Caesar thought he was counting subjects, but God had a bigger plan. Joseph's ancestral town, Bethlehem, was also known as "the town of David," and prophecies stated that the Savior would descend from Israel's King David (Isaiah 9:6-7, 11:1-10) and be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). God used a government regulation to prepare the way for Jesus as the promised Messiah and King.

It's not uncommon today to hear criticisms about governments. Whether it's taxes, policies, trade regulations, or extra paperwork, people get frustrated with government leaders and their demands. But the Christmas story shows that God works even through government inconveniences to make his salvation known. Jesus came to bring the presence of God to sinful humanity, despite the inconvenient circumstances into which he came.

In what ways can you see the Lord working today, despite situations that may be difficult or inconvenient for you?

Almighty God, you reign over all things. Open our eyes to see your presence and work, even in situations that we find difficult. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

## GOD'S PERFECT TIMING

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born. . . .  
—Luke 2:6

Christmas has a way of sneaking up on us, especially if our schedules are full. For many of us in North America and other places, there are parties to attend, decorations to put up, presents to purchase, carols to sing. In such a busy time, Christmas Day can seem to come and go quickly, and it can seem that we have barely enough time to notice.

Luke describes the birth of Jesus in very simple terms. It's worth noting that he spends five verses describing the timing of Jesus' birth, and only two verses on the birth itself. "The time came for the baby to be born," writes Luke, "and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son."

When the Lord comes to us at Christmas, he comes into the ordinary events of life. We might have grand expectations, but Christ comes in

simplicity. Luke may talk of emperors and world powers, but when God's Son comes to live among us, we see a manger in a cattle stall, cloths, and a baby.

Maybe it's good that Christmas can sneak up on us, because we need it to shape and transform the rest of our lives. It doesn't take a special day or event to invite Christ into our lives. He comes simply because it's time.

Are you watching for him today?

Lord Jesus, we live in a busy world. Thank you that Christmas does not depend on our timing, but that you step into our lives when the time is right. Help us to receive you. Amen.

## NO MORE FEAR

The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”

—Luke 2:10

“Do not be afraid.”

When we think of Christmas, these are probably not the first words that come to mind. We usually focus on the joy and celebration that come with this holiday.

But the reality is that all of us have fears. Concerns about our finances, our health, our loved ones, our work, our safety, national or international politics, wars—all of these and more can weigh on us and unsettle us. I’m sure the shepherds had their own fears that night as they watched over their sheep: concerns about sick animals, or the price of wool, or their families’ needs.

Surely God’s coming into our world would bring a sense of relief, right? But in the dark of night the shepherds must have been startled to see a bright host of angels suddenly appear

in front of them. Who could think of relief or confidence when the holy God broke into their lives that way?

Every one of us is a sinner who rightly deserves God’s judgment. But at Christmas we receive instead the startling good news that God has come with favor and grace to live with us.

The announcement of Jesus’ birth came to ordinary shepherds, showing that God cares for us all. And although it can be startling, even shocking, that God would come to us, Christmas joy can replace our fear.

“Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask you to stay close by me forever and love me. . . .” Lord, show us your tender care, and relieve us of our sins and fears, we pray. Amen.

**MEANWHILE, OUT EAST . . .**

“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”  
—Matthew 2:2

Sometimes the big news story of the day is not the one we think it is—or there is more to it than we realize.

As Jesus was born, something else was also happening far away. Matthew tells us about “Magi from the east”—often called “wise men”—who studied the stars. The Magi were astrologers, religious leaders who believed that the movement of the stars and special signs in the heavens could give direction for people’s lives.

To the Jews, that kind of study was superstitious idolatry. And yet we see in this story how God was writing an even bigger story than people were aware of at the time. Jesus was, of course, Israel’s promised Savior. But today we can also see that Christ’s birth was a crucial part of God’s plan to draw all nations to himself.

Even people who were lost in the confusion of sin and idolatry could see glimpses of God’s invitation to draw near and ask, seek, and find him. In the story of the Magi we see how God can meet us where we are—no matter who we are—and make the good news of Jesus’ birth come alive for us.

This Christmas, we might think (or act as if) our celebrations and gifts are the main thing of the season. But God wants so much more. He wants to draw people to Jesus, especially those who don’t know him.

How is God surprising you with that invitation this Christmas?

Lord God, help us to understand what is most important in our lives. Draw us near to you, we pray, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

## THE JOY OF DISCOVERY

The shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."  
—Luke 2:15

My children enjoy making Christmas presents for each other. Especially when they were younger, a big part of our family celebration involved exchanging food containers repurposed into Matchbox car garages, doll beds, and other treasures. As these gifts were opened, we eagerly anticipated the joy of discovering what each child had crafted and given to the others.

Like the Magi (see Dec. 16), the shepherds who learned about the Savior's birth experienced a "joy of discovery." This kind of joy can lead people to look at what God has done and to wonder what God will do next.

The joy of discovery led the shepherds to respond to the angel's message by saying to one another, "Let's go . . . and see this thing that . . . the Lord

has told us about." They were eager to look for more signs and evidence of God's work. They "hurried off" to find things just as the Lord had said they would be.

What have you discovered God doing in your life lately? How can you foster an eager expectation that leads you to say, "I wonder what God will do next"?

Discovering God's work involves seeking the glory of God in unexpected places—even in a baby placed in a manger because there was no guest room available for him.

Heavenly Father, thank you for surprising us with your goodness and mercy in unexpected ways. May we eagerly respond by seeking Jesus in every aspect of our lives. Amen.

## TREASURING GOD'S WORK

They spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. . . .  
—Luke 2:17

Because our young family has lived far away from other relatives, my wife and I have often tried to find different Christmas activities that our kids can engage in. We've discovered annual concerts, live nativity displays at local churches, Christmas light shows, and other goings-on that remind us of the special character of this season. We've also found that friends who have lived in the community their whole lives can be surprised to hear of so many local opportunities to celebrate the holiday beyond their family gatherings!

Sometimes I wonder, though, whether I am as eager to share the message of God's work in my life through Christ as I am to share about the entertaining ways I've found to celebrate Christmas. Light shows and live nativities have a place, but those experiences pale in comparison to the amazing work

God does in our lives and in our world.

When the shepherds found the child Jesus just as they had been told, they spread the good news about the Savior. Jesus' mother, reflecting on God's work, "treasured up all these things and pondered them." When we consider that the Lord came to earth to show favor to sinful humanity, we can respond with similar wonder and gratitude.

How will you glorify and praise God for the fulfillment of his promises in Christ this Christmas?

Father, thank you for Christmas and for all the ways we can celebrate this season. Help us to express to others the wonder of Christ's birth, and to ponder with joy all your work for us. Amen.

## REMEMBERING GOD'S PROMISES

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.  
—Matthew 2:4

Sometime (probably a few months) after the birth of Jesus, Magi from the east came in search of him. These “wise men” had seen a star that pointed them to the birth of a new king. So they came to the regional ruler in Jerusalem to ask about this.

When King Herod heard about the newborn king, he was disturbed. And if Herod was disturbed, the people he ruled had reason for concern. He had a reputation for being cruel and was often suspicious of any threat to his throne. Yet at this point Herod needed more information in order to get what he wanted.

So he asked the people's leaders and teachers about this king, and Herod's inquiries pointed the Magi toward the promises in God's Word. Centuries earlier, God had said that

the Savior would come from Bethlehem, a town in the nearby countryside. The Magi then continued their search until they found the promised child.

We often assume today that we can capture something of the “Christmas spirit” in our decorations and ceremonies of the season. This story about the Magi reminds us that the meaning of Christmas arises from God's promises. Though the devil may try to bring harm in various ways around us, we can trust in the Lord's promises. In what ways are you looking to God's promises for direction this Christmas?

Father, direct us to your promises, and may our Christmas be filled with joyful discovery and new life in Jesus. Amen.

## A FALSE CHRISTMAS

“As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”  
—Matthew 2:8

Christmas in the Western world has become a highly secularized holiday. While the celebration still bears the name of Christ, the season marks a time of gifts and parties, lights and decorations. And while many of those themes are relatively harmless, they do not call attention to the worship of Christ that should be at the center of the holiday celebrations.

It's sad that the priests and scholars who knew the prophecy about the Savior's birth weren't interested enough to see if it was fulfilled, despite the fact that Bethlehem was only a few miles from Jerusalem. And Herod, who was interested because he felt threatened, didn't want to hear about the kind of king God desired—a gentle ruler and shepherd (Matthew 2:6). At times, we too have our tendencies to ignore what we know about

God's promises and to try to maintain our own sense of authority and comfort.

In just a few days Christmas will be here. Perhaps you've already begun your celebrations, and you're enjoying the traditions our culture has built up around this holiday.

As we celebrate, let's be careful not to let our traditions or attitudes bring about a false Christmas that rejects the worship of Jesus. Instead of staying in our own comfortable palaces, let us go, as the Magi did, to seek God's promised Savior.

Gracious God, we confess how easy it is to get caught up in our own version of Christmas and miss the wonder of the Savior's birth. Forgive us, and fix our attention on Jesus. Amen.



## GIFTS FOR THE KING

They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew 2:11

What's the best Christmas gift you've ever received?

A number of years ago, my in-laws gave me a heavy winter jacket and overalls—the kind of warm clothing needed for outdoor work on cold winter days on the farm where they live. My work doesn't require the same need for warmth on cold winter days, but I have used my “snow clothes” countless times while playing outdoors with our kids in the wintertime.

When the Magi found the newborn king, Jesus, in Bethlehem, they presented him with gifts as part of their worship. The presents they brought may seem strange to us, but in that day they were easily used in trade for purchasing everyday things. These gifts were practical and yet costly.

For many of us, Christmas involves giving gifts to one

another. This is a wonderful tradition, and it can help us to express care for the people around us, just as God does for us. When we receive the gift of Jesus the Savior, though, our response should be to set about serving him and others in both costly and practical ways.

An old Christmas carol asks, “What can I give him, poor as I am? . . . What I can, I give him: give him my heart.”

Will you present yourself to Christ in worship and service this Christmas?

Lord Jesus, you have given us the greatest gift—your own self—for our salvation. As we enjoy gifts from one another this Christmas, let us also give ourselves to you in worship and service. In your name, Amen.

## A COSMIC CHRISTMAS

She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.  
—Revelation 12:2

What is the real impact of Christmas?

For many of us in the Western world, the story of Christmas has a familiar cast of characters: Joseph and Mary, the shepherds, angels, the wise men, some sheep and cows to complete the manger scene—and, of course, Jesus. Front-yard displays in our neighborhoods might also include Santa, some elves, a few reindeer, and even some Star Wars characters.

But the Bible shows that Christmas has a much greater and more serious significance. Christ's coming into our world spells the beginning of the end for Satan's power on earth. The devil wants to do all he can to destroy Christ's coming, or at least to distract our attention from it, because he knows that Jesus has come to break the power of sin and death.

If it sometimes seems like a battle to remember Christmas and to focus on Christ as the center of it, we should not be surprised. Our celebration each year has cosmic significance—even eternal significance—and the devil “prowls around like a roaring lion” looking to undermine our joy that Christ has come (see 1 Peter 5:8). But we also remember God's provision in the face of danger. Just as God protected the baby Jesus from human and superhuman enemies, so God will provide for us.

Mighty God, sometimes we must fight to remember what you have done for us. Protect us and guard our hearts and minds so that we may find joy and eternal security in Christ's coming. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

## THE BIG STORY

He appeared in the flesh. . . .

—1 Timothy 3:16

The Christmas holiday is nearly upon us. For many people Christmas is a special day filled with family gatherings, gift exchanges, and other holiday traditions. In my own family, we look forward to these times, and we enjoy telling others about all the ways we are celebrating this week.

But what are we really celebrating? To answer this question, we might point to all of our traditions, and it's easy to overlook the big-picture story that provides the whole reason for this holiday. In today's Bible passage, the apostle Paul reminds Timothy about Jesus' appearance "in the flesh" and how this should shape our words and behavior as his followers.

The great truth of the Christian faith, the reality that shapes our celebration and our living, is that the Son of God has

become human, just like us, so that he can save us. Christmas proclaims to the world that God has come near to live among us and restore us to his glory. So, as great as our traditions may be, the work of God provides an even greater reason for celebrating this holiday.

Our passage for today challenges us to remember what we actually celebrate. So as we tell people about the traditions we are enjoying this week, let's be sure also to share about the true reason to celebrate: that God has appeared in the flesh for our salvation.

Glorious God, your great story is what drives our celebration this season. In the midst of our own traditions, may we never lose sight of your goodness to us through Jesus' birth. Amen.

## WAITING FOR THE LIGHT

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.  
—John 1:5

I often feel like the world holds its breath on Christmas Eve. For weeks, we've listened to advertisements telling us to get ready for the holiday. Perhaps we've done our share of bustling about with our own preparations and parties. But now the holiday is upon us, and most of the preparing is done. Candlelight services held in many churches on this evening add to that sense of stillness and wonder.

The gospel account of John opens with a sense of quiet stillness and wonder. The eternal God, Creator of heaven and earth, is about to draw near. Is the world ready? The text offers an invitation to all who would receive him and believe: God's light and life are here. Amid the darkness and confusion that often cloud our everyday living, a true light shines, enabling us to see clearly where life should lead.

But there is also a warning. It's possible to be so busy bustling about that we miss the wonder of Christ's birth. So it's absolutely necessary to stop in wonder and amazement in order to hear the message God wants to communicate to us: sinful humanity can again become part of God's family.

As our busy lives quiet down somewhat tonight, let's remember that God has made everything ready. Christ has come. God's light is here. Do you see it?

Word of God, in this quiet moment, let us be still and know that you are the Lord our God, holy and true. Renew in us a sense of wonder that you have come to save us and make us a part of your family. Amen.

## THE WORD BECAME FLESH

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.  
—John 1:14

Today is Christmas Day, on which most Christians mark the birth of Jesus over 2,000 years ago. While celebrations may vary, depending on cultures and family traditions, the central meaning of this day is clear. On this day we celebrate that the eternal Son of God, the Word through whom the creation was spoken into being, took on human flesh for our salvation.

The Bible describes this event in terms of “dwelling.” Where you live makes a big difference: it determines the people you spend your time with, the things you invest your life in, and the way you look at the world. By coming to live among us in the person of Jesus Christ, God showed his commitment to dwell with the human race. God demonstrated that he would live among the quirks and even the sins of everyday people, that

he would invest in the redemption of the world, and that the world could now be viewed as a place where God committed to be present.

Maybe today you are gathering in a home with family or friends. As you look around, recognize that in Jesus’ birth God has brought himself into a similar relationship of familiarity with all humanity. Jesus has made known to us the eternal Father and the fullness of his grace. Today we celebrate the Word, who dwells with us.

Lord Jesus, Word of God from the beginning, we sing with joy because you became human for our sake. Proclaim to us the good news of the Savior who was born for sinners. Amen.

## MARVELING AT CHRISTMAS

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him.  
—Luke 2:33

Now that Christmas Day has passed, let's try to make sense of all that we have experienced in the past few weeks. What is the significance of our celebration? Does this season make any difference in the way we live from now on?

Certainly we carry with us memories of time spent with family and friends—and (hopefully) warm feelings about gifts we have received. But it can also be helpful to be intentional about naming ways in which we have seen God at work during this season.

Mary and Joseph could hardly have imagined how their time of presenting Jesus in the temple would be shaped by the words of Simeon. Looking at Jesus, Simeon saw in this baby the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation—not just for the world but also for himself personally. Simeon also foresaw

that Jesus' coming would present people with a choice: what will they do when they are presented with the need for salvation?

As we let the message of Christmas sink into our hearts, we too should marvel at Jesus. For this infant is indeed God's promised salvation, the one who knows our hearts and gives peace to all who seek him with repentance and joy.

Have you marveled at this Christmas gift?

Holy Jesus, fill our hearts with wonder at the gift that is *you*. May we marvel at who you are, and may we humbly receive your salvation. Amen.

## THE FUTURE PROMISE OF CHRISTMAS

[Anna] gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.  
—Luke 2:38

Sometimes just after the Christmas holiday, I feel a bit of a letdown. For weeks I've built up excitement for the coming holiday and have looked forward to celebrating. But now, even if there's still a family gathering or two to attend, the big event is in the past. And I know that in a few days we'll start to take down decorations and clear away all the traces of our celebrations.

But Christmas has a future dimension as well. It's not just in the past. Jesus has come, and his first coming is not the only thing that brings us hope.

In the temple, Jesus' parents met Anna. She had dedicated her life to worship and to looking for signs of God's salvation. Now, as an elderly woman, she recognized the fulfillment of her prayers in Jesus' birth. And there's more: Anna en-

couraged the people around her to see in Jesus the redemption promised to God's people.

Of course, the infant Jesus had not yet completed the work of redemption, and Anna would not likely live to see Christ's finished work. But her hope reminds us that Christmas is about more than the present times we live in. Jesus has come, and his birth points to the redemption of God's people. What's more, through his death and resurrection he has completed the work of salvation for us. And in some ways like Anna, we wait in hope today for his coming again (Revelation 21-22). The best is yet to come!

Lord, may the gift of your birth give us hope for the future as we await your coming again. Amen.

## FIGHTING AGAINST CHRISTMAS

“Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt . . . for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

—Matthew 2:14

Not everyone loves Christmas. Maybe you’ve heard about Ebenezer Scrooge in the Charles Dickens novel *A Christmas Carol*, or about the Grinch in Dr. Seuss’s story *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* Both of these fictional characters eventually change and join in to celebrate Christmas—but, tragically, the real-life King Herod in our Bible reading for today did not. Herod’s cruelty and suspicion led him to respond with murderous hatred when he heard about Jesus’ being born as “king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2-3).

Herod’s cruelty may make us shudder, but the human heart is naturally prone to fight against God’s gift of his Son for our salvation. Christmas confronts us with our need for a new king, one who dethrones our priorities and requires us to make space for God’s plan

in our lives. Christmas can be attractive as long as our focus is on tinsel and nostalgia. But when the coming of Christ demands that we turn our desires and goals over to God in repentance, our natural impulse is to fight back.

Our anger and hostility over God’s gift of Jesus bring heartache and tears. But God has a way of protecting his witness to us. Jesus escaped Herod’s murderous grasp. But in the process Herod drove the Son of God away and could not hear the good news. His actions are a warning to us when we are prone to like the idea of Christmas but to resist its truth.

Holy God, soften our hearts so that we may receive your grace and goodness in Jesus. Amen.



## CHRISTMAS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.  
—Luke 2:39

I like to have the Christmas season continue as long as possible. In our home we often keep our Christmas tree up into the first week of January. But eventually the decorations have to be stored away. Then the house looks rather plain and ordinary again, as if something important and beautiful is missing.

The Christmas story in the Bible has a similar sort of plain ending. Joseph and Mary returned with Jesus to their hometown. Nazareth was a small, relatively unknown town where Jesus grew up and lived for about thirty years. We know very little about what happened in those decades—except that Jesus and his parents and younger siblings lived there.

The story of Christmas reminds us that no matter how

plain and ordinary our lives may feel at times, Jesus has come to us. Nothing can change that fact. The Son of God has come, and nothing can be the same again.

Maybe you have heard of the book *The Everyday Gospel: A Theology of Washing the Dishes*. It points out that we need to look for God's presence in the ordinary things of life. Every moment of our lives is an opportunity to experience God's work of shaping our hearts, inviting us to repentance and to new life in Christ.

Where do you see the Lord at work in everyday life?

Holy Spirit, we need to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. Help us to see his work and presence in everyday life. Amen.

## HE WILL COME AGAIN

“At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” —Luke 21:27

The Christmas season looks back to the time when the Son of God first came to live among us and to bring us salvation. But this season has a forward-looking aspect as well. Christ has come, and Christ is coming again. As we turn the page on our Christmas celebrations, we can also be filled with anticipation for Jesus' return.

Jesus spoke to his disciples about the anguish and uncertainty of human existence in this world. Natural disasters, wars, political unrest, personal disappointments, sins we have committed, and wrongs we've suffered from others—all these things are a part of the “anguish and perplexity” we face in everyday life here on earth. But Jesus has promised that he will return—as the Lord of all creation. And on that day our redemption will be complete.

Though we celebrate Christmas as a season of promise, new life, peace, and hope, in reality our lives here on earth are full of troubles and doubts.

But Jesus the Savior has come into this world, and we have the promise that he will come again. “Lift up your heads,” he says to us, in effect. Christ offers hope and confidence to all who look to him, giving assurance of a future, full life that will never fade (see Revelation 21-22). May that hope be yours today.

Lord Jesus, you came as a baby to bring the glory of God near to us. By the power of your Spirit, help us look forward to the day when you will come again to live with us forever. In your name we pray. Amen.

## JOY AND HOPE

We proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.  
—1 John 1:2

After coming through the Christmas season, we stand today on the verge of a new year. In many homes Christmas decorations are coming down, and Christmas parties are over. Perhaps, like me, you are thinking of the year ahead, imagining and dreaming what God may have in store for you. As we look ahead to the new year and new seasons ahead, we also do well to look back at what God has done for us.

Many years after Jesus had brought salvation by dying to pay for our sin and rising to new life for our sake, the apostle John wrote about his own experience as a follower of Christ. We can picture John looking back on what had happened to him when he first encountered Jesus. "The life appeared," says John, and his words express the wonder and amazement *he* experienced when the Word of life came to

him one day and changed his life (see Luke 5:1-11).

Though we have not encountered Jesus in the same way his first disciples, like John, did, we still have an amazing story to tell. We have fellowship with the Father because Jesus, God's Son, has come to make him known. Through faith in Jesus, we experience forgiveness of sin and new life, restoring our relationship with God.

Christmas brings us joy for what God has done and offers hope for what lies ahead. May your life, today and in the coming year, be filled with the joy of knowing Christ the Savior.

Lord Jesus, as you became one of us so many years ago, stay close now and in the years ahead. Deepen our joy in knowing you. Amen.



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